



UTAS Sohar students’ projects find place in international journal

SIHAM AL SAIDI
SUHAR, MARCH 26

The projects presented by students of University for Technical and Applied Sciences, Sohar, have won several accolades at the recently held International Conference on Environmental Sciences and Engineering for Sustainable Development.

One of the research projects that garnered acclaim is titled “Design and Implementation of High-Efficiency Three-Phase Inverter for the Speed Control of Electric Vehicles and Regenerative Braking Analysis.” This project, led by Israa al Badi, Dana al Issai, Asia al Khanbashi, Al Baraa al Rasbi and Salima al Hinai under the supervision of Dr Magdy Saoudi Abdelfatah Saoudi, recently received the Best Poster Award (Second Place) of UTAS. The project aims to enhance energy efficiency in electric vehicles through innovative technology.

Another distinguished project, recognised with the Best Paper Award (Second Place), is led by Dr Mohammed Mihoub. The paper titled “Design and Experimentation of Underwater Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) for Habitat Monitoring” delves into the development and experimental validation of an ROV tailored for monitoring



The recognition through prestigious awards reflects the university's commitment to fostering innovative solutions



underwater habitats. The ROV is equipped with Inertial Measurement Unit (IMU), depth sensors and a Pixy camera, showcasing advanced technology for underwater exploration. The project’s results demonstrated the effectiveness

of the AI controller in stabilising the ROV’s depth, contributing significantly to underwater robotics advancements for sustainable habitat monitoring and conservation efforts. Fatima al Aliani, supervised by Iman al Futaisi, led a project

titled “A Study to Evaluate the Desulphurisation of Omani Petroleum Fractions using Solvent Extraction.” “This project focuses on using solvent extraction technology to purify Omani petroleum products, reducing sulphur content to improve air quality and comply with environmental regulations. This initiative aims to enhance the economic feasibility and competitiveness of petroleum products while addressing environmental pollution and health concerns,” she said. It represents a significant step towards sustainable practices in the oil industry, emphasising clean energy production and environmental compliance.

Dr Wasil Hashim Mohammed, Head of Engineering, said that “these researches will be published in an international journal.

These researches initiatives align with UTAS Sohar’s strategic vision of sustainability and excellence in scientific research and support the Oman vision priorities of achieving zero-carbon neutrality.

The recognition through prestigious awards reflects the university’s commitment to fostering innovative solutions that address societal challenges and promote a greener, more sustainable future across land and sea.

Ahad Foundation secures release of prisoners

MUSCAT: Ahad Foundation contributed for the release of a number of prisoners who met the conditions of the humanitarian relief aid programme ‘Fak-Kurba’, an initiative espoused by Oman Lawyers Association. Ahad Foundation keeps lending support to distressed detainees and their families during the blessed month of Ramadhan and other occasions. Its backing turns timely in the run-up to Eid al Fitr celebration

so that the families could enjoy a happy social ambience. Ahad Foundation promotes community empowerment initiatives, notably those related to women, people with disabilities and people with limited income. It also supports families, individuals and civil society organisations that provide rehabilitation and social care services for needy segments of the community, including the elderly and orphans.

TRA releases report performances on telecom companies in Al Amerat, Qurayat

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 26

The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) has published a report on the quality of telecommunications services in the Wilayat of Qurayat and Al Amerat in Muscat, which was conducted in January

It was found that in the Wilayat of Qurayat, the average data download speed reached 193 Mbps for the Oman Telecommunications Company (Omantel) 5G network, and the average data upload speed reached 38 Mbps.

As for Ooredoo, the average data download speed was 294 Mbps for the 5G network, and the average data upload speed was 47 Mbps.

With Vodafone Oman, the average data download speed was 43 Mbps for the 5G, and the average data upload speed was 49 Mbps.

For Al Amerat, the average data



download speed was 214 Mbps for the 5G network of Omantel, while the average data upload speed was 56 Mbps.

As Ooredoo, the average data download speed was 236 for the 5G network, and the average data upload speed was 54 Mbps.

For Vodafone Oman, the average data download speed was 129 Mbps for the same network, and the average data upload speed was 48 Mbps.

TRA conducts these surveys every month to improve telecommunications services.

Qaranqasho a special Ramadhan tradition that brings joy to kids

THE AL AQABAH NIGHT

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, MARCH 26

Children with lanterns and flashlights lit up Nizwa to mark the Al Aqabah Night in Nizwa on Tuesday. It marked the midpoint of Ramadhan, serving as a symbolic bridge between the fasting period and the joyous celebration of Eid al Fitr. Families cherish this occasion as it signifies a milestone in their children’s fasting journey, with the first half of Ramadhan being dedicated to fasting.

Al Aqabah Night is part of Qaranqasho when children roam around the neighbourhood dressed up in colourful traditional attire and carrying small bags or baskets, going from door to door in their neighbourhoods.

This celebration started as a way to reward children for successfully fasting for the first half of the month, and to encourage them to continue through the second half. It continues to be a beloved tradition throughout the Gulf countries.

As a part of the festivities, children are given sweets and candy, and treated to face painting, balloon art, cartoon characters, games and other fun activities. On this day, mothers also make rice dishes with meat, fish, or chicken, as well as harees and sweets, and distribute them to the poor.

It’s a night that brings joy and happiness to children’s spirits. They roam around the streets, and villages raising their voices in praise and gratitude for the blessings they have received.

The Nizwa Charity team organised a celebration for this occasion at Nizwa Fort. Around 100 children of various ages participated enthusiastically in the celebration. Sweets were distributed to them, and afterward, the children walked through the neighbourhood, chanting praises and gratitude to God.

Loay al Subhi, a participant in the Al Aqabah Night, “This is the first time I have participated in Al Aqabah. I loved the atmosphere very much. I am now happy because I fasted this month. I will complete the rest of my fasting.

I am glad that someone honours our strength and effort in fasting. I will participate every year.” The event also featured competitions and recitations of prayers.



As a part of the festivities, children are given sweets and candy, and treated to face painting, balloon art, cartoon characters and games .

PHOTOS BY SAMI AL HINAI





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‘Share the Pride’ campaign highlights outstanding SMEs

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
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The Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (ASMED) launched a campaign ‘Share the Pride in Ramadhan’ to highlight outstanding small Omani companies.

“We continue to highlight the products and services provided by small and medium enterprises for the sustainability of this sector. We also continue to support them in innovative ways through the available media because of their effective role in the marketing process,” said Moosa bin Khamis al Balushi, Director of Communications and Media at the Authority.

One such SME is Al Sawari Factory, which is the first factory in the Sultanate of Oman to make ropes used in the marine sector. It produces approximately 312 tonnes of ropes annually using high-quality raw materials.



SMEs create job opportunities for young people

Mohammed bin Salem al Mukhaini, owner of the project, said, “The factory is a specialised Omani institution run by Omani staff and we manufacture ropes using polyester, polypropylene and polyethylene.” The products of the factory, which is located in the Madayn industrial zone in Sur, Al Sharqiyah South Governorate, are

subjected to quality tests before being delivered to the consumer. The products are certified by the British Classification Authority.

Such projects seek to create job opportunities for young people. The Sultanate of Oman is working to Omanise jobs in the industrial zones and oblige all investors and companies in the industrial zones to

raise the Omanisation percentage to no less than 80 per cent, which is among the conditions set by the industrial zones to achieve the goals of Oman Vision 2040.

Industries play an important role in supporting and diversifying the national economy, and the industrial sector is considered one of the basic foundations on which economic development in the Sultanate of Oman is based.

Furthermore, local added value is considered one of the most important tools for implementing the 2040 Industrial Strategy. The project is to enhance local added value in the manufacturing sector, increase local manufacturing opportunities, enhance the purchasing power of the national product and related services, raise the efficiency of national cadres, make use of Omani competencies and create job opportunities for citizens, which will contribute to the development of the manufacturing sector.

Oman Theatre Festival from September 22



MUSCAT: The 8th edition of Oman Theatre Festival will be held from September 22 to October 1 at the Madinat Al Irfan Theatre, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth announced on Tuesday.

Sayyid Said bin Sultan al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Culture, said: “The journey of the Omani theatre, from its beginning to the present day, marks an exceptional experience in Arab theatre. The Omani theatre has directly contributed to shaping our culture and identity and enabled many young Omanis to show off and hone their theatrical talents.” The 8th edition of Oman Theatre Festival comes as a continuation of past festivals. The festival acquires its importance from the fact that the theatre is a gateway to enriching the artistic and cultural scenes. It contributes

to enriching theatrical and artistic experiences and achieving the cultural strategy of developing the cultural scene by supporting cultural production and nurturing up-and-coming theatrical artists, Al Busaidy said.

