

P10

SILHAVY PROUD OF RED WARRIORS' TEAM SPIRIT AGAINST MALAYSIA



P15

OMAN TO HOST SUMMIT OF GLOBAL CRYPTO MINERS TOMORROW



P20

PARIS CROWNS CHAMPION WAITERS IN ONE-OF-A-KIND 'CAFE RACE'



70,000 citizens got jobs last year

THE MINISTRY WILL PROVIDE 1,000 JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN INSPECTION SERVICES AND SECURITY

MOL PREPARING AND IMPLEMENTING THE NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 27

The government has provided 70,000 jobs for Omanis last year in line with goals of Oman Vision 2040. The Ministry of Labour (MoL) implemented several initiatives in the labour and human resources development sectors in terms of employment and replacement last year. The number of jobs filled exceeded 40,000 jobs out of a target of 35,000 jobs, representing more than 115 per cent. It included more than 20,000 jobs in the government sector, more than 17,000 jobs in the private sector, and more than 2,000 jobs in non-employment-related training (indirect employment). In addition, more than 29,000 individuals entered the job market.

These figures were revealed by the Minister of Labour



The Ministry of Labour's aim last year was to hire 6,000 job-seekers in the public sector, but the ministry managed to hire more than 17,000 employees.

Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain in a press conference on Wednesday to highlight its annual plans under the theme "Renewed Labour Market and Organised Employment Sectors." Emphasising a proactive approach to tackling unemployment challenges, the ministry has outlined a comprehensive strategy to promote jobs and raise professional standards across the workforce in the Sultanate of Oman.

The minster said during 2023 the aim was to hire 6,000 job-seekers in the public sector, but the ministry managed to hire more than 17,000 employees.

The ministry articulated its commitment to bolstering national programmes for training and qualifying job-seekers, focusing on both public and private sector employment.

TURN TO P3

Kosovo lauds Oman's role in promoting peace and security

NEW YORK: Donika Gërvalla-Schwarz, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora of the Republic of Kosovo, hailed the march of comprehensive development in the Sultanate of Oman, as well as its foreign policy, describing it as an oasis of security and stability in the Middle East region.

She stressed that the efforts made by Oman to promote and enhance security, peace and coexistence in the region have enjoyed a special appreciation by the international community. This was stated when Dr Mohammed bin Awadh al Hassan, Permanent Representative of the Sultanate of Oman to the United Nations in New York, received the Kosovo official at the headquarters of the Permanent Mission of the Sultanate of Oman to the UN.

The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora of Kosova called for strengthening the relations of cooperation and friendship between the Omani and Kosovo peoples in various fields, especially investment, education and tourism. She added that Kosovo welcomes Omani students and visitors who wish to study at its universities and see its tourist attractions. She also stressed the sympathy of the Kosovo people for the issues of the Middle East region, the demand for an immediate cessation of the war in the Gaza Strip and ensuring the protection of civilians. — ONA



DIVINE WORDS

People read a giant handwritten copy of the Holy Quran, measuring 142 x 210 centimetre, during the holy month of Ramadhan, at the Baiturrahman Mosque in Banyuwangi, East Java, on Wednesday. — AFP

Omani must in registry for foreign investors

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) has clarified that, starting April, it will be mandatory to employ an Omani employee in the foreign investor's commercial registry one year after starting to practice the commercial activity, and for him to be registered with the General Authority for Social Insurance, with a commitment to implementing the policy Omanisation followed by the Ministry of Labour.

This comes in implementation of the Council of Ministers' decision to reduce commercial registration fees for foreign investors and treat them as an Omani investor, with the obligation to employ a minimum of one Omani employee.

Ammar bin Sulaiman al Kharousi, Director-General of the Investment Services Centre at MoCIIP, pointed out that the ministry had announced on June 18, 2023, through its electronic platforms, the start of reducing

fees for foreign investment companies and obliging them to employ an Omani employee, in addition to placing an alert when extracting the commercial register clarifies the condition for employing the Omani citizen one year after the establishment of the commercial register for the foreign investor.

He said that the ministry is making continuous efforts to enhance the attractiveness of the investment environment in Oman, by removing challenges facing investors. He hopes that foreign investors will contribute to enhancing local added value by creating job opportunities for Omanis, who represent the backbone for development.

SEE ALSO P13

Kate treatment revelation shines light on under-50s cancer mystery

PARIS: When Catherine, Princess of Wales, revealed she was being treated for cancer last week, part of the shock was that an otherwise healthy 42-year-old has a disease that mostly plagues older people.

However, researchers have been increasingly sounding the alarm that more and more people under 50 are getting cancer — and no one knows why.

Across the world, the rate of under-50s diagnosed with 29 common cancers surged by nearly 80 per cent between 1990

and 2019, a large study in BMJ Oncology found last year.

The researchers predicted the number of new cancer cases among younger adults will rise another 30 per cent by the end of this decade, with wealthy countries particularly affected.

The increase in cases — and soaring global population — means that the number of deaths among under 50s from cancer has risen by nearly 28 per cent over the last 30 years.

This occurred even as the odds of people of all ages surviving



A message for Britain's Catherine, Princess of Wales, is placed on a bouquet of flowers near Windsor Castle, the day after news of Britain's Catherine's illness. — Reuters file photo

cancer have roughly doubled over the last half century.

Shivan Sivakumar, a cancer researcher at the UK's University of Birmingham, called it an "epidemic" of young adult cancer.

While breast cancer remains the most common for people under 50, the researchers expressed particular concern about the rise of gastrointestinal cancers — such as of the colon, pancreas, liver and oesophagus — in younger adults.

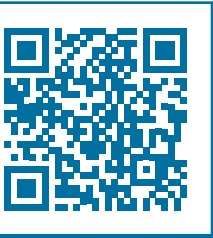
Colon cancer is now the leading cause of cancer deaths

in men under 50 in the United States, according to the American Cancer Society. For women, it is number two — behind only breast cancer.

One high profile case of colorectal cancer was "Black Panther" actor Chadwick Boseman, who died at the age of 43 in 2020.

"We just don't have the evidence yet" to say exactly what is causing this rise, Sivakumar said, adding it was likely a combination of factors.

— AFP



MoSD, SQU discuss cooperation

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) and Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) on Wednesday held an annual meeting to discuss their cooperation programme to promote the culture of volunteer work among university students in various social work

institutions. The meeting, which was held at the ministry, was chaired by Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najar, Minister of Social Development, and HH Sayyid Dr Fahad bin Al Julanda al Said, SQU Vice-Chancellor. The meeting reviewed a

number of aspects related to the joint conference between the ministry and the university, as well as discussing mechanisms for developing the research base for researchers in the ministry and cooperation in the field of scientific research and studies. — ONA



The meeting reviewed a number of aspects related to the joint conference between the ministry and the university. — ONA



SHIHAB RECEIVES AMBASSADOR OF UZBEKISTAN

MUSCAT: HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, received in his office at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Wednesday Abdusalam Khatamov, Ambassador of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the Sultanate of Oman. The meeting discussed several matters of mutual interest. The two sides also reviewed the bilateral relations between Oman and Uzbekistan. — ONA

Families sour over bachelor accommodation

COMPLY WITH REGULATIONS PERTAINING TO HOUSING EXPATRIATE LABOURERS OR ELSE IT COULD LEAD TO A FINE EXCEEDING RO 50

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 27

Many Omani families have expressed concern over neighbourhoods crowded with single expat workers citing rising theft, breach of privacy and other inconvenience. Some of them have been forced to move out to other areas. This has prompted the Governorate of Muscat to reiterate the need to comply with regulations pertaining to housing expatriate labourers as it could lead to a fine exceeding RO 50. This directive aims to prevent violations that may lead to penalties, considering the implications from security, social and economic standpoints. As per Article 31 of Local Command No 23/92 regarding the buildings' organisation in Muscat and its amendments, it is not allowed to establish complexes or buildings to accommodate workers or bachelors in residential areas or commercial residential areas. No design is accepted, no matter what it recommends. It is also not allowed to construct a building that combines family and bachelor accommodation. It also calls on landlords not to rent residential units to expatriate workers without families. Faisal bin Abdullah, a citizen, said, "Some neighbourhoods are chaotic due to crowding of expat workers near family homes, not to mention the anxiety and inconvenience that these people cause. Some of the places where they stay are unhygienic. We agree that they are housed in residential areas due to the paucity of suitable alternatives. But companies

must take responsibility for housing these groups in places designated for them and keep them away from the neighbourhoods." Despite clear rules and regulations, bachelors are accommodated in residential neighbourhoods in Muscat. Khalid bin Hamad al Hasani said: "The accommodation for single workers near us is disturbing, and we are concerned about our children due to the presence of a group of single workers in large numbers. I cannot allow my children to play in front of the house, even in the evening after they return from school or during vacation, because some single workers sometimes walk in front of the houses smoking or in indecent clothing without regard for the privacy of the families or children." Al Hasani called for adherence to the regulations that prevent the housing of single workers in residential neighbourhoods. Mohammed al Siyabi expressed his regret that some people rent their homes or rooms attached to homes to single expatriates in residential neighbourhoods without taking into account the concerns of families. "If the community does not cooperate and come together, this problem cannot be eliminated, and landlords must not rent out premises just for financial gain." Hamoud bin Rashid said, "This menace is spreading in all governorates. Rules must be a deterrent for those who violate the regulations governing the housing for migrant workers. He urged municipal councils to help residential neighbourhoods maintain privacy."

Al Khabourah's Ramadhan event fosters community spirit



Through workshops and displays, attendees had the opportunity to learn about and support various projects



SIHAM AL SAIDI
SUHAR, MARCH 27

To mark the advent of Ramadhan, Al Khabourah Municipality organised a community event that featured competitions, stalls of productive families and SMEs. The food carts and other pavilions aimed at bringing people together, empowering local entrepreneurs and supporting small businesses. Ahmed al Maimani, Director of the Municipality Department in Al Khabourah, explained that Al Khabourah fort premises were chosen as the venue in coordination with relevant authorities. The event area was spread over 4,800 square metres, including an interlocked pathway 5 metres wide and 95 metres long. Additionally, 16 side tables were allocated for display, along with provision for electrical and plumbing connections. Light poles were installed, and a 1,150-square metre area was designated for display and parking. Moreover, the event emphasised the importance of supporting home projects and initiatives. Through workshops and displays, attendees had the opportunity to learn about and support various projects, contributing to the development and sustainability of local initiatives. The atmosphere of the event was further enhanced by the Ramadhan spirit, with Iftar and Suhoor meals provided



in a traditional setting inside Al Khabourah Fort. This added a sense of togetherness and solidarity, reflecting the essence of Ramadhan as a time of sharing and giving. The various competitions

showcased the talents and creativity of the youth. These cultural competitions not only promoted knowledge, but also highlighted the rich cultural heritage of the region. Overall, the event in

Al Khabourah served not only as a tourist attraction during Ramadhan, but also as a platform for promoting community values, encouraging entrepreneurship and supporting local initiatives.



1,000 job opportunities in inspection services and security support

FROM PAGE 1

Additionally, it highlighted initiatives to support recruitment endeavours overseen by governmental bodies and private sector units. Furthermore, the ministry emphasised the importance of strengthening national capacities and talent management by developing human capital in administrative units and implementing performance measurement systems at both individual and institutional levels.

KEY INITIATIVES FOR 2024

National Strategy for Professional Standards: The ministry aims to develop policies and strategies to promote investment attraction by developing labour market policies, preparing and implementing the National Strategy for Professional Standards, and monitoring the national employment policy.

Improving Service Quality: The ministry targets improving the quality of services this

year by activating the digital job balance database, developing the ministry's call centre, enhancing services provided to beneficiaries, implementing the ISO 9001 system in government units, and improving current electronic services.

Digital Transformation: In the area of digital transformation, the ministry continues to link electronically with government units, redevelop the public employment system, as well as the work permit system, employment services, worker care services, workforce registration system, administrative and financial affairs services, and launch new services for employers and employees through the "Ma'ak" mobile application as a second channel for the ministry's online services, continuous improvement of current online services, and activating remote work capabilities for the ministry's employees.

GCC LINK

The presentation made by Dr Mahad addressed the ministry's



Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, addressing the press conference in Muscat on Wednesday. Photo by Hussein al Muqbali

achievements during 2023 in the legislation and laws governing the labour market and professional localisation. He explained that the MoL has studied many professional standards and labour market needs, and adopted general

frameworks for implementing the professional accreditation system. During the past year, the Ministry linked 3,624 job titles to the Gulf Classification and Professional Description Guide.

The design of 20 e-training programmes were completed,

covering effective communication skills, performance indicator measurement, individual planning, emotional intelligence, feedback methods, low performance evaluation methods, goal and key result methodology, work ethics, contemporary innovation and

creativity, achieving job excellence, leadership preparations, agile methodology, governance and risk management, e-marketing, corruption prevention, career burnout, negotiation skills, self-empowerment, excellence in customer service, change management, and project management.

In its efforts to create job opportunities for job-seekers, the ministry supervised 16 economic sectors, including tourism, food security, transportation and logistics, health, energy and mining, technology and communications, public services, manufacturing industries, private economic zones, school education, banking, higher education, urban development, telecommunications, sports, and the stock market.

The ministry will provide 1,000 job opportunities through the agreement to develop inspection services and security support. This agreement also aims to protect small and medium enterprises from unfair competition, combat hidden trade, and improve inspection and security support services.

SOCIAL MEDIA IS ALSO A TOOL TO BRING SMILES AND CHANGE

AHMED AL KAABI

MUSCAT, MARCH 27

Social media isn't just about posting pictures or sharing updates; it's a dynamic force for making a difference in society. During Ramadhan, these platforms hold huge potential for bringing people together and shining a light on humanitarian causes.

The power of social media comes from its ability to bring people from different cultures and backgrounds together under one banner, which enhances solidarity and cooperation for common causes. As a result, individuals seeking social change use these platforms to raise awareness, motivate and organise the public to achieve many humanity goals.

One example of this type of campaign is the story of Suleiman al Maskari, who found himself in a battle against the rare disease Duchenne. At the age of five, Suleiman urgently needed a drug injection to avoid a deterioration in his health. However, due to the high cost of this injection, his family was unable to afford this



treatment.

From here, Suleiman's story spread like wildfire across social media platforms. Thanks to the power of social networks, his story was widely shared, with Omani celebrities and activists publishing it and calling for help. Through these joint efforts, the Omani community responded incredibly.

There are also several initiatives on social media that are essentially aimed at giving and helping. Among these initiatives, the "Alaash Followers" initiative stands out. This initiative aims to pay electricity and water bills for poor families, and has received a great response from followers

on social media platforms. Participants in the campaign donate in minutes to pay these bills, which helps bring joy and happiness to the hearts of needy families during the month of Ramadhan.

These campaigns and initiatives highlight that social media platforms are not just platforms for entertainment, but effective tools that can be used for the good of the public and social change.

As awareness of the importance of teamwork and interaction through social media increases, these campaigns can serve as a model for how to harness collective power to achieve social

change. Therefore, societies must realise the value of these tools and invest in them to promote good and justice in the societies.

Fahad al Mugairi, a social worker, said: "Social media has become a powerful tool for influencing public opinion and drawing attention to social issues. Using it effectively can have a major impact on changing behaviours and attitudes." Building well-targeted campaigns and using interactive strategies can motivate and guide people to work on the issues that matter to them, which can lead to positive results.

"Given that celebrities and social media influencers have a large fan base, they can use their voice to draw attention to important issues and encourage followers to participate in social campaigns and donations," Al Mugairi added.

Social initiatives on social media are an opportunity for people to bring about change, whether through donations, raising awareness, or supporting social issues by sharing information and resources.

Flood protection dams in Seeb, Amerat completed

MUSCAT: The basic construction work at the flood protection dams in Al Jifnain in the Wilayat of Al Seeb and Al Jufainah in the Wilayat of Al Amerat in Muscat Governorate with a combined capacity of 26.8 million cubic metres, has been completed, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources announced on Wednesday.

Engineer Nasser bin Mohammed al Battashi, Director-General at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, said that the basic construction work is now complete in Al Jufainah Dam in the Wilayat of Al Amerat. Work is underway in the diversion channel at the top of the reservoir with a length of 8 kilometres and

a width of 40 metres. The dam is 2.66 kilometres-long and has a storage capacity of up to 15.7 million cubic metres of water.

The Al Jufainah Dam project in the Wilayat of Al Seeb includes the construction of a pile dam with a height of 18.5 metres and a length of 6,500 metres. The dam has two spillways, two concrete towers, a concrete divider and several openings for discharging retained water, the official added.

Both dams were equipped with monitoring devices for measuring groundwater and leakages as well as a device to measure the level of water and silt in the lake. Al Jafainah Dam is the last barrier to flood waters before reaching the sea and passing through the commercial and residential areas in Al Khoudh,



Over RO 3.4 million allotted to road construction in Bidiya



Internal road paving project in the Wilayat of Bidiya is part of a number of projects implemented by the governorate. -- ONA

BIDIYA: Al Sharqiyah North Municipality has embarked on a project for the construction of 56 km of internal roads in a number of villages in the Wilayat of Bidiya at an estimated cost of RO 3, 432,738.