Ibrahim bin Saif Bani Araba, Assistant Director-General of the Directorate-General of Arts, said that the Oman Theatre Festival is one of the most important cultural events the ministry is keen to hold, stemming from its belief in the importance of refining and highlighting young theatrical artists. He added that among the axes and objectives that the ministry seeks to materialise from this festival are enhancing pride in the Omani theatrical identity and keeping pace with knowledge developments and technical changes in the global theatre.

— ONA



NCSI gets ISO certificate for data security management

MUSCAT: The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) has been awarded the Information Security Management System certificate (ISO 27001:2022 ISO/IEC) by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) in recognition of NCSI’s application of the highest levels of excellence in the field of data protection and security.

Khalifa bin Abdullah al Barwani, CEO of NCSI, said that the Centre’s obtaining the ISO



Khalifa bin Abdullah al Barwani, CEO of NCSI, receives the certificate

27001 certificate was the outcome of extensive efforts exerted by the NCSI in establishing and

maintaining a secure statistical and information environment in all the tasks assigned to it and

its ability to update its electronic services, its electronic portals and digital platforms.

The ISO 27001:2022 ISO/IEC certificate (ISMS) is awarded by the ISO, an international accreditation service organisation based in the United Kingdom.

The organisation specialises in the field of developing administrative systems, evaluating performance and services and calculating globally applicable quality measurements.

— ONA

Municipal Council discusses Nizwa beautification

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, MARCH 26

Several infrastructure works including new projects were reviewed and discussed by the Municipal Council of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate chaired by Shaikh Hilal bin Said al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah, on Tuesday.

It discussed the Nizwa entrance development project and looked into allocation of government plots for investment purposes.

The agenda included subjects related to developing healthcare, education and infrastructure services. The municipal sector, investments and urban planning were thoroughly reviewed and discussed, highlighting their direct



The first phase of the Nizwa entrance will provide space for recreation and exercise and it will add more trees in the area including walking paths and cycle tracks

impact on public welfare and the advancement of development plans in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

Sulaiman bin Hamad al Sunaidi, Director-General of Al Dakhiliyah Municipality, said the first phase of the Nizwa entrance will provide space for recreation and exercise.

It will add more trees in the area. The project will include walking paths and cycle tracks.

During the meeting, the council reviewed the response of the Minister of Housing and Urban Planning on the request to shift the incinerator from the landfill in



Samayil.

The council also reviewed the statement of the Under-Secretary Minister of Housing and Urban Planning on plots used for investment purposes based on a previous recommendation from the Municipal Council.

The council also reviewed the letter regarding the request to extend the Al Sharah Mosque area site and create another site for the council in Al Rasis area of Izki. It also reviewed the letter on surveyor work at Al Mirkadh area in Al Hamra and a proposal for a



public park in Wadi Quriyat in Bahla.

The council also discussed the report issued by the Municipality Department Director of Samayil regarding determining roads and pavement of footpaths in the residential plans.



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BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 26

YOU rarely find a family that does not participate in charitable works during the holy month. Some distribute meals and donate money while others do voluntary work. Volunteering is not limited only to distributions and helping others in doing good deeds, but it can also be through a kind word and a smile, especially to those we do not know.

Volunteering is a simple language of communication that makes everyone feel loved. How can we help our children volunteer? Family consultants say parents should instil volunteering in children from a young age. Plant the seeds of good values and it will grow along with them to adulthood. Children who perform acts of kindness increase well-being, popularity and acceptance among their peers. It will lead to better behaviour in the classroom and higher

academic achievement.

The first step that parents must take is to choose some home activities for the child, direct him/her, follow up on his/her work completion, and set an example for the child. Whenever a child sees his/her parents doing volunteer work, the values of love, goodness and helping others become entrenched within him/her, and s/he begins to follow parents' good deeds.

Promote compassion: While fasting during Ramadhan, the feeling of hunger and thirst can be used to illustrate the plight of children who normally cannot find food and a safe place to live. It will make your child feel the extent of every person's need and appreciate their feelings and circumstances.

Encouragement to help: Children can be encouraged to help others, whether the elderly, or to search for places that need volunteers, such as nursing homes and orphanages. They can also be urged to participate in meeting the needs of others for food, drink, clothing, or money. Encouraging the child with motivating

Children who perform acts of kindness increase well-being, popularity and acceptance among their peers. It will lead to better behaviour in the classroom and higher academic achievement

words, talking to him/her about the basics of Islam and the results of doing good in our lives, reading stories and telling examples from the life of the Prophet can motivate children. Treat them with respect: Experts say when you treat your children with respect, love and appreciation, they will share this feeling with you. They will be a mirror of you in society, so that they will love others, be calm, and be able to deal with their emotions.

Help them volunteer: Parents should encourage children to visit hospitals and care homes. Experts stress that practical implementation is more important than theoretical explanation to the child, so parents strive to assist others in front of the children so that they see the impact of such actions in reality.

Parents must realise that our children learn only through small acts of giving. To become changemakers they should teach children means to be good persons and citizens so that these interventions become force multipliers in their communities.



ROHM welcomes Syrian ensemble for Ramadhan concert series

MUSCAT: The Royal Opera House Muscat (ROHM) continued its Ramadhan concert series with a divine concert from the renowned Syrian ensemble, the Malawiyyin and Levantine Religious Chants Group, in tandem with Khalid al Araimi, an Omani chanter of great note.

The Ramadhan series, which started on March 18 and will run until April 1, is designed to offer respectful evenings of sacred prayer that inspire devotion.

Over 300 people joined last night's concert, experiencing firsthand the incredible talent of The Malawiyyin and Levantine Religious Chants Group. Conceived in 2014 by a group of four musicians known as the Damascus Quartet, the group is comprised of leading musicians, who have carved their "Inshaad" journeys through different experiences and with diverse backgrounds. The combined energy and talent of Mahmoud Al Siad, Mohammed Shafik Al Chaar, Ghassan Al Srouji Kanani, and Mustafa Al Sheikh gave rise to the larger group, drawing the best chanters and musicians, with their aim to create an incredibly high standard of performance. Their presence on stage at the opera house gave rise to a sincere concert, which was both profoundly touching and exquisite in its execution.

Focused on cultural collaboration between Oman and Syria, ROHM welcomed Oman's most inspiring chant performer, Khalid al Araimi. Originally from Sur, al Araimi began chanting in school and has continued to



The Ramadhan series, which started on March 18 and will run until April 1, is designed to offer respectful evenings of sacred prayer that inspire devotion. – ONA



develop the art with instruction, performing across the region at public events to celebrate "Inshaad" and religious devotion. His presentation inspired considerable pride in the culture

and history of "Inshaad" within the Sultanate of Oman, offering a new generation of chanters an example of dedication and talent. The final concert in the Ramadhan series will feature

renowned Egyptian artist Ali El Helbawy and Sami al Subhi of Oman and will take place on Monday, April 1. The concert will be held at the Royal Opera House of Musical Arts. — ONA

Training workshop on sustainability and environmental citizenship

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 26

The Ministry of Education organised a workshop on sustainability and environmental citizenship.

The workshop was presented by Dr Basma al Riyami, citizenship specialist at the Department of Citizenship.

The programme included several topics, including green education, teaching mechanisms for green education, and greening the curriculum, which includes updating the current curricula to include content that reflects the concepts of environmental preservation and sustainability.

It aims to developing new curricula that focuses on these issues, with the aim of enhancing environmental awareness and social responsibility among students, enabling them to make informed and responsible decisions towards the environment and society, developing critical thinking skills, solving problems related to the environment, promoting teamwork, and innovation in

finding sustainable solutions to environmental challenges.

Trainees were trained in the skills necessary to green curricula, carried out practical applications of some of these skills, and reviewed the efforts made by the Ministry of Education in green education.

The trainees were also introduced to the concepts of environmental citizenship, environmental sustainability, and mechanisms for integrating and including these concepts in the school curricula.

The workshop also addressed strategies and methods through which students can develop decision-making skills regarding environmental problems, through reviewing a set of teaching strategies, training in formulating, and developing educational activities to develop decision-making.

This is based on the belief in the importance and necessity of paying attention to preparing a generation of individuals who have the ability to understand the environmental problems surrounding them and make decisions in accordance.



The workshop was presented by Dr Basma al Riyami

AI-POWERED TOOL DEVELOPED TO DECODE ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 26

In the past few years, there has been an array of innovative and insightful research projects funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation. 'A customised machine learning and deep learning model for predicting the risk of Alzheimer's disease at an early stage' by principal investigator Dr Abraham Varghese, Senior Lecturer at the IT Department, University of Technology and Applied Sciences Muscat, is among the research projects funded by the Block Funding Programme of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

In this research project, Dr

Abraham Varghese explained that Alzheimer's disease (AD) has become one of the leading causes of death worldwide. The number of people suffering from AD is expected to rise from 55 million to 139 million by 2050. A sharp increase in Alzheimer's disease cases necessitates the development of immediate early diagnostic tools, something that is also true in the Sultanate of Oman, where the number of patients with Alzheimer's disease is on the rise.

The study therefore aimed to develop an AI-driven diagnostic tool for Alzheimer's Disease (AD) that leverages both psychological parameters and image features derived from clinical and MRI measurements, integrate Explainable AI (XAI) techniques



The research project was conducted by Dr Abraham Varghese, Dr Vinu Sherimon, Dr Ben George, Aisha bint Khalid al Hinaiyah and Dr Prashanth Gouda

into the diagnostic tool to enable practitioners and researchers to understand the reasoning behind the model's decisions, and develop a user-friendly graphical user interface (GUI) for the diagnostic tool, which facilitates model predictions and explanations, thereby supporting

informed clinical decision-making.

According to Dr Abraham, the study emphasised the development of AI-based tools for the early diagnosis of AD, focusing on the stage of Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI) to prevent the complete

neurodegeneration of Alzheimer's progression. To understand how AD affects the brain over time, the research team examined MRI scans along with psychological and demographic information from the Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI).

Dr Abraham added that after rigorous preprocessing and application of feature selection algorithms, a set of black box algorithms was applied, and Random Forest was selected as having the highest accuracy of 92 per cent. Incorporating Explainable AI techniques, the research team enhanced model transparency, enabling medical professionals to gain clear insights into the predictive outcomes.

Dr Abraham and his team also developed a web application

that enables medical experts to use the model effectively. This tool facilitates the provision of personalised care and quality treatment by offering accurate, AI-driven insights into each patient's condition. Through this initiative, the team aimed to enhance clinical decision-making processes, bridging the gap between advanced AI technologies and their practical application in healthcare settings for Alzheimer's disease.

This research project was published in the peer-reviewed journal *Alzheimer's & Dementia* in 2023. The research project was conducted by Dr Abraham Varghese, Dr Vinu Sherimon, Dr Ben George, Aisha bint Khalid al Hinaiyah and Dr Prashanth Gouda.

Cooler temperatures expected in the next three days

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
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Cooler temperatures are expected in Oman for the next three days after some areas received rain, according to Oman Met Office weather forecasters

Rainfall of varying intensity accompanied by hailstones fell in Al Khabourah, Al Suwaiq, Qurayat, Jabal Shams and Al Rustaq. The heaviest thunderstorms were



Cooler temperatures are expected in Oman for the next three days

experienced in Jabal Shams and Al Rustaq. According to forecast, the activity of northwesterly winds which was experienced on Tuesday evening will be occurring today (Wednesday) as well over the governorates of Al Dhahirah, Al Wusta, and Dhofar.

It may cause dust to rise and can have an impact on the level of horizontal visibility to decrease at times.

It should be mainly clear skies on Wednesday, said the weather

forecaster at Oman Met Office, adding, "There could be some rain in Dhofar on Wednesday."

Clouds of varying height has been flowing over most governorates of the Sultanate of Oman currently.

The Sea State is reported to be moderate to rough with a wave height of 2.5 metres along the Musandam coasts and Oman Sea coast, while it is expected to be slight-moderate along the Arabian Sea coasts with a wave height of 1.5 metres.

Madinat Al Sultan Qaboos Private School

JOB VACANCIES

Madinat Al Sultan Qaboos Private School (bilingual) is hiring teachers for the following vacancies for the academic year 2024 -2025:

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EU states agree agriculture policy review as tractors throng Brussels

BRUSSELS: EU member states on Tuesday agreed to unpick more eco-friendly requirements under the bloc's common agricultural policy (CAP) in a new bid to pacify months-long protests by farmers — who rolled hundreds of tractors into Brussels to vent their grievances.

A special committee endorsed the review to be debated by agriculture ministers meeting in Brussels as farmers thronged the city's European quarter for the third time in two months, setting fire to tyres and bales of hay, and throwing eggs at riot police.

"We have listened to our farmers and we have taken swift action to address their concerns at a time when they are confronted with numerous challenges," said David Clarinval, deputy prime minister of Belgium, which holds the rotating EU presidency.

He said the revision aims to slash red tape for farmers and give them more flexibility complying with green regulations while also "maintaining a high level of environmental ambition".

The committee backed a proposal from the European Commission to change a set of environmental and climate standards that determine whether farmers can receive CAP subsidies.

A key change involves granting leeway to farmers who fail to meet CAP requirements because of extreme weather.

The revision does away entirely with the obligation to leave a share of arable land fallow — a measure aimed at protecting soils and promoting biodiversity but a major gripe for farmers. But they



Smoke rises as farmers demonstrate outside the EU headquarters during EU agriculture ministers meeting in Brussels. — AFP

would still be incentivised to do so.

Member states would have more flexibility to decide which soils to protect and in which season, and allows them to diversify crops as well as rotate them.

And it exempts small farms under 10 hectares from inspections and penalties related to CAP compliance.

Farmers have been mounting rolling protests in countries across the EU, from Belgium to France, Spain, Italy and Poland, over a long list of burdens they say are depressing revenue.

The committee backed a proposal from the European Commission to change a set of environmental and climate standards that determine whether farmers can receive CAP subsidies

The concessions are being made less than three months before EU-wide elections for the European Parliament.

Surveys predict the vote will

result in a surge of support for far-right parties that are using farmers' discontent as part of their campaigning.

Meanwhile, Ukraine is ready to introduce export licences for its agricultural products to help address farmer anger in Poland, its agriculture ministersaid, adding that he was "disappointed" by EU curbs on those goods.

Polish farmers have since February been blocking border posts with Ukraine in protest at what they view as unfair competition from their neighbouring counterparts.

— AFP

Major US bridge collapses as cargo ship plows into pylon

BALTIMORE: A major bridge in the US city of Baltimore collapsed early on Tuesday after being struck by a container ship, sending multiple vehicles and people plunging into the frigid harbour below.

Dramatic nighttime footage showed a 300-metre vessel hitting a pylon of the Francis Scott Key Bridge, bringing most of the steel-built structure crashing into the Patapsco River within seconds.

Vehicles could be seen on the road surface as the bridge warped and crashed in sections, with the third tranche cantilevering upwards before it, too, tumbled into the water.

Rescuers said they were still looking for at least seven people, having pulled two people free.

As daylight broke, the extent of the disaster became apparent.

Twisted stanchions of steel lay draped over the deck of the ship, on which stacks of containers teetered precariously — adding further danger to rescue and recovery work.

Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott said maintenance workers were on the bridge at the time of the collision, an incident he described as an "unthinkable tragedy... like something out of an action movie."

Footage appeared to show the ship going dark twice in the

moments before the collision, possibly indicating some kind of power failure.

There was no immediate confirmation of the cause of the crash, but Baltimore's Police Commissioner Richard Worley said there was "no indication" of terrorism.

A huge emergency response swung into action after the collision with first response vehicles crowding the shoreline.

Water temperatures were around 9 Celsius, narrowing the window of survivability and increasing the urgency for divers scouring the water, with tides also complicating efforts.

Baltimore's fire chief James Wallace said sonar had "detected the presence of vehicles" in the harbour, but declined to estimate how many. One person was taken to hospital in "a very serious condition," he said, adding a second person recovered from the water was uninjured.

Baltimore is one of the busiest ports in the United States, handling \$80 billion worth of cargo last year, including a large volume of vehicles. The bridge's destruction could have a significant economic impact, with shipping in and out of the port suspended from Tuesday. — AFP



The steel frame of the Francis Scott Key Bridge sits on top of a container ship after the bridge collapsed in Baltimore. — AFP

Eighth suspect in Moscow mass shooting appears in court

MOSCOW: Russia remanded in custody on Tuesday a Kyrgyzstan-born man suspected of involvement in Friday's mass shooting at a Moscow concert hall, and sent investigators to Tajikistan to question the families of four men charged with carrying out the attack.

Eight suspects have now been remanded in pre-trial detention since gunmen sprayed concertgoers with bullets in the deadliest attack in Russia in two decades, days after President Vladimir Putin celebrated an election that handed him a fifth term.

IS has claimed responsibility and released footage from the attack. The United States and France say

intelligence suggests the group was indeed behind the attack, in which 139 people were killed and 182 wounded.

Putin said on Monday the attack had been carried out by IS members but also suggested that Ukraine, which is at war with Russia, may have played a role. Ukraine has denied any role.

Russia has said the four suspected gunmen have confessed, but some showed signs of injuries when they appeared in court.