This is part of service projects planned for several wilayats of Al Sharqiyah North Governorate.

Eng Nasser bin Khamis al Hasani, Director-General of Al Sharqiyah North Municipality, said that

internal road paving project in the Wilayat of Bidiya is part of a number of projects implemented by the governorate, including internal road paving projects, rehabilitation of some roads within quarters and residential areas in the wilayats of the governorate. He added that work has begun on paving roads in the village of Al Dhaher as part of the project.

— ONA

School students go bonkers with Qaranqasho

MUSCAT: Al Injaz International Private School, Muscat, celebrated the traditional festival of Qaranqasho with enthusiasm on March 25. This festivity, which falls in the middle of Ramadhan, is deeply rooted in Omani culture and symbolises a moment of joy

and celebration, particularly for children, during the holy month.

The school which was adorned with colourful decorations set the festive mood as the students were dressed in vibrant traditional attire, adding to the lively atmosphere.

The celebration commenced with a brief introduction about the significance of Qaranqasho, educating the students about its cultural importance and how it embodies the spirit of community and sharing.

One of the highlights of

the event was the singing of traditional Qaranqasho song, which filled the air with festivity. Children, carrying bags, went around classrooms chanting the Qaranqasho song, reminiscent of the practice of going door-to-door to receive sweets and nuts,



One of the highlights of the event was the singing of traditional Qaranqasho song, which filled the air with festivity. -- Photos by Dinesh Deckker



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ACCORDING TO HOLY QURAN



“EAT AND DRINK, AND DO NOT BE EXTRAVAGANT. INDEED, HE DOES NOT LIKE THE EXTRAVAGANT.”



KABEER YOUSUF
[@kabeeryousef](#)

A whopping amount of food is going to the trash everyday during the holy month of Ramadhan and the volume of waste is soaring , according to NGOs working in this area.

Ramadhan is usually the month when mass Iftars are held as corporates, associations and NGOs organise Iftars daily. The holy month of Ramadhan is a period to observe moderation. On the other hand, people buy food of all kinds and cook a large amount of food, with most of it ending in waste.

ANNUAL FOOD
WASTAGE
RO 56 MN

MUNICIPAL WASTE
MANAGEMENT
RO 100 MN

HOUSEHOLD FOOD
WASTAGE IN A YEAR
PER PERSON
95 KG



Shocking statistics According to the figures released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), the loss incurred by the country annually in food wastage reached RO 56 million, and the cost of municipal waste management is about RO 100 million per year. Household food wastage in the Sultanate of Oman was estimated to be 95 kg per person per year in 2019.

The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MoARA) has called on all to avoid food wastage and organise Iftars in mutual understanding so that no duplication gatherings are held.

“In order to reduce food waste, one should cook rationally and consume intelligently,” Ali al Hattali from MoARA said.

“The best way to reduce food from being wasted is to cook an appropriate amount for the family. More importantly, one should understand that this month is not just for eating but to pay more attention to acts of worship and Zakat as a Muslim gets a great reward from them,” he said.

By and large, the consensus is to reduce food wastage during Ramadhan, just as the holy month is all about moderation and minimal wastage.

“One shouldn’t prepare more food during the holy month or otherwise. We need to educate our children. Teach them how much effort these farmers put to grow grains and vegetables and dumping foods is an unthinkable crime,” said Rasha Shaabu, a housewife in Muscat.

Efforts to preserve food from being

wasted have been bringing in sufficient results, Jassim bin Salim al Hashemi from Al Buraimi has initiated a project to collect leftover food from hotels and restaurants and distribute them among the needy in some villages of the governorate.

‘Niamah’, a first-of-its kind initiative, has a large number of volunteers and cars equipped with the necessary equipment to operate a food bank, including collection and preservation of food from different sources.

For its exemplary services to the society and to the environment, it has already won the Sultan Qaboos Award for Voluntary Work.

Niamah deals with government and private entities that generate large amounts of food daily, including hotels, restaurants, commercial complexes, hypermarkets and wedding halls. In Ramadhan, it distributed 2,890 meals and 320 Ramadhan kits among the needy.

“We encourage the culture of reducing food waste and recycling surplus food especially during the holy month. We also want to be prepared throughout the year to provide food aid to those affected by disasters,” Jassim told the *Observer*.

“I believe that the best method is consciousness. We must believe that food wastage is morally, socially and financially a bad practice. It’s time to start the Small Plate Movement to reduce food wastage,” Hashmi adds, quoting the holy Quran, which says “And eat and drink, and do not be extravagant. Indeed, He does not like the extravagant.”

To
The Manager
Surveillance Department
Central Bank of Oman



ME/FORM NO.5

SUMMARY OF ASSETS & LIABILITIES MUSANDAM EXCHANGE L.L.C.
AS OF 31.12.2023
(In RO 000' s)

ASSETS	31.12.2023	31.12.2022	LIABILITIES	31.12.2023	31.12.2022
1. Cash in hand	307	457	1. Capital & Reserves	1,179	1,157
2. Deposits with Central Bank of Oman	100	100	2. Borrowings from Banks	-	276
3. Precious Metals	-	-	3. Balances due to Branches	-	-
4. Balances due from Banks	1,262	1,248	4. Balances due to Money changers	409	286
5. Balances due from Branches	-	-	5. Loans and Advances payable	-	-
6. Balance Due from Money Changers	2	2	6. Cheques and Drafts issued & outstanding	-	-
7. Cheques and drafts purchased	-	-	7. Other Liabilities	308	322
8. Loans and Advances	-	-			
9. Investments	-	-			
10. Fixed Assets	46	57			
11. Other Assets	179	177			
TOTAL	1,896	2,041	TOTAL	1,896	2,041

Musandam Exchange, Managed by Canara Bank
P.O. Box 2155, Ruwi, Postal Code 112, Sultanate of Oman
Tel: 24834954/24831852, Fax: 24831154, E-mail: gm@musandamexchange.com



2.7 MILLION PASSENGERS USE AIRPORTS BY FEBRUARY 2024



The increase is in line with a recent report by BMI that arrivals in Oman are likely to grow 24.7 per cent year-on-year in 2024 to a total of 5.3 million

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The number of passengers passing through the airports of the Sultanate of Oman (arrivals, departures and transit) exceeded 2.7 million at the end of February 2024, according to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).
The increase is in line with a recent report by BMI that arrivals in Oman are likely to grow 24.7 per cent year-on-year in 2024 to a total of 5.3 million. Overall, the 2024 arrivals will be a new high, building on the most recent historic peak of four million visitors in 2023, BMI stated. The

momentum continues in 2024 with a significant 21.6 per cent increase in airport passenger traffic by the end of January totalling 1,417,442 passengers. The number of arrivals through all airports of the Sultanate of Oman increased by 19 per cent, while the number of departures increased by 25 per cent, compared to the same period month in 2023. In the same period, the number of domestic and international air traffic through Muscat International Airport increased by 17 per cent to 16,996, compared to 14,602 flights compared to the same period in 2023. The total number of passengers (arrivals,

departures and flight transfers) increased by 22.9 per cent to 2.4 million from around over two million in 2023. The number of domestic and international air traffic through Salalah International Airport increased by 61 per cent to 1,572, compared to 1,482 flights compared to the same period in 2023. The total number of passengers (arrivals, departures and flight transfers) increased by 10.1 per cent to 232,000 compared to around 210,077 in 2023. The number of domestic and international air traffic through Sohar International Airport increased by 83 per cent to 110 compared to 60 flights compared to the same period in 2023. The total

number of passengers (arrivals, departures and flight transfers) increased by 166.8 per cent to 11,410 compared to around 4,277 in 2023. Indian nationals topped the list of passengers using the Muscat International Airport (146,472), followed by Pakistan nationals (45, 543), and Bangladesh nationals (36,847).
The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has an ambitious goal to attract 11 million tourists annually by 2040, as part of the broader Oman Vision 2040 objectives. “The forecasted arrivals growth trajectory for Oman indicates that the market will achieve this target of 11 million,” said BMI.

Oman Air responds to social media post about trainee pilots

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, MARCH 27

National carrier Oman Air issued a statement on Tuesday addressing the status of a group of Omani trainee pilots who have been the subject of recent online discussions.
According to the state-owned carrier, 86 Omani nationals were enrolled into a 24-month programme at the Oman Aviation Academy. This programme aimed to train them for a commercial aviation licence (EASA CPL/IR) specifically for Boeing 737 aircraft. However, Oman Air emphasised that participation in the programme did not guarantee employment with the airline upon completion.
“The agreement did not obligate the company to appoint them after their training, regardless of successful completion,” Oman Air emphasised in its statement.
Of the 86 trainee pilots,

34 candidates successfully graduated from the programme, with the remaining 52 continuing their studies at the Academy.
Recently, in line with its commitment to fostering Omani talent in the aviation sector, Oman Air said it had signed employment contracts with 21 of the 34 graduates. These new hires will begin as trainees and may be offered permanent positions with Oman Air or another airline in the future, it noted.
“The company welcomes the remaining 13 graduates to join the Oman Air team alongside their colleagues,” the airline further stated in its clarification.
However, a source that the Observer contacted disputed some of the assertions of Oman Air saying that the contract explicitly stated a ‘training coupled with employment’ arrangement, with provisions for direct employment upon successful completion of training.



TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Nama Dhofar Services invites the specialized companies to participate and submit their offers for the below said tenders:-

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last Date for Collection of Tender Documents	Time & Last Date for Proposal Submission	Tender Fee (OMR) Including VAT (5%)
DISC/ 2024/038	UNE LOT 021/2024	14/04/2024	28/04/2024	52/500
DISC/ 2024/039	Installation of HV CT VT Operated Meters at 11KV and 33KV Feeders	14/04/2024	28/04/2024	52/500
DISC/ 2024/040	Meter Reading, Replacement to AMR and Troubleshooting	14/04/2024	28/04/2024	2,500/=
DISC/ 2024/041	Replacement water transmission Pipeline from Garthnout pumping station to Tawi Atir	14/04/2024	28/04/2024	52/500

• To purchase the tender document website via the link or the Barcode below:
https://supplier.nama.om:4443/OA_HTML/OA.jsp?OAFunc=XXTEN_TENDER_FLOAT_DISC_F

• Every company wishing to participate in this tender must attach with its bid a bid bond in the form of a bank guarantee from one of the banks operating in the Sultanate of Oman. Any bid that does not contain the bid bond will be disqualified.

• The original bid bond must be submitted in an envelope sealed with red wax and addressed to the chairperson of the minor tender committee and written on outside the Tender name and the Tender number and it should be placed in the tender box in Nama Dhofar Services in Salalah before 10:00 am of the last day for submitting Bids.

• Bids shall be submitted online through using “supplier portal”. No hard copies are accepted.

• The Tender fees are not refundable. However, Tenderers who are holding “Riyada” card issued from public authority for SME development will be exempted from providing the tender fee and the Bid bond.

• The company is not obliged to accept the lowest or any other bid.

• In the event of receipt of the tender document on behalf of another company, the interested purchasers in the above tender document should provide details of the person's name and the company details.

Dhofar Integrated Services Company s.a.o.c.
CR Number: 2185229, P.O Box: 2009
PC 211, Salalah, Sultanate of Oman
Phone Number: 23325233, Fax: 23201183
www.dhofarservices.nama.om

Northwesterly wind continues
LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

Northwesterly wind activity continued over the governorates of Dhofar, Al Wusta and Al Dhahirah, where wind speeds reached 27 knots, causing dust to rise and a decrease in horizontal visibility. Authorities have requested public to be cautious.
The activity of northwesterly winds will continue on Thursday and may cause the rise of dust and a decrease in horizontal visibility could be experienced at times in desert and open areas, said the Met Office.
Clouds continued to flow over most governorates, with scattered rain of varying intensity fell in parts of the Al Sharqiyah South Governorate especially in Jaalan Bani Bu Ali.
The weather officials said there were chances of scattered rain falling in parts of Al Sharqiyah North, Al Sharqiyah South and Dhofar governorates on Wednesday.
Moderate to rough has been the sea conditions with wave heights recording 2.5m along Musandam coast and Oman Sea coasts and slight to moderate along the Arabian Sea coasts 1.5-2m.

سلطنة عُمان
وزارة النقل والاتصالات وتقنية المعلومات
Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology

إعلان مناقصة Tender Notice

The Internal Tenders Committee at the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology invites for the Following Tenders:

TENDER NUMBER	TENDER NAME	DATE OF PUBLISHING	LAST DATE TO PURCHASE TENDER DOCUMENT	SUBMISSION DATE	COMPANIES WHO SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN THIS TENDER	DOCUMENT PRICE
MT CIT/ 46/2024	CONSULTANCY SERVICES FOR ENGINEERING DESIGN FOR CONSTRUCTION ROAD TO JABAL AL ABYAD	27-03-2024	03-04-2024	22-04-2024	EXPERIENCED COMPANIES AND REGISTERED WITH THE SECRETARIAT GENERAL OF TENDER BOARD (FIRST & SECOND)	(47/500) FORTY SEVEN OMANI RIAL AND FIVE HUNDRED BAISA FOR LOCAL COMPANIES (10/-) TEN OMANI RIAL (FOR SME) NON-REFUNDABLE
MT CIT/ 45/2024	REPAIR DAMAGED AREAS OF EXISTING AL-HAIAL/MADLI ASPHALT ROAD IN WILAYAT IBRI (AL DAHIRAH GOVERNORATE)	27-03-2024	14-04-2024	07-05-2024	EXPERIENCED COMPANIES AND REGISTERED WITH THE SECRETARIAT GENERAL OF TENDER BOARD (FIRST)	(40/-) FORTY OMANI RIAL FOR LOCAL COMPANIES (10/-) TEN OMANI RIAL (FOR SME) NON-REFUNDABLE
MT CIT/ 47/2024	MT CIT STAND DESIGN AND BUILD IN COMEX 2024	27-03-2024	03-04-2024	22-04-2024	EXPERIENCED COMPANIES AND REGISTERED WITH THE SECRETARIAT GENERAL OF TENDER BOARD (ALL CLASSES)	(25/-) TWENTY FIVE OMANI RIAL FOR LOCAL COMPANIES (10/-) TEN OMANI RIAL (FOR SME) NON-REFUNDABLE

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CORRESPONDANCE:

- Tender Inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the TENDER Inquiry must be online at e-Tendering System. (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
- E-Tendering System Inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the e-Tendering System technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number:
Tel: +968 24402200, e-mail : etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om

INTERNAL TENDERS COMMITTEE

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Xi tells Dutch PM Rutte nothing stops tech progress

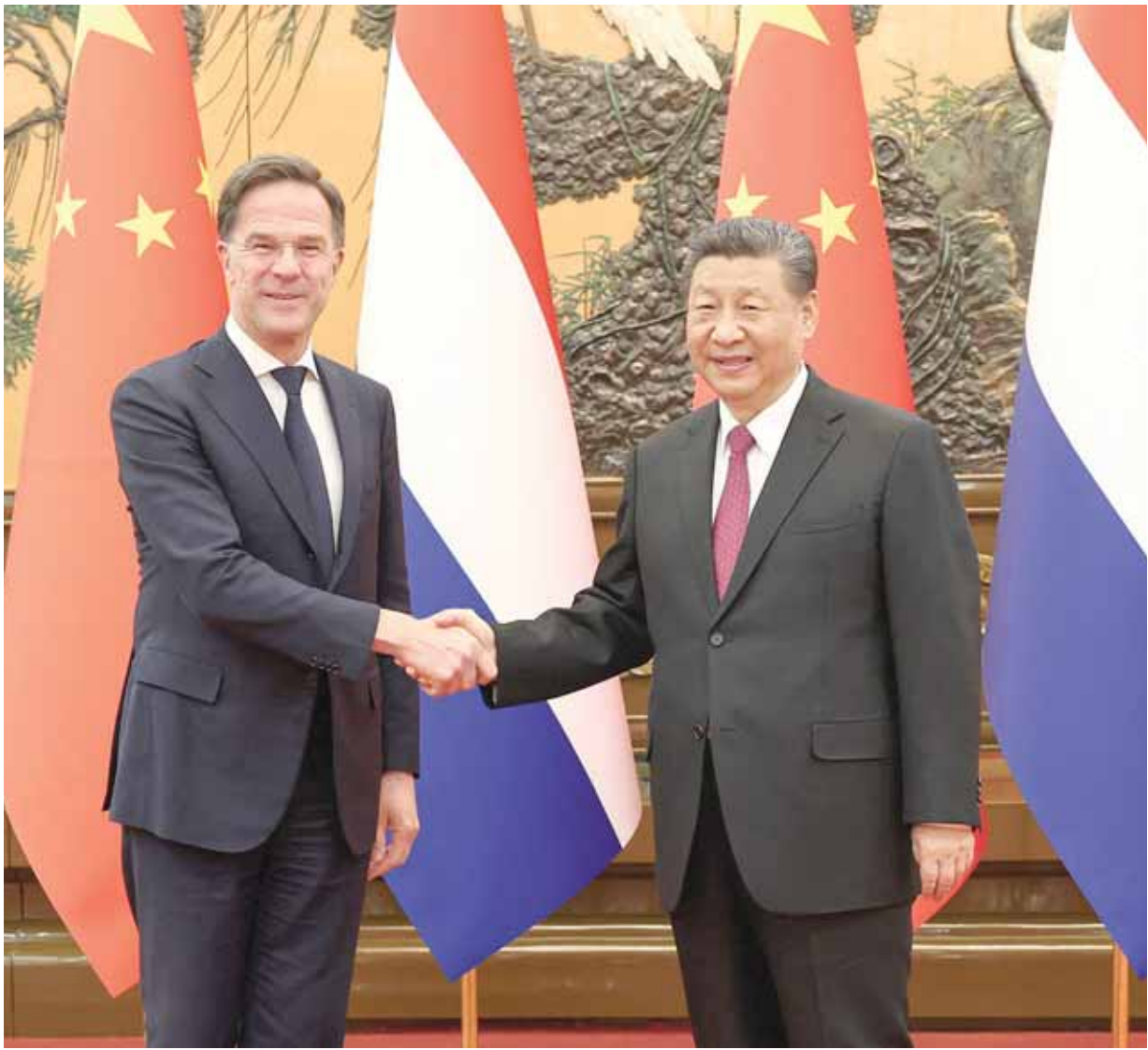
BEIJING: Chinese leader Xi Jinping on Wednesday told Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte that China's technological progress could not be held back, as they met in Beijing for talks on subjects including the crucial semiconductor industry.

Dutch chip-making machine supplier ASML is one of the world's leading manufacturers of equipment to make state-of-the-art semiconductors, used in everything from mobile phones to cars.

The sector has become a key battleground in recent years, with the United States and some European countries blocking exports of high-tech chip technology to China over fears of military use.

ASML announced this year that it had been blocked from exporting "a small number" of its advanced machines to China, amid reports of US pressure on the Dutch government.

"The Chinese people also have legitimate development rights, and no force can stop the pace of China's scientific and technological progress," Xi told Rutte on Wednesday according to state news agency Xinhua.



Chinese President Xi Jinping meets PM of the Netherlands Mark Rutte at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. — Reuters

The Chinese people also have legitimate development rights, and no force can stop the pace of China's scientific and technological progress

XI JINPING
Chinese President

Xi added that "China will continue to pursue a win-win approach (and) open wider to the outside world at a high level".

"There is no way out for 'decoupling and breaking the chain,' and opening-up and cooperation are the only choice," Xinhua quoted him as saying.

Rutte told reporters at a press conference that he couldn't share details of what had been discussed around semiconductors.

"What I can tell you about our semiconductor sector and companies like ASML is that when we have to take measures that they are never aimed at one

country specifically," he said.

"We always try to make sure that the impact is limited, it's not impacting the supply chain and therefore is not impacting, let's say, the overall economic relationship," Rutte's comments came at the close of a two-day visit to Beijing, where he and Dutch Trade Minister Geoffrey van Leeuwen held talks with top Chinese leaders and visited representatives from the European business community.

The Dutch prime minister said on Wednesday that the Western military alliance did not come up in his discussions with Chinese leaders. But on the war in Ukraine, Rutte said he urged China to use its influence with Russia to bring about peace.

Beijing has deepened its ties with Moscow in recent years, to the dismay of many European leaders.

"What I particularly tried to do today... in my conversations is make clear that this is a direct security issue for us, because if Russia will be successful in Ukraine it will be a threat to the whole of Europe," said Rutte.

— AFP

Pakistan steps up security for workers after bombing

PESHAWAR: Pakistan ramped up security guarding Chinese engineers building Beijing-linked projects in the nation's northwest, an official said on Wednesday, a day after five workers were killed in a suicide bombing.

The five Chinese engineers — plus their Pakistani driver — were killed while travelling between Islamabad and a hydroelectric dam construction site in Dasu, in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

A high-ranking official from the provincial interior ministry said on Wednesday that at the more than two-dozen sites hosting Chinese engineers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa security was stepped up.

"Directives have been issued to all law enforcement agencies to enhance security for Chinese nationals and all other foreigners," he said on condition of anonymity.

"Instructions have also been given to foreign nationals to restrict their movements."

Information Minister Attaullah Tarar told a press conference in Islamabad that security procedures

would be reviewed "with a focus on identifying and addressing any gaps".

Meanwhile, further details emerged about the attack, which has yet to be claimed by any group. Local police officer Bakht Zahir said the five engineers killed near the city of Besham included four men and a woman, and that the bomber targeted the middle vehicle in a convoy of 12.

"The suicide bomber rammed his vehicle into the convoy in the middle, detonating himself, causing the Chinese engineers' vehicle to fall into a 180-foot-deep (55-metre) ravine and catch fire," he said.

Pakistan's domestic chapter of the Taliban is the most active threat in the region, but the group's spokesman denied involvement in a statement late on Tuesday. China has inked more than two trillion dollars in contracts around the world under its Belt and Road investment scheme, with billions pouring into neighbouring Pakistan and aiding its crumbling economy. — AFP



Security personnel inspect the site of a suicide attack near Besham city in the Shangla district, Pakistan. — AFP

Baltimore bridge response shifts to recovery of six missing

BALTIMORE: Authorities in Baltimore were set to focus on expanding recovery efforts on Wednesday after a cargo ship slammed into a major bridge, causing it to collapse and leaving six people presumed dead.

All six were members of a construction crew repairing potholes on the Francis Scott Key Bridge in the US East Coast city when the structure was sent careening into the Patapsco River at around 1:30 am.

A desperate search in near-freezing conditions managed to pull two people from the choppy waters, but after nearly 16 hours, officials said they had given up hope of rescuing the others.

"At this point we do not believe that we're going to find any of these individuals still alive," US Coast Guard Rear Admiral Shannon Gilreath told reporters as night fell on Tuesday.

He added that responders were transitioning "to a different phase."

Speaking at the same press conference, Maryland Secretary of State Police Roland Butler said the focus would shift to a "recovery operation" by



The Dali cargo vessel which crashed into the Francis Scott Key Bridge causing it to collapse in Baltimore, US. — Reuters

Wednesday morning.

"We're hoping to put divers in the water and begin a more detailed search to do our very best to recover those six missing people," he said.

After the search effort was called off, Mayor Brandon Scott emphasised the need to help families of the victims "get the closure they deserve."

"My heart is with those families tonight and in the days ahead," he said in a statement.

One of the missing workers was father-of-three Miguel Luna, according to Casa, a nonprofit that serves immigrant communities.

Two of the other missing workers were from Guatemala, the country's foreign ministry said, while local news outlet The Baltimore Banner reported that Mexican and Honduran nationals were also among the victims.

Officials stressed that there was no known connection

to terrorism, and that the preliminary investigation indicated an accident. Details emerged on how the crew tried to avert disaster after their 985-foot ship lost power and began careening toward the bridge.

"Just prior to the incident, the vessel, Dali, had experienced momentary loss of propulsion. As a result, it was unable to maintain the desired heading," said the maritime authority for Singapore, where the Dali is flagged. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

PARIS

France says has airlifted over 170 from Haiti

France has evacuated more than 170 nationals and around 70 people of other nationalities from violence-wracked Haiti on French army helicopters, the foreign ministry said.

"More than 170 French nationals and around 70 people of European and other nationalities in a vulnerable situation" were airlifted out, it said in a statement. They have all be taken to a "navy boat that will ferry them today to Fort-de-France" in the French overseas territory of Mar-



tinique. Around 1,100 French citizens live in Haiti, many of them holding dual nationality. Paris said that people wanting to leave should contact the embassy in Port-au-Prince. — AFP

HELSINKI

Finnish unions extend strikes over labour reforms

Finland's industrial, logistics and electrical workers have agreed to extend strikes in protest against planned labour market reforms to a fourth week, the head of trade union association SAK said on Wednesday.

The workers have been on strike since March 11, targeting exports, imports and cargo transportation. "The strikes will continue from Monday morning onwards for a week," SAK President Jarkko Eloranta said. "We are trying to negotiate and com-



promise with the government but unfortunately there has been no response to these efforts."

Largest companies have said the strikes are negatively affecting their operations. — Reuters

WARSAW

Poland to resolve grain conflict with Ukraine

Poland and Ukraine were closer to resolving a conflict over farm imports, Warsaw said on Wednesday, on the eve of bilateral talks on the issue that has angered farmers in the EU member.

"We can say there's been a certain rapprochement between the respective positions but of course... each is fighting for himself," Poland's Agriculture Minister Czeslaw Siekierski said.

"Everything's still ahead of us. The negotiations will certainly not end today," he said, before



his meeting on Wednesday with Ukrainian counterpart Mykola Solsky. Coalition lawmaker Krzysztof Paszyk said that the two countries were "on the verge of resolving these issues". — AFP



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A Palestinian boy walks on the site of an Israeli strike, in Rafah. – Reuters

Occupation forces bomb around Gaza hospitals

GAZA: Israeli forces pounded besieged Gaza on Wednesday in the war sparked by the October 7 attack and fought Palestinians around several hospitals despite a UN Security Council demand for a ceasefire.

Talks in Qatar towards a truce and captives release deal, involving US and Egyptian mediators, have brought no result so far, with Israel and the Palestinian group blaming each other.

Tensions have risen between Israel and its top ally the United States over the soaring civilian

death toll and dire food shortages in Gaza, and Israeli plans to push its ground offensive into the far-southern city of Rafah, which is packed with displaced civilians.

In heavy overnight bombardment, Israeli strikes again hit Gaza City and Rafah, where a fireball lit up the sky over the city crowded with up to 1.5 million people, most of them displaced by the war.

The health ministry in Gaza said 66 people were killed in overnight bombardment and combat. Israeli forces have battled in and around

three Gaza hospitals, raising fears for patients, medical staff and displaced people inside them.

Fighting has raged for nine days around Gaza City's Al Shifa Hospital, the territory's largest, and more recently near two hospitals in the main southern city of Khan Younis, Al Amal and Nasser.

The Palestinian Red Crescent warned that thousands were trapped inside and "their lives are in danger". The Israeli army has yet to comment on the situation in and around the hospital.

Israeli forces have battled in and around three Gaza hospitals, raising fears for patients, medical staff and displaced people inside them

Gaza has endured almost six months of war and a siege that has cut off most food, water, fuel and other supplies, and the UN has warned that its 2.4 million people

are on the brink of a "man-made famine".

The flow of aid trucks from Egypt has slowed amid the war and due to lengthy Israeli cargo inspections.

Donor governments have airdropped food into Gaza where desperate crowds have rushed towards aid packages drifting down on parachutes. At least 18 people have been reported killed in stampedes or drowned in the Mediterranean Sea.

Palestinian group Hamas has urged an end to the airdrops

and called for stepped-up road deliveries instead. The United States said it would keep airdropping humanitarian supplies while also pushing for more overland deliveries.

Israel's retaliatory campaign has killed at least 32,414 people in Gaza, most of them women and children, according to the health ministry.

The UN Security Council on Monday passed its first resolution demanding an "immediate ceasefire" in Gaza and the release of the captives. — AFP

Rafah raises fear assault could begin

GAZA: Israel bombed at least three homes in Rafah overnight, raising new fear among the more than a million people sheltering in the last refuge on the southern edge of the Gaza Strip that a long-threatened ground assault could be coming. One of the airstrikes killed 11 people from a family, health officials said.

Mussa Dhaheer, looking on from below as neighbours helped an emergency worker lower a victim in a black body bag from an upper storey, said he had awakened to the blast, kissed his terrified daughter, and rushed outside to find the destruction. His father, 75, and mother, 62, were among the dead.

"I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. I can't make sense of what happened. My parents. My father with his displaced friends who came from Gaza City," he said. "They were all together, when suddenly they were all gone like dust."

At another bomb site, Jamil Abu Hourri said the intensification of air strikes was Israel's way of showing its disdain for a UN Security Council resolution last week demanding an immediate ceasefire. Next up, he fears a ground assault on Rafah, which Israel has threatened to carry out despite pleas from its closest ally Washington that this would cause too much harm to civilians.



This picture shows smoke billowing in the besieged Palestinian territory amid Israeli strikes. – AFP

The intensification of air strikes was Israel's way of showing its disdain for a UN Security Council resolution last week demanding an immediate ceasefire

"The bombing has increased, and they have threatened us with an incursion, and they say that have been given the green light

for the Rafah incursion. Where is the Security Council?" Abu Hourri said. "Look at our little ones. Look at our children. Where should we go? Where should we go?"

At least 32,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's offensive into Gaza, according to the health ministry there, with thousands of other dead believed unrecovered under rubble.

Israeli forces just north of Rafah kept the two main hospitals in Khan Younis, Al Amal and Nasser Hospital, under a blockade imposed late

last week. In the north, they were still operating inside Al Shifa, the enclave's largest hospital, which they stormed more than a week ago.

Gaza's health ministry said wounded people and patients were being held inside the human resources department that was not equipped to provide them with healthcare.

Residents living nearby report hearing explosions in and around Al Shifa and lines of smoke coming from buildings inside the medical facility. — Reuters

Calls for more aid grow in southern Gaza

GAZA: The southern Gaza Strip came under intense Israeli bombardment overnight, despite international pressure for an immediate ceasefire.

Besieged Gaza is in desperate need of aid and the United States said it would continue airdrops, despite pleas from Palestinian groups to stop the practice after they said 18 people had died trying to reach food packages.

A fireball lit up the night sky in the southern city of Rafah, the last remaining urban centre in Gaza not to have been attacked by Israeli ground forces.

The Palestinian Red Crescent has warned that thousands were trapped in the Nasser hospital in Khan Younis and "their lives are in danger".

Underscoring the desperation of civilians trapped by the fighting, Palestinians have asked donor countries to stop their airdrops after 12 people drowned trying to recover parachuted food aid from the sea off Gaza's Mediterranean coast. The Swiss-based Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor also said another six people were killed in stampedes trying to get aid.

"People are dying just to get a can of tuna," Gaza resident Mohammad al Sabaawi said,

holding a can in his hand after a scramble over an aid package.

The war has shattered Gaza's infrastructure and aid agencies say all of its 2.4 million people are now in need of humanitarian help.

The UN children's fund, Unicef, said vastly more aid must be rushed into Gaza by road rather than by air or sea to avert an "imminent famine".

Unicef spokesman James Elder said the necessary help was "a matter of kilometres away" in aid-filled trucks waiting across Gaza's southern border with Egypt.

The US National Security Council said in a statement it would continue trying to get aid in by road, but also said it would continue airdrops. AFPV footage showed crowds rushing towards aid packages on Tuesday being dropped by parachute from planes sent by Jordan, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Germany.

Israel's retaliatory campaign has killed at least 32,414 people in Gaza, most of them women and children, according to the health ministry.

Officials from the two warring sides are in indirect mediated talks in Qatar aimed at agreeing on a ceasefire and the release of captives. — AFP



A military aircraft releases parachutes of humanitarian aid over Gaza. – AFP

Labour crunch forces Croatia to open doors to Asians

LAJLA VESELICA

Durga Phuyal had hoped to start anew when she landed in Croatia, but the Nepali migrant faced an uphill battle to adjust to life in the Balkan country. Phuyal is among the tens of thousands of migrants who have flocked to Croatia from as far afield as Asia, as the small EU country desperately tries to overcome a chronic labour shortage. Traditionally reliant on seasonal workers from Balkan neighbours, Croatia is increasingly counting on labourers from Nepal, India, the Philippines and elsewhere to bridge the gap. Mass emigration and a shrinking population has created tens of thousands of vacant positions in construction and the service industry in the tourism-dependent country, famous for its picturesque beaches along the Adriatic sea. But not everyone has put out the welcome mat, with migrants facing cramped and expensive housing, and occasional anti-immigrant rhetoric that has spiked ahead of elections.