The arrests have cast a spotlight on two former Soviet republics in central Asia that have close ties with Moscow and depend on remittances from migrant labourers working in Russia.



A woman lays flowers on the roadside near the Crocus Hall, Moscow. — Reuters

Three Tajik sources said on Tuesday that Russian investigators were in Tajikistan questioning the families of the four suspected gunmen, saying their relatives had been brought to the capital Dushanbe from their home towns.

On Tuesday, Putin said he hoped prosecutors would do everything to ensure the attackers would be justly punished.

Kyrgyzstan-born Alisher Kasimov, remanded in custody on Tuesday, was led into the court room bent double — like the other suspects — before his handcuffs were removed. He showed no visible signs of injury. He is accused of providing accommodation to the four Tajik

men accused of carrying out the attack. The Tajik sources said Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon was personally overseeing the Tajik part of the investigation into the Moscow attack, which he said was a "terrible and shameful event".

Russian investigators say that after firing from Kalashnikov AK-47 weapons, the attackers set fire to the building with gasoline before leaving, hitting a family with two young children as they sped out of the car park.

The Kremlin refused to be drawn on whether it believed there was a link between the Ukrainian leadership and Friday's attack, saying only that its investigation was ongoing. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

LONDON

UK court delays decision on Assange's extradition

Two UK judges delayed a decision on Tuesday on whether to grant WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange a last-ditch appeal against extradition to the United States, giving Washington three weeks to provide further "assurances" in the case.

Assange had suffered a string of court losses in the long-running legal saga, which his supporters see as a battle for media freedom. The judges in London said he had "a real prospect of success" on three of his nine grounds



of appeal. Victoria Sharp and Jeremy Johnson gave Washington three weeks to allay concerns that he will be prejudiced at trial and that he could face the death penalty if convicted. — AFP

FRANKFURT

German rail operator agrees to 35-hour week work

German rail operator Deutsche Bahn said on Tuesday it had agreed with the GDL union to shorten train drivers' working week, ending a months-long row that caused strikes across the country.

"It was a difficult road," Deutsche Bahn's human resources director Martin Seiler said at a Berlin press conference. "But in the end we were able to reach an intelligent compromise." From 2026, the standard working week will be gradually reduced from



38 hours to 35 hours by 2029.

Train drivers will, however, have the option of working more if they want to, up to 40 hours per week, at 2.7 per cent more salary per additional hour. — AFP

TOKYO

Japan attempts to revive Moon lander

Japan's space agency said on Tuesday it will try to revive its Moon lander after a second frigid, two-week lunar night, following a surprising awakening last month.

The unmanned Smart Lander for Investigating Moon (SLIM) touched down in January at a wonky angle that left its solar panels facing the wrong way.

The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said on Tuesday that it hoped "there will be enough sunlight on the solar



cells to start up SLIM around this evening".

"The project team will begin operations today to restart SLIM after the second lunar night," it said in a post on X. — AFP



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7

No let-up in war despite UN ceasefire resolution

GAZA: Israeli troops battled Palestinians in the Gaza Strip on Tuesday, with no sign of a let-up in the war despite a UN Security Council resolution demanding an “immediate ceasefire”.

The resolution was adopted on Monday after Israel’s closest ally the United States abstained amid growing concern for the worsening humanitarian situation after nearly six months of war.

The text demands an “immediate ceasefire” for the ongoing Muslim holy month of Ramadhan, leading to a “lasting” truce.

It also demands that Palestinian groups free captives they took during the unprecedented October 7 attacks on Israel, though it does not directly link the release to a truce.

In Gaza, there was intense fighting overnight, with Israeli operations in and around at least three major hospitals in the besieged territory.

The Israeli military said its jets had struck more than 60 targets in Gaza in the past day.

The health ministry in the territory said 70 people were killed early on Tuesday, 13 of them in Israeli air strikes around the southern city of Rafah.

The Israeli military said air raid sirens sounded in areas near the Gaza border.

The Security Council resolution was the first since the Gaza war erupted to demand an immediate halt in the fighting.

After the vote, UN chief Antonio Guterres led calls



Women and children stand by items that were salvaged from a building that was hit overnight during Israeli bombardment in Rafah. – AFP

for the resolution to be implemented. “Failure would be unforgivable,” he said on social media platform X.

Israel reacted furiously to the US abstention, while Washington insisted that it did not mark a shift in policy, although it has taken a tougher line with Israel in recent weeks.

The United States had previously vetoed successive draft resolutions calling for a ceasefire, but it has become increasingly concerned by the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza, where the United Nations has warned of famine in the north by May if urgent action isn’t taken.

The Gaza health ministry said seven people had drowned in the Mediterranean trying to reach aid airdropped into the territory.

Washington has also balked at Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin’s determination to launch an assault on Rafah, the last major population centre still untouched by Israeli ground troops where most of Gaza’s population has sought refuge from the fighting.

In protest at the United States’ abstention in the UN vote, which it said “hurts” both its war effort and attempts to release captives, Israel cancelled a planned visit to Washington by a high-ranking delegation.

Palestinian groups welcomed the Security Council resolution and reaffirmed its readiness to negotiate the release of captives in exchange for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. — AFP

Aid drop off Gaza beach leads to drownings



Humanitarian aid is being airdropped, along the northern coastline of Gaza. – Reuters

GAZA: Twelve people have drowned trying to reach aid dropped by plane off a Gaza beach, Palestinian health authorities said on Tuesday, amid growing fears of famine nearly six months into Israel’s military campaign.

Video of the air drop showed crowds of people running towards the beach, in Beit Lahia in north Gaza, as crates with parachutes floated down, then people standing deep in water and bodies being pulled onto the sand.

It is the latest in a string of incidents involving deaths during aid deliveries in the tiny, crowded Palestinian enclave where some people are foraging for weeds to eat and baking barely edible bread from animal feed.

The video showed the apparently lifeless body of a bearded young man being hauled onto the beach, the eyes open but unmoving, and another man

trying to revive him with chest compressions as somebody said, “It’s over.”

“He swam to get food for his children and he was martyred,” said a man standing on the beach who did not give his name.

“They should deliver aid through the (overland) crossings. Why are they doing this to us?”

Aid agencies say only about a fifth of required supplies are entering Gaza as Israel ploughs on with an air and ground offensive, triggered by October 7 attack, that has shattered the enclave, pushing parts of it into famine already.

They say deliveries by air or sea directly onto Hamas-run Gaza’s beaches are no substitute for increased supplies coming in by land via Israel or Egypt.

A piece of paper retrieved from Monday’s air drop said in Arabic written over an American flag that the aid was from the United States.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has urged Israel to give an “ironclad commitment” for unfettered aid access into the Gaza Strip and described the number of trucks blocked at the border as “a moral outrage”.

Israel says it puts no limit on the amount of humanitarian aid entering Gaza and blames problems in it reaching civilians within the enclave on UN agencies, which it says are inefficient.

Distribution of aid inside Gaza has been complicated, particularly in the north, and last month health authorities in Gaza said Israeli troops killed more than 100 people trying to take aid from a convoy.

Israel’s military disputed that account, saying people who had rushed the convoy had died during a stampede or by being crushed by aid trucks. — Reuters

Qatar says negotiations ‘ongoing’ for Gaza truce

DOHA: Mediator Qatar said on Tuesday that talks between Palestinian groups and Israel on a Gaza truce and captives release are continuing, despite the warring parties trading blame over the lack of headway.

Foreign ministry spokesperson Majed al Ansari said the talks were “ongoing”, adding there had not been “any development that would lead to thinking that one of the teams has pulled out of the negotiations”.

Qatar, with the United States and Egypt, has been engaged in weeks of behind-the-scenes talks in a bid to secure a truce in Gaza and the release of Israeli captives in exchange for Palestinian prisoners being held in Israeli jails.

Since the UN Security Council adopted a resolution on Monday demanding an “immediate ceasefire”, Hamas and Israel have traded blame for their failure to agree a deal.



A man inspects the rubble of a building destroyed by bombardment, in Rafah. – AFP

Hamas said Netanyahu and his cabinet were “entirely responsible for the failure of negotiation efforts and for preventing an agreement from being reached up until now”.

Netanyahu’s office hit back on X, charging that Hamas was “not interested in continuing negotiations” as it had been emboldened by the Security Council vote. Ansari told a Doha news conference that Qatar welcomed the UN resolution, which he said had not had “any

immediate effect on the talks”.

A source briefed on the talks said that “officials from Israel’s Mossad spy agency remain in Doha for negotiations mediated by Qatar and Egypt on a Gaza truce and captive releases”.

The source, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the discussions, said “only part of the Mossad team was returning to Israel for consultations on developments in the talks”. — AFP

■ PROTESTERS DEMAND CEASEFIRE



Protesters chant slogans during a meeting between Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the US State Department in Washington, DC, on March 25. – AFP

Principles and faith in leadership



Dr Ahmed bin Mahmood al Lawati

The writer is Project Assurance & Coaching team leader in PDO

Principles are a set of beliefs that a person carries either since childhood or growing up as an adult. The set of beliefs drives the actions of individuals. The principles do not affect the actions only but the way that a person behaves even being alone. For example, the set of principles that Gandhi demonstrated in his actions was demonstrated by protesting using non-violent resistance to lead the successful campaign for India’s independence from British rule. The principle of non-violence in Gandhi was the key factor in the continuation of the freedom journey he led regardless of the huge challenges faced in those days. On top of that, Gandhi adopted the short dhoti woven with hand-spun yarn as a mark of identification with India’s rural poor. Also, he lived in a poor residential community, ate simple food, and undertook long fasts as a means of both introspection and political protest. This adaptation became his lifestyle and a

principle that he believed in. Introspection is a good example of relation with the principle that drives the leader’s reflection and actions. Faith is a deeper conviction that makes leaders insist on the cause, even die for it regardless of the success rate. This is the strongest inner motivator that drives a leader in the change journey. One of the good examples is the soldiers of liberation movements, where the soldiers are ready to give up their lives for their cause and take Palestinians as a good demonstration of that today. Regardless of the obstacles to the availability, accessibility and quality of healthcare, food and infrastructure, the people of Palestine refuse to leave their land. This is a clear demonstration of strong faith that is not deniable. According to the writer, based on extensive research, the strongest faith comes from a religious background. Those who hold the faith extracted from religion, hold their position to the maximum capacity of any

PSYCHOLOGISTS CONCERNED WITH STUDYING THE IMPACT OF THE WEATHER ON HUMAN BEHAVIOUR SUG

human being. They were tortured in many aspects and ways, yet they did not change their position. For instance, the companion of Jesus would be seized and held in pits dug for them in the ground. They would be sawed into two halves from their heads, and their flesh was torn away from their bones with iron combs. But, despite this, they would not wean away from their faith. The greatest example who demonstrated the effect of faith is Prophet Muhammad. He showed the effect of belief when he was offered to be wealthy or to be a king. Instead, he refused all these appealing offers by saying “If they put the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left, I will not stop what I am doing until the Allah says or I die before”. This is a clear example of how faith can drive change and make the world a better place to live. It is important to highlight that leaders must discuss their beliefs with a specialist to direct those beliefs, principles and faith into standards that help humanity for the greater good.

Migrant transfers ahead of Olympics anger mayors

ADAM PLOWRIGHT

Mayors in rural and small-town France are increasingly angry over the transfer of migrants from the capital to their communities, which they believe is linked to clean-up efforts ahead of the Paris Olympics. Serge Grouard, the right-wing mayor of Orleans in central France, went public Monday with his complaints over the arrival of up to 500 homeless migrants in his town of 100,000 people without his prior knowledge. “It has been proved that every three weeks, a coach arrives in Orleans from Paris, with between 35-50 people on board,” he told reporters, adding that it was to “clean the deck” in the capital ahead of the Olympics in July and August. Each new arrival is offered three weeks in a hotel at the state’s expense, but is thereafter left to fend for themselves, Grouard explained. Paris has long been a magnet for asylum seekers and migrants, mostly from Africa, South Asia or the Middle East, with demand for short-term emergency accommodation far exceeding supply. As a result, informal camps under bridges or on unoccupied land spring up regularly around the capital, which are periodically torn down by police. Occupants are offered the chance to apply for asylum and the government’s policy is to move many of them out of Paris and into facilities elsewhere in the country. In January, the major of Lavaur, a small town near Toulouse in southwest France, issued a public letter in which he denounced the policy of transferring migrants around the country as “irresponsible” and “dangerous”. “To make Paris in all likelihood more ‘presentable’ and more controllable, six months before the Olympic Games,” wrote Bernard Carayon. “It’s unacceptable.” French President Emmanuel Macron backed the idea of dispersing asylum seekers and refugees around the country during a speech in September 2022. The centrist called the long-standing policy of concentrating migrants in low-income areas of major cities “absurd” and argued that refugees could help bring about a “demographic transition” in rural and small-town France. Many areas outside of France’s major cities are undergoing population decline, leading to school closures and labour shortages. But right-wing and far-right politicians have long denounced the policy, accusing Macron of introducing poverty, crime and Islamism into traditional communities which are frequently wary of outsiders. — AFP

The war is against Palestine not Hamas



Zahir bin Harith Al Mahrouqi

The author is an Omani writer concerned with the Arab affairs. He is the author of The Road to Jerusalem

Among the paradoxes that could even be agonising is that, at a time when we see global popular attitudes and some official ones supportive of Gaza and its resistance in most world countries including the US, the Zionist entity has succeeded to portray its war on Gaza as a war against a rebellious faction rather than a war against all the Palestinians, thus we have more than one Palestine. It seems that some Palestinians were deceived by the Israeli stratagem when the whole world saw heated argument and media accusations on the Palestinian side to the extent of criminalising the resistance which is confronting the Nato in its entirety and at a time when Arab and Islamic countries backed Israel in its war against Gaza by supplying it with all its needs and are fuelling its war machine. Delegating Mohammad Mustafa to appoint a new Palestinian government sparked a debate between Fatah and Hamas movements with Hamas believing that appointing a government without a national consensus is a step devoid of content and further deepens the Palestinian strife. This opinion was also shared by the Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Palestinian National Initiative Movement (Al Mubadara). These factions are of the opinion that the top national priority for the time being is confronting the barbaric Zionist aggression and its war of extermination and starvation rather than forming a new government. Forming a government without national consensus reinforces the policy of exclusivity and worsens division at this historic juncture. The Fatah movement voiced its disapproval stating, according to the Palestine News and Information Agency (WAFA): “Whoever caused Israel’s reoccupation of the Gaza Strip and caused the disaster that the Palestinian people are experiencing does not have the right to dictate national priorities.” That wasn’t sufficient for Fatah movement, it went on wondering “Why do most of Hamas’ leaders live abroad?” Why did Hamas’ leaders

and their families flee leaving the Palestinian people facing a brutal war of extermination without any protection?” Nevertheless, the truth known by Fatah and the whole world is that this is a fallacy belied by reality. It is apparent that Gaza alone bore the brunt of the Israeli war and the Fatah movement was totally out of the scene. It’s because the Israeli entity’s plan is to follow a gradual plan to take the Palestinian factions one by one meaning that the turn is coming for all factions. That is not a secret. The problem between the Fatah and Hamas is old, it is attributed to the growing influence of Hamas and its rejection of the humiliating Oslo Accords which constituted a major issue for President Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and leader of the Fatah movement who signed the

THE NEW PALESTINIAN GOVERNMENT SHOULD STRIVE TO RESTORE NATIONAL UNITY AND END THE DIVISION AND SHOULD NOT BE A SHAM GOVERNMENT WITH A MISSION TO FILL THE VACUUM

agreements and recognised Israel in exchange for Israel’s recognition of the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people. The Oslo Accords stipulated that the Palestine Liberation Organization abandons the armed struggle approach against Israel and amend some clauses of the Palestinian National Charter related to the armed struggle approach adopted by the Palestinian factions affiliated with the PLO. However, the Hamas movement and other Palestinian factions announced their rejection of any peace agreement that abolishes the right to claim historic Palestine, insisting to continue military action against Israel which led it to direct clashes with the Fatah movement. Hence, there were two different

approaches which led to a clash between the two parties. Even so, Fatah and Hamas avoided clashes in the first months of the war on Gaza, the decision to form a new government triggered verbal confrontation between the two factions again and brought the strife to the public. It is by no means that Hamas and PIJ can be ignored nor removed from the political equation. That’s because they represent an authentic component of the Palestinian people and there is no point in forming a government in which the opinion of Hamas or any other Palestinian faction is not taken into account. Otherwise, it will seem as a formation outside the national will of all Palestinians in light of the ongoing fierce war on Gaza. It seems that the decision to form the new government was taken in the context of ‘understandings with Arab and Western countries involved in the arrangements for the next day in Gaza’, a source within the Palestinian Authority told Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper adding that president Mahmoud Abbas’s decision to form the government came in the context that ‘there is no need to wait for someone and that the priorities that Hamas talks about such as providing relief to the people and rebuilding the Gaza Strip, entail the formation of a government capable of doing that.’ Division is normal owing to the differences in views of those who believe in armed struggle and those who believe in a false peace that has not been achieved despite the passage of many years since the Oslo Accords. The new Palestinian government should strive to restore national unity and end the Palestinian division. It should not be a sham government with a mission to fill the vacuum and handle day-to-day duties. I believe that it is time to take radical and fateful steps to restore the former glory of the Palestinian struggle. The dreams of peace cannot continue without embracing the ideology of resistance. Perhaps the dispute between the Hamas and Fatah movements, which has come out to the public forcefully, will open the way for new generations to should Palestinian responsibility under a united banner and one goal. In the end, this war is against Palestine and not only against Hamas or Gaza.