In Nepal, Phuyal paid 7,000 euros in total for the various fees, documents and travel expenses before landing Croatia. But after barely a month after arriving, she had lost her job and was offered no assistance by the agency that helped hire her. “I had no job, no accommodation, no food.” The country provided nearly 120,000 non-EU nationals with work permits in 2023, a 40 per cent jump over the figure from the previous year. But in the run-up to general elections in April, right-wing parties have accused migrants of threatening the country’s security and stealing jobs from Croatians. Migrants have also been regularly pilloried online, with social media users mocking them for gathering during New Year’s festivities in Zagreb, calling the celebrations “Advent in Kathmandu” and “Nepali New Year.” Ethnic Croats comprise more than 90 per cent of Croatia’s population — nearly 80 per cent of whom are Roman Catholics — making it one of the more homogeneous societies in Europe. Language barriers along with conservative attitudes toward outsiders have presented myriad obstacles to welcoming in the

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COUNTRY

new labour force. “Unlike countries that throughout their history had contacts with diverse cultures — like France or Britain — Croatia is facing for the first time a situation where it is encountering very different groups,” said Dragan Bagic, a sociologist at the University of Zagreb. **NOT ‘MENTALLY’ READY** According to forecasts by the Croatian Employers’ Association, the country of just 3.8 million could need as many as 500,000 foreign workers by the end of the decade. Newly arrived migrants have been most vulnerable during their search for housing, according to experts. An investigation in a local newspaper in the capital Zagreb said 32 foreign workers were found living in a cramped 83-square-metre (893-square-foot) apartment in the city. Classified advertisements aimed at foreign workers typically offer tiny apartments with nearly a dozen beds, priced at 200 euros (\$216) per person. A Nepali workers representative said their wages in Croatia range between 560 and 1,000 euros per month. — **AFP**

California looks to Europe to rein in AI

GLENN CHAPMAN

California, home to Silicon Valley, is eager to rein in the deployment of artificial intelligence and is looking to Europe’s tough-on-big-tech approach for inspiration. The richest state in the United States by GDP, California is a hotbed of no-holds-barred tech innovation, but lawmakers in state capital Sacramento want to give the industry laws and guardrails it has largely been spared in the internet age. Brussels has enacted a barrage of laws on US-dominated tech and sprinted to pass the AI Act after OpenAI’s Microsoft-backed ChatGPT arrived on the scene in late 2022, unleashing a global AI race. “What we’re trying to do is actually learn from the Europeans, but also work with the Europeans, and figure out how to put regulations in place on AI,” said David Harris, senior policy advisor at the California Initiative for Technology and Democracy. As they have in the past with EU laws on private data, lawmakers in California are looking to recent European legislation on AI, especially given the little hope of equivalent national legislation out of Washington. There are at least 30 different bills proposed by California state legislators that relate to various aspects of AI, according to Harris, who said he has advised officials here and in Europe on such laws. Proposed laws in California range from requiring AI makers to reveal what was used to train models to banning election ads containing any computer generated features. “One of the aspects I think is really important is the question of how we deal with deepfakes or fake text created to look like a human being is sending you messages,” Harris said. State assembly member Gail Pellerin is backing a bill she says would essentially ban the spreading of deceptive digital content created with generative AI in the months leading up to and the weeks following an election. “Bad actors who are utilising this are really hoping to create chaos in an election,” Pellerin said. Industry association NetChoice is dead set against importing aspects of European legislation on AI, or any other EU tech regulation. “They are taking, essentially, a European approach on artificial intelligence - which is that we must ban the technology,” said Carl Szabo, the general counsel of the association, which advocates for light touch regulation of tech.

— AFP

Why IS attacked Russia – and why Russia blames Ukraine



Omar Ashour

The author is Professor of Security and Military Studies and Founder of the Security Studies Programs at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. He is also the w, is the author of How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt

The terrorist attack on the Crocus City Hall concert venue in a Moscow suburb was no bolt from the blue. The Kremlin dismissed US intelligence warnings of an imminent attack by “extremists,” possibly to shift the blame to a convenient scapegoat when the attack came. The murder of 137 concert-goers is but the latest atrocity in a decade-long struggle between the IS and Russia. The die was cast on September 30, 2015, when Russia intervened in Syria to support the collapsing regime of Bashar al Assad. IS operatives responded a month later by infiltrating Egypt’s Sharm El-Sheikh airport and planting a bomb on a Russian Airbus, killing all 224 passengers and crew.

In retribution, in September 2017, Russia is alleged to have killed IS’s former “war minister,” Gulmurod Khalimov, who had once been the commander of the police special forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Tajikistan and who had fought beside the Russian forces during the Tajik Civil War. All of the alleged Crocus City Hall attackers are from Tajikistan. Between 2015 and 2024, Russia has supported many of IS’s avowed enemies. That includes military and intelligence coordination with Hezbollah, political support for Hamas, and political, intelligence, and possibly military support for the Taliban. ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K), the branch whose operatives are suspected to have committed the Crocus City Hall attack, is active primarily in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

IS’s way of waging war skilfully combines conventional, guerrilla, and terrorist tactics. Thus, despite being widely hated, massively outnumbered, and overwhelmingly outgunned, IS managed at one time to occupy over 120 cities, towns, and villages from the southern Philippines to western Africa, and has survived war mounted by nearly 80 states. But IS leaders are poor strategists, with no viable military approach, as their targets range from al-Qaeda and



Members of the Russian Emergencies Ministry and workers remove debris inside the burnt-out Crocus City Hall following a deadly attack on the concert venue outside Moscow on Tuesday. — **Reuters**

PUTIN, AN EXEMPLARY
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the Taliban to the United States and its allies. Iran and Russia are included as well. But Russia under Putin has a history of false-flag operations, the Ryazan attack in September 1999 being perhaps the best-known. That incident, unfolding against the backdrop of a series of deadly bombings in Moscow and other Russian cities, raised profound questions about Putin’s involvement in acts of state terrorism, ostensibly to justify escalating military actions in Chechnya and therefore consolidate power. Fast forward to March 2024. Although a Russian National Guard (Rosgvardiya) base is only two miles from the Crocus City Hall venue, it took over 90 minutes for the security forces to mobilise despite the warnings of possible attacks that the Kremlin had received.

Whether this is incompetence or conspiracy, Putin seems to have already made up his mind about where the blame lies: in Ukraine. Dead bodies and a burned entertainment complex in the Russian capital just a few days after Putin’s “re-election” are not just terrible optics. They are the result of security breaches, intelligence failures, political complacency, and possibly worse. But the Kremlin seems determined to use its massive propaganda apparatus to deflect public anger toward Ukraine. Despite regaining the operational initiative during winter, Russia remains far from achieving its strategic objectives in Ukraine. Indeed, 18 months, hundreds of thousands of Russian casualties, and hundreds of billions of dollars spent, Russia still does not control the entire territories of the “annexed” oblasts. For large-scale offensive manoeuvres, Russia needs more manpower, more domestic resources and less local resistance – civil or armed. Putin, an exemplary cynic, may well have allowed the attack on the Crocus City Hall venue to take place so that he could use it to push mass mobilisation, strengthen support for the war, and make opposition to his rule even more difficult. Like ISIS, Putin’s war on Ukraine seems to be enduring and expanding. ©Project Syndicate, 2024

Mission not impossible

When was the last time you imagined our world as experienced by those who are differently abled? For example, how do people with hearing impairment feel in public events? How would you describe nature to someone who is visually impaired?

I believe that adding value to the lives of people with diverse physical, mental, and cognitive abilities is one of the most noble missions in life.

While we live in a world that experiences violent shocks of disruptions, not the least being pandemics, genocidal conflicts, and rapidly rising cost of living, we are also experiencing many ordinary people coming up with extraordinary solutions for humanity.

This is what amazed me about the origin story of “Not Impossible Labs”.

NOT IMPOSSIBLE LABS

You often hear the phrase “what a crazy idea!” describing a potential solution that has not been done before.

This phrase is what motivated Not Impossible Labs to start an innovation studio for technology solutions of societal problems.

This innovation studio does not only rely on technical engineers but invites groups of innovators from all walks of life to make experiencing the richness of life possible.

One of the most beautiful Not Impossible Labs examples is their project to facilitate for deaf people enjoying sound in a concert.

They developed devices that connect to the skin and transform sound waves into vibrations felt by deaf audiences.

People told them it was a crazy idea, but their determination to be inclusive of people who are differently abled finally paid off and they are changing the lives of millions of hearing-impaired



Khalid Alsafi Al Huraibi
khalidalharibi@gmail.com

The writer is an entrepreneur and innovation adviser

ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT STEPS IN THE ROAD-MAP TO MAKE THE IMPOSSIBLE NON-DISRUPTIVE MISSIONS POSSIBLE IS BY INVESTING IN INCUBATORS AND STUDIOS THAT DEVELOP SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

people around the world forever.

SCALING UP TECH SOLUTIONS

There is a famous saying in the business world in the Arab region that says “capital is coward” referring to the fact that people with money see risk as a major red investment flag.

Investing in technology for humanity and solving societal problems is a risk, yet it is the reason we are all alive today.

The homes we live in, the food and water which keep us alive and the income we generate come from solutions by forward thinking innovators, such as Not Impossible Labs.

Yet, the truth is access to ideas without access to resources means that the innovation ecosystem is not sustainable. What makes the innovation ecosystem in more dire straits today is how profitable it is to invest technology related to conflicts.

One of the most blatant examples is how the US backed Zionist governments of Israel’s intrusive surveillance technology and assault weapons industry contributed to the harm and death of tens of thousands of people in Palestine and around the world, without any tech solutions to societal problems.

AN EXIT FORWARD

Exiting is a popular term in the investment world as it refers to the right time to leave a business or an initiative after meeting your objectives.

Humanity needs an exit from the clutch of human made crises, especially geopolitical conflicts, and this cannot happen if we keep fuelling these crises with investments.

One of the most significant steps in the road-map to make the impossible non-disruptive missions possible is by investing in incubators and studios that develop sustainable solutions made by the right groups of storytellers, artists, engineers, technologists, entrepreneurs and ethical hackers.

EASTER FERVOUR



A woman looks at a structure depicting an Easter egg painted in the traditional naive art style in Koprivnica, Croatia, on Wednesday. – Reuters

Humanity of Oman: Ensuring security, dignity and safety of domestic workers

In recent years, human trafficking has emerged as a global scourge, exploiting the vulnerable and tarnishing the reputation of nations accused of harbouring such nefarious activities. Among the victims is Oman, a nation renowned for its rich heritage, cultural diversity, warm hospitality, security and safety. Oman ranks as 48th most peaceful country in the world and 3rd most peaceful country in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) regions, according to the Global Peace Index released in London by the Institute of Economics and Peace.

However, a recent BBC documentary has cast a shadow over Oman, alleging its involvement in human trafficking. While such accusations are serious and demand attention, it is imperative to delve deeper into the true essence of Oman – a land of humanity, cooperation, and compassion. Oman has long been celebrated for its commitment to fostering a harmonious society, where people from diverse backgrounds coexist peacefully. Oman has been lauded for its progressive policies aimed at promoting social cohesion and inclusivity. Central to Oman’s ethos is the principle of ‘tolerance and understanding,’ a mantra championed by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

Contrary to the BBC documentary’s portrayal, Oman stands as a beacon of humanity in the region, actively combating human trafficking and



Dr Khalfan bin Hamed al Harrasi

linkedin.com/in/dr-khalfan-hamed-alharrasi-42a1061a

The views expressed are personal

CONTRARY TO THE PORTRAYAL IN THE BBC REPORT, OMAN HAS IMPLEMENTED COMPREHENSIVE MEASURES TO SAFEGUARD THE RIGHTS OF DOMESTIC WORKERS, IRRESPECTIVE OF THEIR NATIONALITY.

safeguarding the rights of all individuals within its borders. The Omani government has instituted robust legal frameworks and stringent enforcement mechanisms to combat this transnational crime. Collaborating with international organisations and law enforcement agencies, Oman has demonstrated its unwavering commitment to eradicating human trafficking from its shores.

Moreover, Oman’s commitment to the welfare of expatriates further underscores its compassionate ethos. Expatriates constitute a significant portion of Oman’s population, contributing to the nation’s development and cultural tapestry. The Omani people, known for their generosity and kindness, extend a warm welcome to expatriates, embracing diversity as a source of strength and enrichment.

In the fabric of Omani society, compassion and empathy are woven intricately, shaping interactions at every level. Whether through community initiatives, charitable endeavours, or governmental policies, Oman continuously uplifts the vulnerable and marginalised. From providing assistance to refugees fleeing conflict to empowering women and children, Oman’s humanitarian efforts resonate far beyond its borders.

One of the hallmarks of Oman’s approach to addressing social challenges is its emphasis on dialogue and collaboration. Oman actively engages with civil society organisations, religious institutions, and international partners to foster dialogue and exchange best practices in combating human trafficking. By fostering a culture of cooperation and mutual respect, Oman reinforces its commitment to upholding human dignity and rights. These recent allegations have raised concerns regarding the treatment of domestic workers, namely those of Malawian nationality.

While such accusations demand scrutiny, it is essential to present a balanced perspective that reflects the reality of the situation and differentiates between human trafficking and employee mistreatment: Distinguishing between instances of ill-treatment of employees and cases of human trafficking is indeed crucial in addressing the complexities of labour rights issues.

While both are serious concerns, they differ significantly in nature and scope. Ill-treatment of employees, although unacceptable, may involve violations of labour laws, such as long working hours, inadequate wages, unsafe working conditions, or verbal abuse by employers.

While such practices are widespread in various parts of the world and require attention, they do not necessarily constitute human trafficking. Human trafficking, on the other hand, involves the exploitation and coercion of individuals for various purposes, including forced labour, sexual exploitation, or involuntary servitude.

It often entails the recruitment, transportation, and harbouring of individuals through force, fraud, or deception, with the intent to exploit them for profit. By conflating instances of ill-treatment with cases of human trafficking, we risk oversimplifying complex issues and undermining efforts to combat trafficking effectively.

Contrary to the portrayal in the BBC report, Oman has implemented comprehensive measures to safeguard the rights of domestic workers, irrespective of their nationality.

Malawian domestic workers, like their counterparts from other countries, are entitled to legal protections, fair treatment, and avenues for recourse in the event of any grievances or abuses.

One of the key pillars of Oman’s approach is the regulation of recruitment agencies, which play a pivotal role in facilitating the employment of domestic workers. Strict licensing requirements, regular inspections,

and stringent penalties for non-compliance are enforced to deter any malpractices or abuses within the recruitment process.

Furthermore, Oman has implemented initiatives aimed at empowering domestic workers and enhancing their access to support services.

Education and awareness orientations are conducted to inform domestic workers of their rights, responsibilities, and available avenues for assistance. The Omani legal framework offers robust protections for domestic workers, including provisions for fair wages, decent working conditions, and access to healthcare.

In practice, domestic workers in Oman, including those of Malawian nationality, experience dignified and respectful treatment in their employment. Many forge strong bonds with their employers, who often regard them as valued members of their households, providing them with care, support, and opportunities for personal and professional development. It is important to acknowledge that isolated incidents of abuse or exploitation do not represent the broader reality of the situation. Oman remains committed to addressing any instances of wrongdoing swiftly and decisively, holding perpetrators accountable under the full force of the law.

sport

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Ukraine’s Mykhailo Mudryk celebrates scoring their second goal with Volodymyr Brazhko in the Euro 2024 Qualifier Play-Off against Iceland at Stadion Miejski Wroclaw, Wroclaw, Poland. – Reuters

Ukraine join Poland, Georgia in Euro 2024

PARIS: Ukraine came from behind to beat Iceland in a play-off to qualify for Euro 2024 on Tuesday, while Poland secured their place at the finals with a penalty shoot-out victory over Wales and Georgia qualified for a first ever major tournament.

The Ukrainians were aiming to qualify for a first tournament since the Russian invasion of the country two years ago, and they did so by coming from behind to defeat Iceland 2-1 in a game played in the Polish city of Wroclaw.

Albert Gudmundsson silenced the crowd in a city with a large Ukrainian refugee population as he fired Iceland into the lead on the half-hour mark.

Iceland, with a population under 400,000, were hoping to return to the finals of a

competition in which they reached the quarterfinals in 2016.

However, Euro 2020 quarterfinalists Ukraine equalised nine minutes after half-time thanks to a superbly taken goal by Viktor Tsygankov of Spanish side Girona.

Extra time was looming when Ukraine grabbed the winner with six minutes left as Chelsea’s Mykhailo Mudryk swept home a first-time shot from the edge of the area.

“Thank you, guys! Thank you, team! For significant emotions for the entire country. For the important victory and making it to EURO. For proving once again: whenever Ukrainians face difficulties but do not give up and continue to fight, Ukrainians certainly win,” Ukraine’s President, Volodymyr Zelensky, wrote on X.



Georgia’s goalkeeper Giorgi Mamardashvili reacts during the penalty shoot-out. – AFP

Having narrowly missed out to Italy in their qualifying group and being forced into the play-offs, Ukraine can now look forward to the European Championship which begins in Germany on June 14.

They will go into Group E alongside Belgium, Slovakia and

Romania and will have ambitions of progressing to the last 16.

AGONY FOR WALES, GREECE

Poland go into a difficult Group D at the Euro along with France, the Netherlands and Austria after getting the better of Wales in a tense shoot-out at the end of their play-off final in Cardiff.

The match ended 0-0 after 90 minutes and there were no goals either in extra time, which ended with Wales having Chris Mepham sent off for a second booking.

A high-quality shoot-out, which began with Robert Lewandowski converting Poland’s first kick, saw nine successful penalties before Daniel James had his effort saved and Wales lost 5-4.

There will be no third consecutive European

Championship for the Welsh team, who were semifinalists in 2016, but Poland will be present at a fifth continental finals in a row.

“It’s a cruel game, that’s what I’ve said to the players, one kick away from qualifying. It hurts,” Wales manager Rob Page told broadcaster S4C.

Earlier, Georgia made history by winning through to a major international tournament for the first time since the country in the Caucasus of 3.7 million people gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

They beat Greece 4-2 on penalties after a 0-0 draw at the end of extra time in Tbilisi, sparking a pitch invasion from delighted fans at the Boris Paichadze Stadium.

Nika Kvekveskiri stroked in the decisive penalty for Georgia

after Tasos Bakasetas and Giorgos Giakoumakis both failed to score from the spot for Greece.

Surprise European champions in 2004, Greece’s defeat means their wait to qualify for a first major tournament since the 2014 World Cup goes on.

Ranked 77th in the world, a Georgia team coached by former France full-back Willy Sagnol will join Turkey, Portugal and the Czech Republic in Group F at the European Championship.

“I would pay to feel what I feel today,” said Sagnol after the game, speaking in English.

They had never come close to qualifying before, until losing in a play-off at the same stage for the last Euro, going down 1-0 at home to North Macedonia in 2020.

—AFP

Silhavy proud of Red Warriors’ team spirit against Malaysia

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 27

Oman’s head coach Jaroslav Silhavy praised his players for the group work and top spirit they showed in the 2-0 win over the hosts Malaysia in their Preliminary Joint Qualification - Round 2 for the Fifa World Cup 2026 and the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 tie at the Bukit Jalil National Stadium in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday night.

The second successive victory meant, Red Warriors inch closer to secure a slot in the next stage of the Fifa World Cup 2026 and to confirm their presence in the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027. The win took Oman to second place in Group D by nine points behind Kyrgyzstan, who managed to defeat Chinese Taipei 5-1, to claim the group leaders with goal difference while Malaysia

remained with six points in third place.

“The away match was more difficult than the home game in Muscat. The opponent delivered top efforts on their ground and worked very hard to compensate their previous loss in Oman. The national team players dominated on the pitch and we missed many scoring attempts. I am very pleased with the technical performance of the team and to see the joy of fan with the victory,” Silhavy said.

“Despite the short term, I worked hard with the coaching staff to deliver our best towards registering the positive results. It is not easy to select the starting line-up during this limited period but I worked with the team to deliver our top level. Football is a group sport and our players deliver everything,” the Czech coach added.

“It was a fantastic match and everyone enjoyed the game. I am thankful to all our lovely audience for their continuous support and this win is dedicated to them. The triumph is a result of the team work,” the 62-year-old concluded.

Oman will return back to the joint qualifiers in June as they will take on Chinese Taipei in away game on June 6 before they meet each other again in Muscat on June 12. During the stoppage period of the national team, Silhavy will observe the players in the remaining rounds of the top league and the final HM Cup match between Dhofar and Al Nahda.

Oman’s goalie Ibrahim al Mukhaini thanked Oman’s media for their positive support. “The media role was very crucial during the last period. As players, we implemented the head coach instructions properly



Oman players and coaching staff celebrate their win in Kuala Lumpur.

and we executed all the learned tactics at the training sessions. We promised since we were in

Oman to show different style in comparison to our recent show. The ground could have created

some injuries but we managed to end the match with no injuries,” he said.

‘Near perfect’ as Ravindra, Dube help Chennai thrash Gujarat



Chennai Super Kings' Shivam Dube plays a shot against Gujarat Titans at the MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai. – IPL

CHENNAI: New Zealand's Rachin Ravindra hit an explosive 46 and took three catches to help holders Chennai Super Kings to their second straight IPL win with a 63-run thrashing of Gujarat Titans on Tuesday.

The left-handed Ravindra, in his debut IPL season, made his runs off 20 balls while captain Ruturaj Gaikwad also hit 46 as Chennai posted 206-6 at their home MA Chidambaram Stadium.

Seam bowlers Mustafizur Rahman, Deepak Chahar and Tushar Deshpande took two wickets each to help restrict Gujarat, led by Shubman Gill, to 143-8 and go down to their biggest IPL loss by runs.

"Today's game was near to a perfect game, in the sense

of batting-bowling-fielding, all three departments," said Gaikwad.

"Against a team like Gujarat, we had to produce this kind of performance."

Chennai's Shivam Dube top-scored with his 51 off 23 deliveries to boost the total after Ravindra and Gaikwad gave the team a quick start in their opening stand of 62.

Old warhorse MS Dhoni shocked his fans ahead of the T20 tournament when he passed on the Chennai captaincy to Gaikwad after he had led the team to its fifth IPL title last year.

Gaikwad, who led the team to a win over Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the IPL opener last week, survived an early reprieve on one and made use of the spill.

LEADERSHIP ROLES

Gaikwad is learning the leadership roles under Dhoni's mentorship as the 42-year-old former skipper, who took a diving catch as wicketkeeper to dismiss Vijay Shankar, kept guiding the new captain throughout the game.

The left-handed Ravindra remained defiant and clubbed three sixes and six fours.

Gujarat's Afghanistan spin wizard Rashid Khan denied Ravindra his fifty as the leg-spinner had the batsman stumped while Gaikwad fell caught behind off Australia's Spencer Johnson.

Dube, who was named man of the match, reached his fifty in 22 balls before he fell in the 19th over to Afghan spinner Rashid

Khan, who took two wickets but leaked 49 runs.

Gujarat Titans, who won a title in their debut IPL season in 2022 and ended runners-up in 2023, were never in the chase after they lost captain Gill lbw of the bowling of Chahar.

Gill took charge of the team and won his opening match on Sunday after Hardik Pandya switched to Mumbai Indians for another captain's role.

"Lot of new learnings, new experiences and different things," said Gill.

"It's exciting to captain a team like Gujarat Titans, we've made it to the finals in the last couple of years so very exciting."

The final of the lucrative T20 tournament will be played in Chennai on May 26. — AFP

Azarenka battles into Miami semis, Rybakina beats Sakkari

MIAMI: Three-time Miami Open winner Victoria Azarenka battled for nearly three hours to get past a determined Yulia Putintseva and take her place in the semifinals with a 7-6 (7/4), 1-6, 6-3 win on Tuesday.

Fourth-seeded Elena Rybakina, the highest seeded player left in the tournament, held off a strong challenge from eighth-seed Maria Sakkari of Greece before emerging with a 7-5, 6-7 (4/7), 6-4 win.

The 34-year-old Azarenka, who won in Miami in 2009, 2011 and 2016, had to deal not only with the spirited display from the Moscow-born Kazakh player, but also a long disruption to the match due to a technical problem.

The match was stopped for 45 minutes in the fourth game of the first set due to a power outage which impacted the umpire's communications and the hawkeye system.

Azarenka had to save three set points on Putintseva's serve at 5-4 in the first set, then missed out on two set points of her own at 6-5 before the tie-break.

Putintseva dominated the second set but Azarenka found the strength to get ahead in the third but still her opponent refused to relent, fighting off match point before breaking.

But Azarenka held on her next serve to secure passage to the last four and keep alive her hope of a fourth Miami title.

"Yulia played great, she's in such great form and I really had to dig deep. I felt like my legs were kind of giving in a little bit and I lost a little bit of self-belief because she was playing so well and moving me around everywhere," said Azarenka.

"But I'm happy that I was able to regroup, reset and really

take my chances, come out and play aggressive and face the challenge," she said.

Azarenka said the win showed that there can be no doubt about her desire to compete at the highest level.

"I'm motivated to compete and go after my dreams. I've been playing on tour for 20 years and I still feel like I am improving, that's priceless for me and I want to keep going," she added.

Belarusian Azarenka will face Rybakina for a place in the final.

Rybakina, at 24, is the youngest player left in the tournament and she needed all her energy to survive a 2hr 48min tussle with Sakkari.

Rybakina led 6-5 in the first set and the match looked poised for a tie-break but Sakkari's service game deserted her at the crucial moment and she was broken with a fine down the line winner from the Kazakh, last year's beaten finalist in Miami.

Sakkari opened up a 4-2 lead in an error-strewn second set but allowed Rybakina to win the next three games and had to save two match points.

The Greek ran out the winner in the tie-break but Rybakina, who looked to have an ankle problem, was able to finally break at 3-3 converting on her third break point.

Sakkari's determination saw her save four match points when 5-3 down as she held but this time Rybakina was able to close out the contest on her serve.

"It was such a tough battle, as it has been before. I am really happy but now I just need to recover," said Rybakina.

World number one Iga Swiatek, Aryna Sabalenka and third seed Coco Gauff have all been eliminated.— AFP



Elena Rybakina (KAZ) hits a backhand against Maria Sakkari (GRE) at the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. – USA Today Sports



Zubair Ahmad receives the man of the match award.

Nazimabad in semis after last-ball win

MUSCAT: In the last quarterfinal of the ongoing PSM Ramadhan cricket tournament, Nazimabad XI beat Charwa XI by 3 runs on Tuesday night.

Batting first, Nazimabad posted 97-4 in 8 overs. Amir Ali scored 30 (3x6). Qamar took 2 wickets for Charwa XI.

In reply, Charwa XI scored 94 with Mohsin Raza hitting 35 with three sixers and fours each. But a devastating spell by Zubair Ahmad, who took six wickets for 12 runs in 2 overs won the match for Nazimabad XI. Zubair's 6-12 was a new bowling record.

The semifinals and final will be played on Thursday. Hala Cosmos will meet Nazimabad XI in first semifinal while Salalah Kings take on SE Muscat in the second semifinal.

Medvedev, Alcaraz and Sinner through in Miami

MIAMI: Defending Miami Open champion Daniil Medvedev and top seed Carlos Alcaraz marched into the quarterfinals of the tournament on Tuesday with convincing victories.

Medvedev earned a 7-6 (7/5), 6-0 win over Germany's Dominik Koepfer while Alcaraz took care of Italian Lorenzo Musetti with a 6-3, 6-3 win in 85 minutes.

Second seed Jannik Sinner of Italy also moved into the last eight beating Christopher O'Connell of Australia 6-4, 6-3.

Alcaraz, who is searching for the 'Sunshine Double' after winning in Indian Wells, was too much for 23rd seed Musetti although the Italian certainly contributed to a crowd-pleasing contest.

Stadium court erupted after a rally in the third game of the second set saw Musetti clip the ball between his legs, lobbing Alcaraz but the Spaniard returned it with a 'tweener' only to lose the point to a deft volley at the net.

But overall it was a comfortable match for Alcaraz whose all-round game looks in strong shape.

"I don't know if this is the best game I've played but without a doubt it is the best feeling. I feel great



Carlos Alcaraz (ESP) hits a backhand against Lorenzo Musetti (ITA) on day nine of the Miami Open at Hard Rock Stadium. – USA Today Sports



Jannik Sinner (ITA) hits a volley against Christopher O'Connell (AUS).

on the court, I'm moving great, I am not injured and not thinking about my ankle anymore....it's the best feeling since the summer," he added.

In the quarters, Alcaraz will face Bulgarian Grigor Dimitrov, who beat Pole Hubert Hurkacz,

triumphing in a third set tie-break for a 3-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/3) win.

SLOW START

Medvedev made an unusually sloppy start on Stadium court, with a series of unforced errors, and

found himself trailing 4-0 in the first set tie-break.

But having overturned that deficit, Medvedev went on to win all the remaining games as he showed that, despite his concerns over the rapid deterioration of balls on the hard court surface, he is comfortable with the conditions.

The Russian suggested that Koepfer had struggled to recover from the blow of seeing his tie-break lead vanish. "I think sometimes it happens, when you lose the first set the way he lost it. He played very good, probably was closer to winning it because of the 4/0 in the tie-break and when you lose such a set, especially when the points were tough, it brings your energy down," he said.

The world number four, Medvedev will face Chilean Nicolas Jarry who upset Norwegian seventh seed Ruud with a 7-6 (7/3), 6-3 win.

Cheered on by a large contingent of Chilean supporters, Jarry had 39 winners to Ruud's 17 and was delighted at his progress into the last eight. "I'm very happy with the way I played. I was very strong on court, not missing many easy balls. The conditions were so tough. The wind was extreme and Casper also,

he's a grinder," he said.

Italy's Sinner trailed 3-1 in the first set against O'Connell, as the Australian cleverly mixed up his approach, asking a variety of questions of his Italian opponent.

He faced a potential double break at 0-30 but responded strongly to come back and take the set after 58 minutes. The second set was more straightforward for Sinner who broke O'Connell's first service game and then took care of business to wrap up the win.

"He started off really well, I made a couple of mistakes. When you are a break down especially in the beginning, it's always tough, also mentally," said Sinner.

Sinner will face Czech Tomas Machac who eased into the quarters with a 6-3, 6-3 win over another Italian, Matteo Arnaldi.

Hungary's Fabian Marozsan, World No 57, continued his impressive run with another upset win, triumphing 6-4, 0-6, 6-1 over ninth seed Australian Alex de Minaur. Marozsan, who will break into the top 40 in Monday's rankings, is playing in just his fourth Masters 1000 event and will play in his second quarterfinal at this level against Alexander Zverev. — AFP

Bellingham brings relief for England



England's Jude Bellingham scores their second goal past Belgium's Matz Sels. – Reuters

ANDY JALIL
LONDON, MARCH 27

With virtually the last kick of the match, England salvaged a 2-2 draw against Belgium in the second of their two internationals in preparation for the European championship this summer. After suffering defeat three days earlier against Brazil, England's blushes were spared with highly-rated Jude Bellingham's equaliser with seconds remaining of added time. Knowing the barrage of criticism England would face had it been two quick defeats on home soil from two games, Bellingham said: "I know the rubbish we would have got if we would have lost two games on the bounce. These two games will stand us in good stead for the Euros. We will use the positives and learn from the negatives. We created a lot of

chances tonight. I had one where I should have scored so I'm happy to make it up to the team." He added: "But we really should be winning with all the chances we made. You trust everyone that comes into the squad and they are all good players. I am sure the manager will be happy with how we played. You're never happy with a loss or a draw but we have to be with how we played. "You have to keep perspective with these games, a lot of lads were making debuts. I know everyone will be negative about it but you have these games for what they are. You plan these games because you expect a fully-fit team and then players get injured. But I'm sure the boss is glad with the players he got to see because they were brilliant." Belgium took the lead in



England's Jude Bellingham celebrates scoring their second goal with Anthony Gordon. – Reuters

the 11th minute, a minute after the injured John Stones was replaced. It came about from a rare mistake by goalkeeper Jordan Pickford whose weak clearance went straight to Amadou Onana who promptly passed to Youri Tielemans to deliver a right-footed shot into the far corner from 20 yards.

Belgium's lead lasted just six minutes as Bellingham and Kobbie Mainoo combined in a fine move to pass to Ivan Toney who was then brought down in the box by Jan Vertonghen and the resulting penalty was converted by Toney. Within ten minutes of that England nearly went ahead but the headed 'goal' by Jarrod Bowen was ruled out by VAR for offside following a corner. It was, however, Belgium who went into the lead again nine minutes before the break with a brilliant goal. Lewis Dunk was beaten as Tielemans passed to Romelu Lukaku on the right and raced ahead towards to back post, Lukaku then made a marvellous cross with the outside of his left-foot from which Tielemans produced a diving header into to the net.

England pressed hard for the equaliser. Bellingham missed a chance when his headed attempt from a pass by substitute Joe Gomez went wide. He had also missed a good chance earlier when he shot over the bar from a ball that came to him after Mainoo had dispossessed Onana. But Bellingham finally got England parity in a last-gasp with increased pressure. England had the ball in the penalty area and substitute James Maddison controlled it near the goal line before passing back to Bellingham who drove in his shot from twelve yards to England's massive relief. Belgium manager, Domenico Tedesco, said: "Of course I'm disappointed as with five seconds to go you could win at Wembley and that would be special."