For a greener, healthier transition

No country has ever prospered without urbanising. With the urbanisation undergoing further transformation worldwide, affordable housing and eco-friendly living has taken the centre stage in the quest for a safe future.

According to UN-Habitat’s World Cities Report, since 2007, more than half of the world’s population has lived in cities or urban centres. By 2030, estimates show that cities will be home to 60 per cent of the global population, a share that will further increase to about 68.4 per cent by 2050.

The estimate is that between 2.5 and 3 billion people will be added to the urban population worldwide, with the highest growth projected to be in less developed regions like East Asia, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

At the same time, cities account for 70 per cent of global waste and consume almost 80 per cent of the world’s energy. Reports indicate that building construction consumes 40 per cent of the world’s energy and is responsible for around one-third of all greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, 91 per cent of the world’s population currently lives in places where air quality levels exceed the World Health Organization’s limits.

In a report, the World Economic Forum points out, “Our cities are growing rapidly in terms of inhabitants and the space they occupy. Every minute, we add 10,000 square metres of city space. Every five days, we build a new Paris.”

While this rapid urbanisation has been the catalyst for innovative solutions in many areas, one key factor that needs more attention is environmentally sustainable housing.

Environmental sustainability in housing, as experts point out, revolves around principles such as energy efficiency, water conservation, waste management and the use of



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OMAN HAS UNVEILED ITS NATIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY, AN ENABLER TO ACHIEVE THE AMBITIOUS OMAN VISION 2040, FOR ACHIEVING URBAN GROWTH WHILE MAINTAINING A BALANCE BETWEEN SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEVELOPMENTS

eco-friendly materials. This will help contribute to a healthier ecosystem and mitigate the impact of climate change.

The Sultanate of Oman is among the countries that signed its commitment to apply its principles in all national plans and strategies that call for ensuring universal access to safe and affordable basic housing and services, sustainable transport systems, and green and public spaces for all.

In this direction, Oman has already unveiled its National Spatial Strategy, an enabler to achieve the ambitious Oman Vision 2040 for achieving urban growth while maintaining a balance between social, economic and environmental developments.

The strategy envisions smart, sustainable and vibrant cities, a vital countryside with a viable architecture that ensures high quality of life, work and leisure, and a diversified and easily accessible means of transport, integrated with sound and targeted urban planning and sustainable world-class infrastructure.

Significantly, the Omani government has been at the forefront of addressing various issues concerning the housing and housing finance sectors through segmentation of the market and promoting appropriate products for specific segments.

The Central Bank of Oman and the Environment Authority signed a cooperation programme in September 2023 to encourage green initiatives through the banking sector.

This programme aims to enhance and encourage green initiatives through the banking sector. It also aims at identifying areas of joint cooperation from which the need for cooperation, coordination, and exchange of experiences emerges in implementing the green initiatives.

After all, environmental sustainability is essential for mitigating climate change, conserving resources, and preserving the planet for future generations.

A COLOURFUL FESTIVAL!



A devotee dances during the Huranga, a game played a day after Holi, at Dauji temple near the northern city of Mathura, India, on Tuesday. – Reuters

Father and wife’s illnesses focus attention on future king, Prince William

With both his father King Charles and his wife Kate absent from public duties as they undergo treatment for cancer, Britain’s Prince William has come under the media and public spotlight like never before.

As heir to the throne and as a son of the late Princess Diana, the 41-year-old is accustomed to the scrutiny that comes with being a British royal. But his father and wife’s absence from public life since mid-January have meant even greater attention has turned to the future King William V. From the moment his grandmother, the late Queen Elizabeth, died in September 2022, he would have been all too aware of the “scary” reality of his destiny, said Anna Whitelock, history of the monarchy professor at London’s City University. “He knows he has to be ready to be king,” she said.

“When (the king’s) cancer diagnosis came, of course, I’m sure his first reaction was as a son, concern for his father. But there is also this big weight of responsibility that suddenly starts to kind of descend upon his shoulders. And I’m sure he’s very, very aware of that.” William was at the centre of some golden years for the royal family in the last decade with public celebrations and outpourings of support at his and Kate’s wedding in 2011, the births of their three children, and milestones in the reign



Sarah Mills

The writer is a senior journalist with Reuters

WILLIAM WAS AT THE CENTRE OF SOME GOLDEN YEARS FOR THE ROYAL FAMILY IN THE LAST DECADE

of his grandmother Elizabeth. But the last few years also saw a high-profile fallout with Prince Harry, his younger brother’s exit from royal duties along with wife Meghan, and their criticism of the institution.

There was also the scandal over his uncle Prince Andrew’s friendship with the late offender Jeffrey Epstein.

The death of Elizabeth and of her husband Philip the year before left the monarchy looking noticeably smaller, something brought into sharp relief by the current absence of Charles, 75, and Kate.

“He must be absolutely devastated and worried about his wife, about his children and about his father, on top of all the problems he’s had with his brother,” royal biographer Claudia Joseph said.

“I think it’s very tough. But... he’s made of stern stuff. He’s very stoic.” That contrasts with the view tabloid newspapers presented of “work-shy” William in 2017.

But since then he has taken on more and more royal duties and won praise for championing causes including the environment and mental health. “I’m sure when the time comes, Prince William will step up to the plate,” said Robert Hardman, author of

recent biography “Charles III”.

“I mean, we saw how in the aftermath of the death of Elizabeth II — the longest lived, longest reigning monarch we’ve ever had — people thought, how do you follow that? Well, the answer is monarchy gets on with it.”

While the role of monarch is meant to be as a non-political head of state, Whitelock said William would find it very difficult to spend his time as king just wearing robes and cutting ribbons. Many people would actually welcome “a more interventionist monarch,” she added.

“I think it’s going to be really interesting over the next few years



As heir to the throne, the 41-year-old is accustomed to the scrutiny that comes with being a British royal. – Reuters file photo

to see whether people are ready for that or whether there is a kind of line which he ends up having to be very clear that he doesn’t cross.”

The prince has not been shy to speak his mind and criticise world leaders over the environment. In February, he voiced concern over the war in Gaza, saying too many people had been killed: an unusually direct intervention from a British royal.

“I think the royal family has to modernise and develop as it goes along and it has to stay relevant,” William said in 2016, when asked by the BBC about his future as king.

“That’s the challenge for me is how do I make the royal family

relevant in the next 20 years’ time, and it could be 40 years’ time, it could be 60 years’ time and I have no idea when that’s going to be. I hope that’s something that I can do.”

Meanwhile, Catherine, Princess of Wales, has said she is “enormously touched” by the support she has received from around the world following her shock announcement that she is being treated for cancer.

“The prince and princess are both enormously touched by the kind messages from people here in the UK, across the Commonwealth and around the world in response to Her Royal Highness’ message,” Catherine and her husband Prince William, the heir to the throne, said in a statement.

“They are extremely moved by the public’s warmth and support and are grateful for the understanding of their request for privacy at this time.” The announcement ended weeks of speculation about Catherine’s health, with many praising her courage and others criticising the conspiracies that spread over her absence.

The candid disclosure leaves the British monarchy in crisis with King Charles III just weeks ago revealing he was also battling cancer.

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ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, MARCH 26

A CONFIDENT OMAN under new coach Jaroslav Silhavy impressed in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday to beat Malaysia 2-0 in the Preliminary Joint Qualification - Round 2 for the Fifa World Cup 2026 and the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027.

The Group D away match for the Red Warriors was a repeat result of their home tie last week in Muscat.

Oman, who controlled the match with precise moves, stunned the hosts in the additional times of the first and second halves to take the full points.

Omar al Malki (penalty) and Mohammed al Ghafri were on target on both the occasions for Oman.

The deserving win in Kuala Lumpur puts Oman on nine points, level with Kyrgyz Republic, who defeated Chinese Taipei 5-1. Kyrgyz Republic are on top of the Group D table with a better goal average.

Malaysia are third with six points, while Chinese Taipei are at the bottom with no points.

The match kick-started with a threatening break by the hosts when midfielder Arif Aiman snatched the ball from the Oman defender Mohammed al Musallami and got near the goal area.

Oman goalkeeper Ibrahim al Mukhaini quickly grabbed the pass by Arif into the goalmouth against an onrushing Darren Lok to keep the danger away.