Brazil fight back to draw six-goal thriller with Spain

MADRID: Brazil snatched a late leveller to share an entertaining and occasionally heated 3-3 friendly draw with Spain on Tuesday. Lucas Paqueta fired home a stoppage-time penalty to deny La Roja victory at the Santiago Bernabeu, after they had taken a late lead. Spain captain Rodri scored two heavily debated penalties of his own in a pulsating battle under a closed roof in the Spanish capital. The Manchester City midfielder opened the scoring from the spot in the 12th minute after electric winger Lamine Yamal tumbled in the box and Dani Olmo extended Spain's lead with a fine individual goal. A mistake by Spain goalkeeper Unai Simon allowed Rodrygo to pull one back before the break and teen sensation Endrick, on as a substitute, fired Brazil level five minutes into the second half. Rodri dispatched his second spot-kick late on after Dani

Carvajal was clipped by Lucas Beraldo but Paqueta had the final say. The match, arranged to help combat racism after various incidents of abuse aimed at Real Madrid and Brazil winger Vinicius Junior in Spain, proved a pulsating battle between two of football's heavyweight nations. Vinicius captained Brazil for the first time but was largely kept quiet, with his teenage compatriot and future Los Blancos team-mate Endrick continuing to enjoy the limelight, while Yamal shone for Spain. "It's a shame it got away from us in the last second, it was a penalty we could have avoided," Rodri told Teledeporte. "We were united against a great team, they have such individual quality, we competed." Rodri was given the armband on this occasion by regular skipper Alvaro Morata, as a gesture for the recent death of the midfielder's grandfather. "I dedicated (the goals) to my



Brazil's midfielder #08 Lucas Paqueta (L) vies for a header with Spain's defender #14 Aymeric Laporte (C) and Brazil's midfielder #15 Joao Gomes during the international friendly match at the Santiago Bernabeu stadium in Madrid, on Tuesday. Spain arranged a friendly against Brazil at the Santiago Bernabeu under the slogan 'One Skin' to help combat racism. – AFP

grandfather, for everything that he taught me," added Rodri. Spain coach Luis de la Fuente picked a close to full-strength side to face the five-time World

'NEVER FRIENDLY' Yamal won the penalty converted by Rodri for the opening goal, although the Barcelona winger was fortunate it was given after tumbling easily under a challenge from Joao Gomes. The 16-year-old continues to grow in stature with every match and played in Olmo for the second goal. RB Leipzig attacker Olmo finished it brilliantly, with some slick footwork to take Beraldo out of the picture before curling past Brazil goalkeeper Bento. Spain allowed Brazil into the match just before half-time when goalkeeper Unai Simon gave the ball away carelessly to Rodrygo, who lobbed the ball over his head and into the net. Dorival brought on Endrick, who scored the winner against England on Saturday in another friendly, at half-time, for his first appearance at the home of his future club, Real Madrid. The 17-year-old starlet did not have to wait long to net his

first goal in the Spanish capital, volleying home with the help of a deflection after a corner was headed into his path. Spain thought they had won the game when Rodri slammed in his second penalty in the final stages after Carvajal hit the deck in a collision with Beraldo, but Brazil refused to throw in the towel. The visitors earned a penalty of their own deep in stoppage time when Carvajal, having fallen, cynically pulled back Galeno's leg. Paqueta, who was earlier lucky to survive without punishment for swinging an arm at Marc Cucurella, sent Simon the wrong way to equalise with virtually the last kick. "A game against Brazil is never friendly, both sides want to win, we gave everything on the pitch with and without the ball," said Olmo. "In the end it didn't happen, but we have to be proud of what we did." – AFP

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MoTCIT and Muscat University sign pact to boost Oman’s transport and logistics sectors



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) and Muscat University signed yesterday a programme for cooperation in the fields of training, consultation and joint research in the transport, logistics, operations and supply chain management sectors.

The cooperation aims to strengthen the vital sectors of transport and logistics in the Sultanate of Oman by improving infrastructure, raising the efficiency of logistics services, enhancing technology and innovation, developing employee capabilities and achieving research and development progress.

Eng Khamis bin Mohammed al Shammakhi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Transport,

explained that such programmes will strengthen the principle of partnership between government and academic institutions in order to reach common goals in achieving the goals of Oman Vision 2040.

For his part, Professor Dr Khamis bin Hamad al Yahyai, President of Muscat University, said: The cooperation programme that was signed is the first cooperation programme with the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

The College of Logistics and Transport at Muscat University is the only college specialised in the field of logistics and transport in the Sultanate of Oman and its programmes are accredited by the International Logistics and Transport Authority and the International Supply Authority.

— ONA

Omani required in commercial registry for foreign investors

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) has clarified that, starting next April, it will be mandatory to employ an Omani employee in the foreign investor’s commercial registry one year after starting to practice the commercial activity, and for him to be registered with the General Authority for Social Insurance, with a commitment to implementing the policy Omanisation followed by the Ministry of Labour.

This comes in implementation of the Council of Ministers’ decision to reduce commercial registration fees for foreign investors and treat them as an Omani investor, with the obligation to employ a minimum of one Omani employee.

Eng Ammar bin Sulaiman al Kharousi (pictured), Director-General of the Investment Services Centre at MoCIIP, pointed out that the Ministry had announced on June 18, 2023, through its electronic platforms, the start of reducing fees for foreign investment companies and obliging them to employ an Omani employee, in addition to placing an alert when extracting the commercial register clarifies the condition for employing the Omani citizen one year after the establishment of the commercial register for the foreign investor.



He said that the Ministry is making continuous efforts to enhance the attractiveness of the investment environment in the Sultanate of Oman, by removing challenges facing investors, whether local or foreign.

He hopes that commercial companies for foreign investors will contribute to enhancing local added value by creating job

opportunities for Omani citizens, who represent the backbone for development.

The facilities and incentives provided by government agencies to investors must contribute to effectively improving the labour market.

MoCIIP on April 1, 2024, to place an administrative obligation prohibiting transactions through the Oman Business Platform on all commercial records of foreign investors that have completed a year since their establishment and have not committed to the appointment, while giving a period of 30 days that may be subject to change to extend the same period for companies to rectify their situations.

If this employee is let go, the obligation will be placed on the company in an electronic way, making it easier for the MoCIIP and the Ministry of Labour to follow up on companies that are not committed to Omanisation.

The investment sector in the Sultanate of Oman witnessed, during the last stage, many facilities and simplification of procedures for investors, by allowing the foreign investor to invest and own 100 per cent, and to invest in more than 1,700 commercial and industrial activities in the Sultanate of Oman through the Oman Business Platform, and reducing, cancelling and merging 836 government services.

— ONA

Pact signed to develop commercial building in Madinat Al Irfan

MUSCAT: The Oman Tourism Development Company (Omran Group) and Alizz Islamic Bank signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a strategic financial partnership related to the innovative development works of Commercial Building No. (1) in the Business Park in Madinat Al Irfan (East).

During the signing ceremony, the focus was on the common goals of this strategic partnership, and an introduction to the components of the business park, which was designed in accordance with the principles of sustainability, and green buildings that the Omran Group places as a top priority.

It also reviews the supporting infrastructure and incentives that attract investors to develop the business park amid a smart and exemplary business environment according to the general plan of the Madinat Al Irfan project.

The ceremony witnessed a detailed presentation that



Ali al Mani, CEO of Alizz Islamic Bank and Dr Hashil bin Obaid al Mahrouqi, CEO of Omran Group sign the agreement.

addressed the vision of the Madinat Al Irfan Business Park, and the ambitious plans that will contribute to making it a leading destination for innovation, opportunities, and growth in Muscat, in addition to focusing on the potential it has thanks to the infrastructure and integrated

facilities it contains.

The ceremony included an introductory tour using augmented reality technology, and the opportunity for attendees to tour Commercial Building No. (1) to witness the developments in work in the building and its engineering and technical

advantages, as this project is expected to be completed by 2025.

It will include the headquarters of the Omran Group, as well as many other leading entities.

Dr Hashil bin Obaid al Mahrouqi, CEO of Omran Group, said that cooperation with Alizz Islamic Bank is an important

step to achieve the group’s vision of establishing vibrant and sustainable communities, in line with the Sultanate of Oman’s efforts to promote social, economic and environmental prosperity.

The group has a proven track record of pioneering tourism projects and assets. It works to stimulate investment by building strategic partnerships with investors, to contribute to creating sustainable social and economic benefits.

Al Mahrouqi said to Oman News Agency (ONA) that the Omran Group will invest about RO 30 million to implement innovative development works for Commercial Building No. (1) and the infrastructure of the business park in Madinat Al Irfan.

For his part, Ali bin Saif al Mani, CEO of Alizz Islamic Bank, stressed that the partnership with Omran Group comes within the framework of the bank’s efforts to support national projects, as it supports the firm commitment

to supporting innovation and sustainability in order to build a promising future.

It is hoped that this strategic partnership will contribute to attracting more investments to develop additional buildings according to the general plan of the business park. To consolidate its position as a major business destination in Madinat Al Irfan.

This partnership is in line with the vision of both sides, which aims to support efforts aimed at enhancing the position of the Sultanate of Oman as an ideal destination for opportunities and innovation.

Madinat Al Irfan (East), whose first phase was completed in 2023 with the opening of JW Marriott Muscat, includes the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, a four-star Crowne Plaza Hotel, and a business complex to serve as the main headquarters for the offices of leading companies such as the headquarters of the Oman Telecommunications Company (Omantel).

— ONA

MG3: Where agility meets affordability in Oman’s automotive landscape

MUSCAT: The automotive landscape of Oman undergoes a thrilling transformation with the launch of the new MG3, a symphony of agility, affordability, and innovation. Representing a leap forward in automotive engineering and design, the new MG3 promises to redefine the driving experience for Oman’s discerning motorists. At the heart of the new MG3 is its advanced petrol engine, delivering an exhilarating 109 horsepower, coupled with an 8-gear i-CVT transmission for seamless power delivery. But what truly sets this remarkable vehicle apart is its exceptional efficiency.



With a peak torque of 142 NM, the MG3 offers outstanding fuel economy without compromising on performance. “Today marks not just the launch of a new car, but the

beginning of a new chapter in the automotive landscape of Oman,” said Mohsin bin Hani al Bahrani, CEO at MHD ACERE. He also remarked “At MG, we’re dedicated to making cars that everyone can afford and enjoy. With the launch of the MG3 in Oman, we’re committed to offering affordable options that give people in Oman the freedom to travel comfortably and confidently, ensuring a smooth ride ahead.” Beyond the numbers, the new MG3 offers a driving experience like no other. With agile handling and flexible steering, it redefines what it means to have fun on the road.

Whether navigating through city streets or cruising along the open highway, every moment behind the wheel of the new MG3 is filled with excitement and joy. The launch of the new MG3 marks MG’s commitment to providing Oman’s drivers with vehicles that combine cutting-edge technology, exceptional performance, and affordability. As the newest addition to MG’s lineup, the MG3 promises to captivate hearts and minds across the Sultanate of Oman. For more information about the new MG3 and to experience its unrivalled performance and agility, visit your nearest MG showroom today.

Bank Muscat extends support to Fak Kurba to resolve 260 humanitarian cases



MUSCAT: Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, has announced its support for the Fak Kurba initiative organised by the Omani Lawyers

Association in coordination with the Ministry of Social Development and the Supreme Judicial Council. For this year, the Bank supported 260 cases who have been jailed or

convicted for failing to clear financial obligations. Bank Muscat is participating for the 7th consecutive year to support the Fak Kurba initiative and has helped secure the release of 1557 cases till date. It must be noted that none of these cases relate to payments involving banks or financing institutions in the Sultanate of Oman. The Fak Kurba initiative is implemented through the voluntary efforts of the Omani Lawyers Association. The initiative has contributed to resolving many cases and succeeded in bringing joy and happiness to many Omani families. It aims to enhance awareness of the importance of community bonding and it is working since its start to transform this initiative into a sustainable project that runs

throughout the year. On this occasion, Dr Mohammed Bin Ibrahim al Zadjali, Chairman of the Oman Lawyers Association, said: “The 11th edition of the Fak Kurba initiative is a continuation of the positive results it has been achieving since its launch in 2012. Throughout these years, the initiative contributed to the release of more than 5890 cases. We are pleased with the continuous support given to the initiative from individuals and institutions, reflecting the strength of cooperation in society. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my appreciation to all contributors for their partnership with the Association to ensure the success of this initiative. I would like as well to thank Bank Muscat for its partnership and contribution to make this initiative

a success.” Taya Eid Bait Sabeea, Deputy General Manager - Interior Regions, Bank Muscat, said: “We are pleased to continue our partnership with Oman Lawyers Association to support the Fak Kurba initiative, which renews its commitment each year to extend a helping hand to deserving beneficiaries, thereby supporting them to lead normal lives. The Bank is keen to support such initiatives and programmes, for the greater good of the community and to sustain the positive results achieved along these years. Enhancing partnership between various institutions in public and private sectors is also one of main areas we focus on. We wish all success to this initiative and the Oman Lawyers Association.”

Ooredoo organises ‘Upgrade Your Digital Infrastructure’ workshop

MUSCAT: Ooredoo understands that if businesses leverage cutting-edge, end-to-end technologies and solutions, they can optimise their digital infrastructure, the engine driving their digital operations. For this reason, Ooredoo organised an exclusive workshop entitled ‘Upgrade Your Digital Infrastructure.’ The event was held together with Starlink, a leading distributor of telecom products in the GCC region and Ooredoo’s ICT partner, and Netceed, a global value-added distributor for the telecom network and digital infrastructure industries, and Ooredoo’s partner

offering solutions for Enterprise customers in Oman. During the workshop, experts shared their experience and know-how on the latest trends and developments in FTTO (Fibre to the Office) technologies and Micro Data Centres. Fibre-enabled FTTO connections are Internet connectivity solutions that significantly benefit businesses with fast speeds, high reliability, and flexibility. Meanwhile, small-footprint, easy-to-deploy Micro Data Centres can maximise a business’s value through increased scalability, resilience,



and reduced costs. “We deliver a personalised and high-impact corporate customer service while an excellent digital infrastructure

organise an expert-led workshop with Starlink and Netceed; both are customer-focused companies that provide pioneering end-to-end connectivity solutions and technologies to entities,” said Saied bin Sadiq al Lawati, Director of Business Marketing and ICT Solutions at Ooredoo. “Starlink, through its strategic partnership with Ooredoo, is confident to deliver similar projects in the future. We will keep adding value to our customers by providing innovative technologies,” said Tommy Davidson, Acting Chief Executive Office of Starlink Middle East. We were therefore happy to

Geely Yinhe E8 wins prestigious 2024 iF Design Award

MUSCAT: The German Firm iF Design Award (iF Design Award), known as the “Oscar of the design industry”, awarded the 2024 iF Design Award to Geely Yinhe E8. The newest star from the Geely Auto stood out from nearly 11,000 entries from 72 countries and regions around the world. As one of the world’s three major industrial design awards along with the Red Dot Award (German) and the IDEA Award (America), the iF Design Award was founded in 1953. It is famous for its independent, rigorous and reliable. In this world, the selection criteria are extremely harsh. This year’s iF Design Award uses “Idea”/“Form”/“Function”/“Differentiation”/“Impact” as the evaluation criteria, emphasising the global influence of design.



Geely Yinhe E8 has won high recognition from 132 global authoritative design review experts from 23 countries with its impressive “new design paradigm” in the era of smart electric vehicle. Break through design

boundaries with high-value design Review experts believe that the breakthrough of Geely Yinhe E8 lies in the perfect integration of culture, technology and user needs. In the “Galaxy Era” of new energy vehicles, Geely Yinhe

anchors the “high value” of its products and adheres to its original intention of “making smart premium cars for everyone”. As the flagship pure electric sedan of the Geely Yinhe series, the Geely Yinhe E8 is equipped with the world’s first mass-produced

integrated luminous front face created by patented “micro hole laser engraving” technology. It not only inherits Geely’s classic ripple symbol design, but also maintains its extremely high brand Recognisable. The world’s first mass-produced 45-inch 8K unbounded smart screen in the car integrates multiple functions to meet the in-vehicle interactive unbounded experience required by users. In addition, in terms of driving experience design, Geely explores the real demands of each occupant in the car from the user’s perspective, repeatedly tests the interactive experience in various scenarios, and improves the “attention rate” in the driving area and the “competency rate” in the blind operation area, providing Safe travel protection for users.

NBO car carnival weekend brings exclusive deals for automotive fans



MUSCAT: In celebration of the Holy Month of Ramahdhan, the National Bank of Oman (NBO) recently hosted its highly successful Car Carnival Weekend.

This two-day event, held at NBO’s head office in Azaiba, provided a vibrant and dynamic platform for automotive enthusiasts and potential buyers to explore a diverse range of new and pre-owned cars.

It served also as a unique platform to explore comprehensive car loans and car insurance offered by NBO and NBO Muzn Islamic Banking. Tariq Atiq, General Manager and Chief Retail & Digital Banking Officer at NBO, said: “We, at National Bank of Oman, are committed to creating value and simplifying customer journeys.

During Ramadhan, numerous customers seek new or pre-owned vehicles, capitalising on the special discounts offered by many car dealers. To facilitate this, we took the initiative to organise this event. We understand the importance of providing comprehensive coverage, and our insurance options are tailored to safeguard our customers’ investments and provide peace of mind throughout their ownership experience.” The Car Carnival Weekend witnessed an unprecedented gathering of avid car enthusiasts and potential buyers, creating a one-stop-shop atmosphere where they could trade in their existing vehicles or purchase a new car.

NBO’s car loans cater to both NBO and non-NBO customers, offering competitive rates and flexible tenures. Both Omani nationals and residents aged 21 years and above can apply for NBO’s car loan offer. Non-NBO customers can apply for a car loan without transferring their salary to NBO, utilising the convenient Direct Debit service unique to NBO.

Additionally, NBO Muzn Islamic Banking’s car finance offer includes a low-security deposit, flexible tenures, and takaful car insurance facilities at preferential rates.



National Team for combating hidden trade holds inaugural meeting



NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 27

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) held the first meeting of the National Team for Combating Hidden Trade.

The team comprises representatives from the MoCIIP, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Information represented by the Government Communication Center, Tax Authority, the Central Bank of Oman, Royal Oman Police, Consumer Protection Authority, and Small and Medium Enterprise Development Authority.

The purpose of the meeting was to review and discuss the mechanisms for implementing the decision to combat hidden trade, as well as to determine the National Team's responsibilities and agree on the initial phase of implementing Decision No. 412/2023 issued by the MoCIIP.

The National Team for Combating Hidden Trade is tasked with proposing commercial activities subject to surveillance, facilitating the implementation of provisions of the decision to combat hidden trade within each member's jurisdiction, holding regular meetings with the technical team for implementing the decision, monitoring and evaluating its work, and receiving reports from the technical team.

The MoCIIP also urges commercial companies to expedite the regularisation of their commercial records, identify active companies, verify the effectiveness of these commercial establishments, and update the commercial database to contribute to reducing hidden trade.

The technical team of the ministry will immediately begin implementing the decision.

The decision to combat hidden trade aims to create an attractive business environment and provide suitable conditions in the Sultanate of Oman by detailing the necessary procedures for registering foreign institutions and companies, as well as specifying the requirements, regulations, and necessary deadlines for issuing approvals, permits, or licenses related to investment projects in accordance with the Foreign Capital Investment Law.

The MoCIIP issued Ministerial Decision No. 412/2023 regarding combating hidden trade in cooperation with several government entities to reduce hidden trade in the Sultanate of Oman and its economic and social impacts on business owners and society. This decision comes in response to continuous appeals from citizens over the past years to stop this phenomenon.

Oman to host summit of global crypto miners tomorrow

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 27

In a nod to the Sultanate of Oman's growing prestige as a destination for crypto mining investments, leading figures from the international mining and blockchain community are due in Muscat tomorrow, March 29, 2024, to attend the Global Digital Mining Summit (WDMS 2024) set to take place at the W Hotel Muscat.

Backed by BITMAIN, the world's leading manufacturer of crypto-currency mining servers, the daylong event will focus on the theme, 'Hydro-Mining Wins the Desert', referencing the importance of deploying energy-efficient, water-cooled solutions to achieve stable computing power in hot desert settings, such as Oman.

Over the past couple of years, Oman has issued licenses to investors in data mining farms worth an estimated \$800 million who have been drawn by the country's business-friendly investment environment, as well as access to competitively priced electricity.

Data mining is a hugely energy-intensive operation, the success of which necessitates access to relatively cheap power, say experts.

Of late, Salalah in Dhofar Governorate has emerged as a major draw for investors attracted by its moderate year-round weather and proximity to ocean water resources necessary to cool the servers via a technique known as 'hydro-mining'.



Exahertz's blockchain data centre in Salalah based on BITMAIN's hydro-cooling mining technology.

"Global Digital Mining Summit (WDMS) — hosted by BITMAIN, a premier event in the digital mining industry — brings together top leaders in mining and blockchain from around the world to discuss the latest developments and future trends in global mining," said the organisers in a post.

"This premier event gathers the brightest in mining and blockchain from across the globe to discuss the latest innovations and future trends in global digital mining.

We're eager to meet our beloved peers in the Middle East and engage in meaningful discussions about AI and Blockchain innovations," added

Greentech Technologies, a provider of hardware for crypto mining farms.

Presenters from Oman include Jad Fredrick Kharma, CEO of Exahertz International, which has invested around \$370 million in a major data hosting and crypto mining centre in Salalah Free Zone in Dhofar Governorate.

Moonwalk Systems, a key partner in the project, will be represented by Sam Ferdows, CEO, and Wayne Boshier, CTO.

Youth blockchain enthusiast Faris bin Haitham al Zadjali, who has been named an 'Ambassador' for both BITMAIN and Exahertz, will also share his vision on how crypto education will shape a better future for the world.

The roster of speakers also includes Olivier Ohnheiser, CEO of Green Data City (GDC), which in 2022 received the first-ever licence for investment in sustainable crypto-mining in Oman.

Phase 1 of its investment includes 200MW of mining capacity, with a goal to ramp it up to 400MW in the second phase aimed at offering hyperscale data centre capacity with natural cooling, renewable energies and downstream applications.

An overview on Oman's digital transformation will be presented by Salah al Zakwani, the Chief Investment Officer of Shumookh Investment and Services, at the opening of the Summit.

German economy to nearly flatline this year

FRANKFURT: The German economy is expected to barely grow this year, leading economic institutes said on Wednesday, as weak demand at home and abroad slows the path to recovery.

Europe's largest economy will expand by just 0.1 per cent in 2024, five think-tanks said in a joint statement, a sharp downgrade from their earlier forecast of 1.3 per cent growth. "Cyclical and structural factors are overlapping in the sluggish overall economic development," said Stefan Kooths from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (IfW Kiel).



Aerial view of a container terminal in the port of Hamburg, Germany. — Reuters

"Although a recovery is likely to set in from the spring, the overall momentum will not be

too strong," he added.

The German economy shrank by 0.3 per cent last year, battered by inflation, high interest rates and cooling exports, and is struggling to emerge from the doldrums.

Even though inflation has steadily dropped in recent months, consumer spending was picking up "later and less dynamically" than previously forecast as wages lag behind.

And Germany's export sector, usually a key driver of economic growth, was suffering from cooling foreign trade against a fragile global economic backdrop. — Reuters

Russia struggles to collect oil payments as China, Türkiye raise bank scrutiny

MOSCOW: Russian oil firms face delays of up to several months to be paid for crude and fuel as banks in China, Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) become more wary of US secondary sanctions, eight sources familiar with the matter said.

Payment delays reduce revenue to the Kremlin and make them erratic, allowing Washington to achieve its dual policy sanction goals — to disrupt money going to the Kremlin to punish it for the war in Ukraine while not interrupting global energy flows.

Several banks in China, the UAE and Türkiye have boosted their sanctions compliance



A crude oil tanker is seen anchored in Nakhodka Bay, Russia. — Reuters

requirements in recent weeks, resulting in delays or even the rejection of money transfers to Moscow, according to the eight

banking and trading sources.

Banks, cautious of the US secondary sanctions, started to ask their clients to provide

written guarantees that no person or entity from the US DN (Special Designated Nationals) list is involved in a deal or is a beneficiary of a payment.

The sources asked not to be named due to the sensitivity of the issue and because they are not allowed to speak to media. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said payment problems exist when asked about reports that banks in China have slowed payments.

"Of course, unprecedented pressure from the United States and the European Union on the People's Republic of China continues," Peskov told. — AFP

Yen hits 34-year low against dollar

TOKYO: The yen hit a 34-year low against the dollar on Wednesday, just over a week after the Bank of Japan announced a much-anticipated interest rate hike in a shift away from years of ultra-loose monetary policy.

The unit weakened to 151.97 per dollar, its softest since 1990, before recovering to levels of around 151.35 later in the day.

The drop came after a top central bank official suggested it would continue to pursue an accommodative policy for the time being, echoing previous comments from the BoJ.

But soon afterwards, the finance minister said authorities would not hesitate to "take resolute action against excessive" forex moves — raising speculation of a government intervention to prop up the currency.

Over the past two years the yen has sharply weakened from levels of around 115 against the dollar, before Russia's attack of Ukraine.

While central banks around the world aggressively hiked rates to tackle soaring inflation, the Bank of Japan stuck to its ultra-loose



Japanese yen and US dollar banknotes are seen in this illustration. — Reuters

policies, driving down the yen. This has been good news for exporters, but not for consumers as it made imports more expensive.

Last week the bank finally took a step away from its unorthodox monetary stimulus programme — hiking rates for the first time since 2007.

The yen has continued to slide since then, however. Wednesday's dip came after Naoki Tamura, a BoJ board member, reportedly told business leaders in northern Japan that "slow but steady progress" was needed on scaling back the central bank's long-standing ultra-easy policy. — AFP

Tourism is an important source of job opportunities



HAIDER AL LAWATI
haiderdawood@hotmail.com

The author is a Muscat-based economic analyst who previously worked for CBO and OCCI

Despite the efforts made by the concerned official authorities and private sector institutions to advance the tourism sector in the country, we need to develop more plans and strategies to empower this sector and benefit from it to provide employment for job-seeking youth.

This sector is vital for everyone, whether the government or the private sector, and through it, thousands of job opportunities can be provided for citizens and job-seekers, as we see in many foreign countries.

For those wishing to open their own tourism establishments, procedures and approval processes should be simplified.

We must work to enable

them to manage their individual institutions, whether from homes, cafes, or any other place, because many of the required tourism services can be provided through small sectors that the tourists require after arriving at their final stations.

In general, many Arab countries have not benefited from the tourism sector as is the case of foreign countries, and have not reached the levels as required according to reports issued by international tourism institutions in this regard.

For example, the Travel and Tourism Development Report, which has been issued every two years by the World Economic Forum in Geneva, Switzerland since 2007, indicates that Arab countries do not rank first globally

in tourism by measuring a set of factors and policies that contribute to a sustainable and flexible environment for the travel and tourism sector.

There are many criteria that are evaluated to determine the indicators that occur in this sector, including the enabling environment, policies and enabling conditions for tourism and travel, infrastructure in the field of tourism, enhancers of demand for tourism and travel, as well as the sustainability of tourism and travel.

What is new in this regard is the positive expectations that could happen in the global tourism sector during the current year 2024, as the recovery cycle in global tourism has now fully begun from the repercussions of

the Covid-19 pandemic, and the number of tourists is expected to increase during the current year.

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, international tourism reached 88% of pre-pandemic levels, while the number of international travellers was estimated at about 1.3 billion travellers in 2023.

Thus, the tourism sector's contribution to the global economy during the same year reached \$3.3 trillion.

The Sultanate of Oman is not far from these developments, as great efforts are being made to develop tourism facilities and provide the necessary services to attract more tourists from different countries of the world. Local statistics indicate that the

number of foreign tourists totalled around 3.5 million in 2023, compared to 2.8 million tourists in 2022.

Tourism revenues also recorded an increase to reach \$1.2 billion in 2023 as a result of the increase in the number of tourists to the country.

Oman, represented by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, is working to upgrade this sector by attracting more required investments in infrastructure, and has developed a comprehensive plan to attract more tourists and visitors to the country, targeting 11 million tourists and visitors annually by 2040, while working to establish more tourism projects in order to provide more job opportunities for Omanis in various of these projects.

Liquid gas angst seeps from consumers to producers

BY YAWEN CHEN AND GEORGE HAY

A few years ago, it was much better to sell liquefied natural gas than to buy it. Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 caused the price of European gas to spike to over 300 euros per megawatt hour (MWh), 15 times its long-term level before 2021.

As gas producers crank up supply, the second half of the decade is likely to see a better time for consumers — and an edgier period for companies extracting the fossil fuel.

The world currently consumes 2.9 billion metric tonnes of natural gas a year. Of that about 400 million metric tonnes, or 14%, gets turned into liquefied natural gas (LNG).

The process involves cooling natural gas in special liquefaction facilities to minus 162 degrees Celsius, thereby condensing its volume by 600 times.

The resulting liquid is portable enough to ship around the world to an importing country, where it is returned to its gaseous state and used to fuel factories and heat homes.

In the gas industry, LNG is where the growth is. Shell, the world's largest trader of the stuff, expects, opens new tab global supply to grow at a 3.6% compound annual rate until 2040, while gas delivered by pipeline will shrink by 0.2% a year.

After the attack of Ukraine in 2022, LNG's share of European gas supply jumped from 19% to 33% as countries shifted away from Russian pipelines.

Producers are responding to rising demand and higher prices. Qatar and the United States, which along with Australia produced nearly two-thirds of the world's LNG last year, are leading the charge.

Shell thinks that overall

supply could spike from 400 million metric tonnes to 600 million metric tonnes by 2030.

Goldman Sachs analysts reckon capacity could increase by 45 million metric tonnes a year between 2025 and 2028, more than three times the average annual increase over the last four years.

The United States and Qatar will account for nearly 70% of this, Jefferies estimates, with the emirate's output likely to jump by 85% to over 140 million metric tonnes by the end of decade.

That's even after factoring in US President Joe Biden's January decision to pause pending and future export applications to study the fuel's environmental impact, which could delay new US projects.

To be sustainable, a massive surge in supply requires a similar increase in demand.

Conveniently, Shell's outlook sees global consumption of LNG rising to around 600 million metric tonnes a year by 2030, in line with its expectations for increased supply.

US oil giant Exxon Mobil sees natural gas demand rising 25% by 2050.

Much of that could come from Asia: Jefferies analysts reckon growing Asian economies will account for 70% of the increase in demand for LNG between 2022 and 2030. Yet this lust for LNG is far from assured.

According to Goldman, Asian consumption of the fossil fuel has grown by an annual average of just 18 million metric tonnes in recent years, even after excluding unusually low demand during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2022.

That's less than half the expected annual growth in supply after 2025. Jefferies analysts think global LNG demand by 2030 may be nearer 550 million metric tons — implying scope for a significant oversupply.

— Reuters

Lucrative foreign exchange trade sustained by low volatility



SAQIB IQBAL AHMED
The author is a stocks, options and FX reporter at Reuters.

An unusual calm enveloping foreign exchange markets is extending the life of a lucrative trade beyond what many had expected.

The so-called carry trade, which involves borrowing in a low interest-rate currency to invest in a higher-yielding currency, had been expected to fade as major central banks pivot away from hiking rates toward easing policy.

However, a major shift has yet to happen, keeping currency markets calm and the trade, which relies on such stability, an easy winner.

"The carry trade is often known as picking up nickels in front of steam rollers, but speculators have been picking up bundles of \$100 bills over the last year," said Karl Schamotta, chief market strategist at payments company Corpay.

"The returns are outstripping virtually everything else." The strategy provided bumper returns for those who played it right, a Corpay Global Payments analysis showed.

Buyers of the high-yielding Mexican peso who sold the Japanese yen would have reaped gains of about 44% over the last 12 months. Other popular carry currencies have also yielded similarly outsized returns.

A Deutsche Bank index, with elements that include the carry performance of 21 emerging market currencies, rose 6.6% in 2023, its best year since 2017.

The DB EM FC Equally Weighted Total Return index, as it is called, has climbed nearly 1% over the last month. The tide may be turning, however.



A man walks past an electric monitor displaying the Japanese yen exchange rate against the US dollar in Tokyo. — Reuters

THE SO-CALLED CARRY TRADE, WHICH INVOLVES BORROWING IN A LOW INTEREST-RATE CURRENCY TO INVEST IN A HIGHER-YIELDING CURRENCY, HAD BEEN EXPECTED TO FADE AS MAJOR CENTRAL BANKS PIVOT AWAY FROM HIKING RATES TOWARD EASING POLICY.

Retreating inflation in emerging markets paves the way for central banks to ease policy in 2024, narrowing the rate difference between the highest- and lowest-yielding currencies.

Mexico recently joined Brazil, Chile and Colombia in cutting rates, easing for the first time since it began tightening in mid-2021.

"The carry trade is likely to run out of steam and while these currencies could see some further gains, those tailwinds that propelled them to large gains in 2023 look to have run their course," said Jonathan Petersen, senior markets economist at Capital Economics.

Last week, Fed policymakers indicated they still expect to reduce rates by three-quarters of a percentage point by the end of 2024. However, the Fed and the European Central Bank are unlikely to match the scale and

speed of easing in emerging markets.

Carry traders need to be more picky as a result, said Aaron Hurd, senior portfolio manager, currency, at State Street Global Advisors.

"It's not quite an all clear environment that you had over the past year and a half," he said.

"We're generally moving in the direction of being more cautious, trying to take the higher quality or lower-risk carry trades now."

Hurd is shifting from using the yen as a funding currency, saying it is vulnerable to a sharp move, toward the stable Swiss franc. He favours buying the Indian rupee while selling the Chinese yuan.

VOLATILITY IS KEY

Central banks moving in sync has helped to curb interest rate volatility. Deutsche Bank's CVIX index, a weighted average of expected volatility in nine major currency pairs, recently sank to a near 2-1/2 year low.

That means investors are not ready to abandon carry trades soon.

"I think markets expected January or February to be more volatile months, where we would have seen a decline in US data that would have warranted maybe Fed rate cuts already in

March or in May," said Francesco Pesole, forex strategist at ING in London. Instead, there were two months of strong US data, he noted.

"We can definitely see another few weeks where carry remains relatively popular," Pesole said. Despite notable interest rate moves in the last few weeks, including a surprise cut by the Swiss National Bank and the Bank of Japan's long-awaited move away from negative interest rates, volatility has stayed low.

Three-month dollar/yen implied volatility, a measure of the cost of options contracts that traders use to hedge positions, is near its lowest in about three months.