Oman made their first solid attack in the eighth minute and Jameel al Yahmadi's left-footer inside the Malaysian box missed the left post narrowly.

In the 13th minute, Mohsin al Ghassani failed to control a good cross at the left flank near the Malaysian goal post.

Jameel got another brilliant pass in the 18th minute from Mohsin but could not keep the ball under control in front of the Malaysian goalpost. Realising the weak links in the Malaysian defence, coach Pan-Gon Kim replaced Azam Azmi with Daniel Ting as early as the 26th minute. In the 33rd minute, Jameel was again in the thick of the action as his well-directed pass inside the box aimed at Mohsin, was cleared to safety by a timely intervention by Malaysian goalkeeper Siyahan Azmi.

In the 41st minute, Oman's Salah al Yahyaei unleashed a firm shot outside the box that was punched away by goalkeeper Azmi. Mohsin rushed in to take the rebound but his shot ballooned over the bar. Three minutes later, Mohsin cleverly headed in from a nice lob by Salah al Yahyaei but keeper Siyahan brought out a spectacular back-curving save to keep the slate clean.

COOL PENALTY

In the additional time of the first half, Mohsin made amends for his couple of near-misses as the forward was brought down by the Malaysian goalkeeper Azmi who received a yellow card for the foul. Omar al Malki made no mistake from the spot kick (45+4) to comfortably place the ball into the centre of the Malaysian net to take the lead.

Malaysia brought in Brendan Gan in place of Syamer Kutty Abba during the start of the second half.

The second half came into life with a strong shot from Salah al Yahyaei just in front of the Malaysian box that hit the left-side post and the rebound was cleared by the goalkeeper for a corner in the 51st minute. Malaysia briefly threatened the Omani goalpost in the 63rd minute after a corner and it was finally cleared away for another corner.

Oman's Czech coach Jaroslav Silhavy made the first substitutions in the 65th minute with Zahir al Aghbari replacing Jameel al Yahmadi and Abdul Rahman al Mushaifri coming in for Salah al Yahyaei.

In search of an equaliser, Malaysia brought in Paulo Josue in place of Stuart Wilkin in the 73rd minute.

Silhavy again made a double change in the 75th minute. Mohammed al Ghafri replaced Mohsin al Ghassani and Hatem Sultan replaced Omer al Malki.

In the 80th minute, Oman almost doubled the score when Mohammed al Ghafri got the ball near the Malaysian penalty area after a miss-pass.

Al Ghafri turned round and hit a strong shot that hit the side bar and was saved by the keeper. In the 84th minute, Al Ghafri received a yellow card for a rough tackle.

Oman sealed the game in the additional time for a second time (90+4) when Mohammed al Ghafri left-footed shot from the centre of the box entered the centre of the Malaysian goal after a clever assist by Abdullah Fawaz.

CONFIDENT OMAN EASE PAST MALAYSIA

RED WARRIORS POST REPEAT
RESULT OF HOME TIE IN GROUP D

‘Still got it’: Kohli hits 77 as Bengaluru beat Punjab



Royal Challengers Bengaluru's Virat Kohli plays a shot against Punjab Kings.

BENGALURU, India: Virat Kohli on Monday said he has “still got it” in him to ace T20 cricket after his attacking 77 guided Royal Challengers Bengaluru to their first win of this IPL season.

Master batsman Kohli smashed 11 fours and two sixes in his 49-ball blitz as hosts Bengaluru chased down their victory target of 177 with four balls to spare against Punjab Kings and bounce back from their loss in the opener of the lucrative T20 tournament.

Kohli fell to fast bowler Harshal Patel in the 16th over and soon Bengaluru lost another wicket before Dinesh Karthik (28) and impact substitute Mahipal Lomror (17) steered the team home in an unbeaten stand of 48 off 18 balls.

Kohli, who missed India's 4-1 Test series victory over England because of the birth of his second child, has played just two T20 internationals for India since

November 2022.

Some critics suggested he is not an automatic selection for this year's T20 World Cup but Kohli has answered back with this latest knock. “I know my name is just attached to promoting the game in many parts of the world when it comes to T20 cricket, but still got it I guess,” Kohli told presenter Harsha Bhogle after being named man of the match.

The 35-year-old Kohli spoke about his paternity break.

“We were not in the country. We were at a place where people weren't recognising us,” said kohli.

“Just to feel normal for two months was a surreal experience. I was telling the guys that the voices got that much louder (back home) which wasn't the case for the last two months. It was amazing to be another person on the road.”

Bowlers set up victory with pace spearhead Mohammed Siraj and spinner Glenn Maxwell

taking two wickets each to keep Punjab down to 176-6 despite skipper Shikhar Dhawan's 45.

FAN LOVE AFFAIR

Kohli then took charge after he was dropped on the second ball of the chase by Jonny Bairstow at first slip off Sam Curran.

He capitalised on the spill on nought and hit the left-handed Curran for four boundaries including three successive hits to set up the chase in the first over.

His flowing cover drives, flicks on the on side and behind-the-wicket hits raised the noise at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium as chants of “Kohli, Kohli” filled the air.

“It's been going on for years,” Kohli said about his love affair with his fans.

“At the end of the day you don't talk about the achievements, stats or numbers but the memories.

“It's what (India coach) Rahul

Dravid says. The friendship, love, appreciation, backing has been amazing and is what you'll miss and never forget.”

He raised his 51st IPL fifty in 31 balls and became the third batsman after Chris Gayle and David Warner to score his 100th 50-plus knock in T20 cricket.

Punjab fast bowler Kagiso Rabada struck early with the key wickets of skipper Faf du Plessis and Cameron Green — both the batsmen out on three.

Kohli stood firm but Punjab bowlers got down a few disciplined overs to put the pressure back on Bengaluru, but the star batsman, and later Karthik, ensured victory.

Bengaluru invited Punjab to bat first and struck regular blows after Siraj send Bairstow trudging back to the pavilion for eight.

Batsmen failed to convert starts with Prabhsimran Singh and Curran out for 25 and 23 respectively. — AFP

Thrilling win for Salalah Kings, Sidhu shines for Hala Cosmos

MUSCAT: In a thrilling encounter at the on-going PSM Ramadhan cricket tournament, Salalah Kings entered the semifinals after beating Orient Travels in the first quarterfinal on Monday night. Salalah Kings won the toss and opted to bowl first. Orient Travels posted 124 for 4 in 8 overs with some fine batting by Asif Khan (46 not out – 3x4, 3x6). Siddique got 2 wickets for 35 runs for SK. In reply, Siddique slammed an attacking 59 runs in just 17 balls with 8 sixers and a four as Salalah cruised to victory.

Siddique was declared the man of the match for his all-round display. In the second quarterfinal, star-studded Asfandiyar XI, who were asked to bat first scored 99 runs for 3 wickets against Hala Cosmos. Umer Umri scored 31 runs. Chasing 100 for a win, Hala Cosmos finished in style by beating Asfandiyar XI by 10 wickets. Sidhu was the star with a quickfire 79 runs in 20 balls with 10 sixers and three fours. The semifinals will be played on Wednesday and the final on Thursday.



Australia-India Test series to start in Perth late November



A man walks past a mural in a laneway showing India's top players in front of the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) in Melbourne. — AFP

SYDNEY: Perth will host the first match of a blockbuster five-Test series against India from November 22, Cricket Australia (CA) said on Tuesday as it released its international schedule for the 2024-25 season.

The series will then move to Adelaide for a day-night Test and then Brisbane's Gabba, which traditionally was the opening venue of Australia's Test summer.

The Melbourne Cricket Ground will stage the Boxing Day Test and the Border-Gavaskar Trophy series will wrap up at Sydney Cricket Ground starting on January 3.

CA chief executive Nick Hockley called it “one of the most highly anticipated summers of cricket in memory”.

“Fittingly, the Border-Gavaskar Trophy has been put on the same footing as the (men's) Ashes with a five-Test series for the first time since 1991-92,” he said.

Australia have not beaten India in a home series since

2014-2015. The hosts have, however, won all four previous Tests at Perth Stadium.

“We're confident the schedule will maximise viewership and attendances and there will be a tremendous atmosphere in stadiums across the country,” said Hockley.

Also released on Tuesday were dates for Australia's home one-day and Twenty20 series against Pakistan in November that will precede the India Test series, and the Women's Ashes against old rivals England.