However, it would not take much to roil markets and unsettle the carry trade, analysts said.

"It's really hard to imagine things getting even calmer in FX markets," Capital Economics' Petersen said.

Surprises could come from central bank policy actions, economic data, geopolitical upheavals and elections around the world this year, including in the US, he noted.

"The bottom line is that the bar is very low for volatility to creep higher from here."

— Reuters

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HADITH

GUIDE FOR THE FAITHFUL



Anas and Abu Hurayrah, may Allah be pleased with both of them, reported that the Prophet, may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him, said:

"None of you will attain perfect faith until I am more beloved to him than his child, his parent, and all people".



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An elderly sick, who is very poor, couldn't fast in the past two years and he is not able to feed others to compensate his lost fasting days during Ramadhan. What should he do?

If he cannot feed people because of certain inability, Allah will forgive him. "Allah does not burden a soul beyond that it can bear". (Surat Al Baqarah/verse 286)

QURAN

VERSE OF THE DAY

When there comes God's victory and conquest. And you see the people entering God's religion in multitudes. Then celebrate the praise of your Lord and seek His forgiveness. He is the Acceptor of Repentance.

(An-Nasr)



Ramadhan

THURSDAY | MARCH 28, 2024 | RAMADHAN 17, 1445 AH

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A STORY OF FAITH AND RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF IMPOSSIBLE MEDICAL CHALLENGE

BY KHALID AL BALUSHI
@khalid_albalushi94

As a mother, Khuloud al Wahibi was compelled to leave her job despite her reluctance. Her departure was necessitated by the arrival of her firstborn, Abdullah. Learning of his serious congenital condition from her doctor, one that posed the threat of kidney failure or worse, Khuloud made the difficult choice to prioritise caring for her newborn over her career.

Thus began Khuloud's five-year journey of self-discovery and resilience. Formerly a successful financial accountant in a local bank, she now found herself immersed in the world of neonatal intensive care, watching over Abdullah as he lay in his incubator surrounded by medical equipment, his tiny form vulnerable to his condition's uncertainties.

In the initial days, Khuloud shuttled between home and hospital, keeping a vigilant eye on her son's progress in the ICU. Amidst her anguish, she delved into research, consulting medical professionals and seeking solace in her faith, grappling with the profound challenges thrust upon her.

Khuloud has to set aside her grief and worry and focus more



what she can do for her child. She quizzed doctors and nurses about everything that they do related to her child's care and the more that she asked and inquire, the more she was coming to term about her son's condition.

The onset of the pandemic only heightened Khuloud's ordeal.

Doctors discovered in the midst of the Covid pandemic that one of her son's kidneys was not functioning at all but they refused to operate for fear of complications from the pandemic. However, Khuloud refused to give up and tried to persuade the doctors to do what was necessary in order to save her son's life. After continuous refusal, she relied on

God, confident that good may come after this, as it is God who has kept her son alive to this day and can extend his life longer.

After a few days of relying on God, Khuloud received a call from her son's doctor informing her that her son had been placed on the list of patients to undergo the operation. As her son grew older and reached his fifth year, Khuloud discovered her strength and ability to face challenges and became convinced that God is the Healer.

One day, she was called to the hospital by the nuclear medicine department and before entering the treatment room, Khuloud felt fear and anxiety but Abdullah's little smile gave her the strength to face the difficulties and to believe that all this was for the benefit of this little one.

Upon entering, Khuloud was told that the doctors have to conduct nuclear medicine where Abdullah will be injected with a radioactive substances which will illuminate everything inside the little child, allowing doctors to see the torn kidney. The doctor asked the family for permission to start the kidney operation.

Khuloud and her husband immediately conducted the initial tests to see if one of them was compatible and if they could donate that kidney to Abdullah, or if they could find a donor who could do so.

In this long journey, Khuloud discovered herself, and in this ordeal, she knew her true friends and relatives.

During coaching and training, Khuloud joined a group that inspired and guided her. Abdullah's influence revealed new aspects of herself. She learned about God, His creation, and the trials He gives us, believing in patience, faith, and divine guidance. This journey led to Khuloud's self-discovery and a belief in God's guiding light for believers.

(Photos are AI-generated and for illustration purposes only).

Swiss chocolatiers bank on the Easter bunny as cocoa costs soar

SWISS CHOCOLATIERS have a battle on their hands as Easter rolls around, with surging cocoa prices sending their costs soaring and consumers cutting back as inflation hits their pockets. Cocoa briefly topped \$10,000 per tonne

in New York on Tuesday — a record high which is more than triple the price a year ago and more than double the price since the start of February.

The surge will force chocolate makers to hike their prices even though they have little room for manoeuvre.

Earlier this month Lindt & Sprungli warned that its prices would be going up again in 2024 and 2025, having already been raised by 10.1 per cent on average last year.

They are banking on their higher margin products like pralines — not to mention their chocolate Easter bunnies — to absorb the shock.

The surge in cocoa costs, which comes on top of high sugar prices, "increases the challenges for Swiss chocolate", Thomas Juch, spokesman for Chocosuisse, the sector's employers' federation, said.

The cocoa price hike is happening in a "context of increased price sensitivity" on the part of consumers and is currently partly being borne by the manufacturers who "cannot fully pass on this increase in retail prices", he said.

This is because prices are adjusted at intervals during negotiations with the



supermarket chains and are not changing continuously, said Juch.

Food price inflation in 2023 dampened consumer appetite, with Swiss chocolate export volumes slipping 0.2 per cent to

150,516 tonnes, according to Chocosuisse. And per capita annual consumption in Switzerland — the world's largest consumer of chocolate — fell by one per cent, to 10.9 kg.

Cocoa prices increased almost 70 per cent in New York and almost 90 per cent in London in 2023 following poor harvests in the leading producers Ivory Coast and Ghana, due to heavy rains, a cocoa pod disease outbreak and then drought.

Cocoa prices have doubled again since the end of January.

One solution the food industry regularly turns to when raw material costs explode is to alter the recipe.

But Nestle chief executive Mark Schneider said that was not on the cards, with consumers having clear expectations for their favourite products. The other industry solution is to come up with new products — Ragusa itself being a well-known historical example.

In 1942, Bloch, who was struggling to import cocoa beans into Switzerland due to the disruption in international trade during World War II, created a new bar using the hazelnuts which he could source in abundance.

According to Jean-Philippe Bertschy, an analyst with Swiss investment managers Vontobel, Swiss chocolatiers cannot compromise on quality, "even if certain foreign groups are less careful". — AFP

HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF MUSLIM FAITH

632

Farewell Haj Pilgrimage

632 marks the "Farewell Haj Pilgrimage," the final pilgrimage of Prophet Muhammad in Islam. It holds immense significance as it encapsulates his sermon, known as the Farewell Sermon, where he emphasised principles of equality, justice, and unity among Muslims. This event symbolises the completion of Islam's fundamental teachings and serves as a guide for Muslims in their personal and communal lives.

DOS & DONTs: ETIQUETTE GUIDE DURING THE HOLY MONTH

PARTICIPATE IN CHARITY

Consider participating in charitable activities or initiatives during Ramadhan such as donating to food drives or volunteering at local organisations. This demonstrates solidarity and support for the community.

RAMADHAN AROUND THE WORLD

AZERBAIJAN



Islam arrived in Azerbaijan during the 7th century through Arab conquests, gradually spreading and becoming the dominant religion by the 12th century. However, under Soviet rule, religious practices were restricted. After gaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijan experienced an Islamic revival, with mosques being restored and religious freedoms reinstated.

Approximately 97 per cent of Azerbaijan's population is Muslim. Ramadhan holds great cultural significance, with fasting observed from dawn to sunset. Families gather for suhoor (pre-dawn meal) and iftar (breaking of the fast). Traditional customs include charitable acts, nightly prayers (Tarawih), and reading the Quran.

During Ramadhan, Azerbaijani cuisine shines with dishes like plov (pilaf), kebabs, dolma (stuffed vegetables), and various soups. But perhaps the most beloved iftar food is pakhlava, a rich, sweet pastry made with layers of nuts and honey, symbolising generosity and prosperity.

RAMADHAN TRIVIA HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW THE HOLY MONTH

WHICH TWO CELESTIAL BODIES PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN DETERMINING THE START AND END OF RAMADHAN?

Answer to last trivia: Qibla

PRAYING FOR PEACE IN GAZA

BY SAMUEL KUTTY

Ramadhan is the time of the year when Muslims fast, pray together, and reflect more deeply on their faith, which is embodied in peace, resilience and generosity. The holy month is also a time to gather together in the evening to share meals with relatives and the community.

Although Muslims collectively began the holy month by fasting, prayer and charity, the festivities are subdued in several parts of the world due to the ongoing conflicts and wars, particularly in Gaza.

"We all pray for an immediate ceasefire and peace in Gaza. It is in the interest of not only Palestine but all countries," said Aron Ahmed, a 58-year-old Egyptian national.

His response came in an e-mail message to the Observer following queries about the themes that the readers were praying for during Ramadhan this year. Many of them overwhelmingly said that this year they would be praying mainly for the people of Gaza.

"During Ramadhan, normally we pray for ourselves, our beloved ones, and many other things. But this year, we're definitely feeling for our brothers and sisters in Gaza, who are without food, water, or other essentials," said Ahmed al Lawati in his message.

Similarly, Aimen Bashmori, a Malaysian academic, said



that the ongoing war is looming large for many Muslims. Though there were hopes that a ceasefire pact could be reached before Ramadhan, nothing happened.

"This is one of the saddest Ramadhans of our time. If celebrations during the holy month were stained by coronavirus a couple of years ago, this is man-made. I feel very bad about Gaza. Our hearts and thoughts are with those affected in Palestine," he said.

For more than five months now, people in Palestine have endured massacres, disease, starvation, and thirst at the hands of the Israeli army. The violence and brutality are continuing unabated.

More than 31,000 people have been killed in the Israeli assault on Gaza, according to Palestinian health authorities in the besieged territory, and aid agencies have warned of a looming famine in parts of the Gaza Strip.

"I am praying for all those in countries from Gaza to Sudan that the almighty wipes out their sufferings. I wish that they are no longer in pain," said Mohamed Mubarak, an Indian national.

Aid agencies have already warned of a looming famine in

parts of the Gaza Strip. The United Nations says that lack of humanitarian aid means famine is a growing risk in Gaza, where 2.4 million people are under a near-total siege by the Israeli military.

"When we get to open our fast with an abundance of food, our hearts become so heavy, and we are in despair because our brothers and sisters are starving and getting bombed at the same time," said Mumtaz, a housewife.

Giving to the less fortunate is an important part of Ramadhan. All Muslims are also required to help the poor and needy in their community. In other words, Ramadhan is a moment to care for each other. Fasting aims to establish equality between the rich and poor.





PARIS CROWNS CHAMPION WAITERS IN ONE-OF-A-KIND ‘CAFE RACE’

VISITORS TO CENTRAL Paris were treated on Sunday to the sight of hundreds of aproned waiters surging through the mediaeval streets, in a one-of-a-kind race designed to show off the profession months ahead of the Olympic Games.

Men's winner Samy Lamrous and top waitress Pauline Van Wymeersch walked the two-kilometre (1.2-mile) route in 13 minutes 30 seconds and 14 minutes 12 seconds respectively -- each carrying a tray with a croissant, espresso and glass of water.

"We do this for 12 hours every day, including weekends and holidays,"



said Van Wymeersch, who works at cafe Le Petit Pont a few hundred metres (yards) from city hall.

Her race-winning secret was "20 years on the job and good legs", she said.

As well as their medals, both winners would receive a night's stay in a swanky hotel, said city water authority Eau de Paris, which sponsored the event.

"Congratulations to everyone who took part," the body wrote on X (formerly Twitter), alongside a video of Lamrous panting for breath as he broke through the tape.

A jury was waiting at the finish line to judge both contestants' times and how much of their beverages might have slopped over an unbalanced rim.

QUESTION OF CONCENTRATION

Hundreds of spectators lined the route or applauded from roadside



cafe tables as the servers, jaws clenched, piloted their trays through the streets, seeking to keep the precious cargo intact.

Joshing as they went, some pulled off acrobatic movements with their trays as they slipped through a gap to overtake.

"My thighs are a bit strained but

it's mostly a question of concentration," said Lamrous.

"You have to keep it balanced with all these people cheering you on. In the end, I managed to come back from behind, Paris style," he added of his first-place victory.

First staged in 1914, the "course des garçons de cafe" (cafe waiters'

race) was held on Sunday for the first time since 2011 -- four months before the city hosts the Olympics in July and August.

With the dismissive "garçon" ("boy") rarely used to refer to waiters nowadays, the challenge was re-baptised this year as the "course des cafes" or "cafes race".

Unlike their Lycra-clad Olympic counterparts, the waiters wore white shirts, dark trousers and aprons provided by the organisers.



The 200 contestants started and finished the race at city hall by the river Seine, sent on their way by mayor Anne Hidalgo.

"I came here yesterday to scout things out," said Thierry Petit, who marked 40 years as a Paris waiter the day of the race.

"Celebrating today, with all these people, in an Olympic year, really puts the wind in my sails," he added.

"This was a way to highlight our city's culture," said Pierre Rabadan, deputy mayor in charge of sports and the Olympics, who himself had a go at the race.

"A cafe or restaurant waiter is a really powerful icon of French culture," he added -- one many visitors will be looking forward to experiencing this summer.

All the medallist waiters will be invited to the Olympics opening ceremony on July 26. -- AFP

There's an art to arranging a bookshelf. Here's how it's done.



IN A PUBLIC LIBRARY, styling a bookshelf is easy: Just fill it with books. At home, a bookcase needs to do a lot more than hold books.

So how do the pros do it?

Start by thinking of your shelves as a kind of 3D wallpaper that adds visual interest to a room. The things you choose to display should express your personality.

"It's like a little cabinet of curiosities," said Jeremiah Brent, an interior designer and the newest cast member of Netflix's "Queer Eye." Your bookshelves, he added, offer "an opportunity for people to look in and see where you've been and where you're going."

In the New York City home he shares with his husband, Nate Berkus -- a much-photographed space featured in Brent's new book, "The Space That Keeps You," and often seen on Instagram, as well -- the bookshelves in the den are always changing. But they're usually filled with stacks of favourite design books, photos of loved ones and pieces of art made by their children, Poppy and Oskar.

"It's about having fun and playing around with different ways to layer things in and tell your story," Brent said. Here's how he does it.

CHOOSE YOUR FAVOURITE BOOKS

Stuffing your shelves completely full of books can look great, especially in a home library. But if you want to mix in objects, art and photos, you may have to pick and choose which books to display.

Start by choosing ones with good-looking covers. "We try to keep the colours coordinated in groupings," Brent said, hastening to add: "We also try to keep them within their category: art, history, décor, jewellery or whatever it may be."

Well-worn paperbacks and other less attractive books can be stored elsewhere. In Brent's home, cabinets with doors at the bottom of the bookshelves hold the overflow.

STACK THEM UP

Don't line up your books in endless rows. Instead, try building stacks.

"There are things we do that really help" to create a collected look, Brent said, "like mixing books horizontally and vertically."

When you're adding a horizontal stack to a shelf, "usually, piles of three or more feels nice," he said. Also, "think about mixing different heights."

On some shelves, Brent may stack lots of books to create a stepped pyramid that fills the space. On others, he may use only a few to create a pedestal for other objects.



ADD OBJECTS THAT MEAN SOMETHING

Your bookshelves shouldn't resemble something out of a catalogue. Forget about displaying anything impersonal, even if it looks nice. This is the place to show off things you have collected over many years.

"We've got artefacts that my husband and I have collected since we met," Brent said. "Everywhere we go, we pick up pottery or funny little sculptures. We've got tassels from curtains in old homes that we've kept and laid across books. We've got feathers that my daughter grabbed. It's a mishmash of everything that we find beautiful, or an expression of somewhere we've been."

The goal?

"The existential step I have for people," Brent explained, "is to try to figure out a way they can incorporate their past and present, but still leave room for the future."

CREATE BALANCE

Once you've selected most of the books and objects you want to display, you're still only halfway there.

Now, Brent said, "you've got to play around with balance and scale."

The goal is to spread the pieces across the shelves equally -- mixing tall and short, light and weighty objects -- so you don't end up with some sections that looked stuffed while others feel emptier.

"If you've got a shelf that's heavy with books," Brent suggested, "lighten it up with some objects next to it."

Even for design pros, he said, "there are no rules." Balance can be achieved only through trial and error.

"It only really happens," he continued, "when you get up there and play with it."

HANG INTERESTING PIECES ON TOP

For the ultimate layered look, use picture hangers to mount one or a few special pieces of art on the front of the bookcase.

"I love to hang art on the face of the bookshelf," Brent said, "so it almost feels like things are spilling out."

And not just framed artwork: Sometime he'll adorn a bookcase with other pieces, like ceramic beads or a mirror finished in shell.

"I love the organised chaos of a bookshelf that spills over with story," Brent said. -- NYT