The final match of the Women's Ashes, starting January 30, 2025, will be the first women's Test at the MCG since 1949. — AFP

Australia v India Test series schedule:
November 22-26: 1st Test, Perth
December 6-10: 2nd Test, Adelaide
December 14-18: 3rd Test, Brisbane
December 26-30: 4th Test, Melbourne
January 3-7, 2025: 5th Test, Sydney

Ferrari revel in putting Red Bull under pressure after Sainz's unlikely win

MELBOURNE: Thousands of red-clad Ferrari fans descended on Lygon St in Melbourne to party in the Italian restaurant strip until the wee hours of Monday after Carlos Sainz's unlikely win in the Australian Grand Prix.

The Italian Formula One team will hope the celebrations continue at Suzuka in two weeks after Albert Park breathed new life into the championship.

Sainz and team mate Charles Leclerc's 1-2 in Australia trimmed Red Bull's lead to four points in both the drivers' and constructors' title races, a major momentum shift following Max Verstappen's Middle East dominance.

Ferrari had the fortune of Verstappen flaming out with a brake problem at Albert Park which ended Red Bull's two-year run of avoiding DNFs (non-finishes) on race-day. Ferrari nonetheless leave Melbourne delighted by the pace of their SF-24 car after being trounced by Red Bull in Saudi Arabia and



Ferrari's Carlos Sainz Jr in action during the Australian Grand Prix at Melbourne Grand Prix Circuit, Melbourne. — Reuters

Bahrain.

“This weekend is good evidence that when we are putting everything together, and I'm not sure that we'll be able to do it every single weekend, we can put (Red Bull) a little bit under pressure,” said team boss Frederic Vasseur.

“It's when they are under pressure that they will also have more mistakes. We have to continue in this direction.”

With triple world champion Verstappen topping the podium ahead of team mate Sergio Perez in the season's first two races, Red Bull were blindsided by setup struggles from the get-go in Melbourne.

Red Bull team boss Christian Horner said Red Bull had not got to grips with conditions while Ferrari, clearly, had.

“I think the nature of the surface (was a factor), as well. I think that

the tyre graining here in particular was something that Ferrari looked in control of,” he said.

“Certainly from Friday their long runs looked good.”

Perez, who finished fifth after the floor of his car suffered damage, said Ferrari “absolutely” had the pace to beat Verstappen had the Dutchman gone the distance.

However, Red Bull advisor Helmut Marko was unconvinced.

“I spoke to Max and he said that, despite the problems, he kept up with Sainz's pace relatively easily,” Marko told Sky Sport. “With Max in the race, it would have turned out completely differently.”

Ferrari may not know where they sit until their next proper duel against Verstappen, who won 19 out of 22 races last season and will be eager to hit back at the Japanese Grand Prix. Mercedes, by contrast, can have little doubt of their place in the pecking order, with Melbourne confirming their also-ran status.

—Reuters

AGM discusses governance project for OOC, sports bodies

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 26

The General Assembly of Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) discussed many topics during the annual regular meeting which took place on Tuesday including the project of governance of Oman Olympic Committee and sports associations beside discussion on the forthcoming participations of the OOC in the coming period. The meeting was held under the chairmanship of Shaikh Khalid bin Mohammed al Zubair, OOC Chairman, in presence of OOC Board directors and General Assembly members.

The OOC chief expressed his sincere thanks and appreciation to the members of the General Assembly of OOC for their active participation, valuable opinions and enriching proposals aimed at enhancing Omani sports and the Olympic movement.

“The project of governance of Oman Olympic Committee and sports associations is being implemented by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth during this period. Since the formation of the council, a work schedule based on several future projects and programmes was formed. This included the implementation of OCC governance project and the completion of its organisational and structural framework. In this context, several important regulations were adopted that were not previously in place, including the financial regulations of the committee and the regulations of Oman Athletes Committee, which were developed in accordance with the principles and recommendations agreed upon with the regulations of athletes issued by International



Shaikh Khalid Mohammed al Zubair, OOC Chairman, addresses the AGM.

Olympic Committee. The council also approved the regulation for the work of sub-committees,” he said. In another significant step made by the OOC, Al Zubair said: “From the principle adopted by the OOC in all its sports initiatives, a contract with expertise houses was signed to accomplish two integrated studies to assess the reality of Omani sports and to govern Oman Olympic Committee and Oman sports associations. The OOC looks forward to outlining the outcomes of these studies to govern the sports sector in its entirety, determining the roles and responsibilities among the various stakeholders, ensuring their integration, and ultimately, establishing a clear and defined plan over time to enable sports bodies materially and logistically so that the ministry, the OOC and sports federations can fulfil their respective roles to

the fullest extent and to the highest governance standards, to achieve the best sports results in the coming years, especially in national teams, elite and Olympic sports.

The OOC chairman highlighted the importance given by the Board of Directors to joint GCC cooperation, which provides an appropriate framework for exchanging experiences, cooperation and unifying visions and positions among the GCC countries to achieve common sports and youth goals. Al Zubair also commented on the success of Oman, represented by OOC, in hosting the 35th meeting of GCC NOCs Presidents, along with the Executive Office and the four advisory committees: the Women’s Sports Committee, the Athletes’ Committee, the Sports Committee, and the Paralympic Committee, which were held in Muscat during the last quarter of

the previous year 2023.

In conclusion of his statement, Shaikh Khalid said: “His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik considers Omani youth as one of the tributaries of comprehensive development and a pillar of building a strong and stable state. This is by harnessing all capabilities to uplift the youth and empower them in all fields, so they can take the initiative to build themselves and their nation, a principle that His Majesty has emphasised on more than one occasion.”

During the meeting, the minutes of the previous meeting of OOC General Assembly were approved. The financial statements for the fiscal year ending in 2023, the auditor’s report for the previous year and the proposed budget for the current fiscal year 2024 were approved by the General Assembly.

Top seed Swiatek exits Miami with Gauff

MIAMI: World number one Iga Swiatek was knocked out of the Miami Open after inspired Russian Ekaterina Alexandrova triumphed 6-4, 6-2 in their fourth round match on Monday.

The 16th seed Alexandrova played brilliant attacking tennis from the outset to beat the Pole and leave the WTA tournament without any of the top three seeds in the quarterfinals with Aryna Sabalenka and Coco Gauff also out.

France’s Caroline Garcia upset world number three Gauff beating the American 6-3, 1-6, 6-2 on Monday to advance to the quarterfinals of the Miami Open, while world number two Aryna Sabalenka had been eliminated by Ukraine’s Anhelina Kalinina on Saturday.

Swiatek never looked comfortable after Alexandrova broke her in the opening game and took control of proceedings with some outstanding, attacking tennis.

The Pole, who was looking to become the second woman to win the ‘Sunshine Double’ after her triumph at Indian Wells, generated just one break point in the match but Alexandrova saved it to take a 4-2 lead in the second set.

Having come from a set down in the previous round against Linda Noskova, Swiatek would have had some belief in turning the contest around but her Russian opponent was in no mood for mistakes.

She made short work of the second set, breaking to go 2-1 up with an startling cross-court return and ending the match with with 31 winners to Swiatek’s 11. The match was the first in which Swiatek has not broken serve since her defeat to Ash Barty in Adelaide in January, 2022. “I just feel disappointed, for sure, because I thought I



Ekaterina Alexandrova of Russia celebrates after beating Poland’s Iga Swiatek. – USA Today Sports



Caroline Garcia celebrates after match point against Coco Gauff.

was going to play better here in Miami. But she played an amazing match and for sure was the better play out there today,” said the 22-year-old, four-time Grand Slam winner.

Alexandrova laughed off the suggestion that she had played a perfect match but was certainly not going to downplay her performance. “It was such a great game for me in consistency, the serve, the returns, the playing from the baseline, I think it was pretty good,” she said.

Fourth seed Elena Rybakina defeated American Madison Keys 6-3, 7-5 to set up a quarterfinal with Greece’s Maria Sakkari.

Sakkari advanced with a walkover after Anna Kalinskaya had to withdraw ahead of their match on Monday due to a right thigh injury. — AFP



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OETC taps local suppliers for RO 70m worth of goods for Rabt – 1 project

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 26

Underscoring its commitment to In-Country Value (ICV) creation from its investments, Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) says it procured over RO 70 million worth of goods and services from the local market for Phase 1 of its Rabt interconnection project.

In an interview with the Observer, Eng Saleh bin Nasser al Rumhi, CEO, shed light on the organisation's commitment to local manufacturing and its recent achievements in expanding Oman's electricity infrastructure.

Last year, OETC reached a significant milestone with the completion of phase one of the Rabt project, which extended the network to Duqm SEZ across a vast expanse of 500 kilometres.

The completion of this phase has paved the way for the phase two expansion, which aims to interconnect the north and south regions, including crucial areas such as hydrogen development zones.

One notable aspect of OETC's approach is its steadfast support for local content. Phase one of the Rabt project alone yielded approximately RO 70 million worth of ICV from locally manufactured and procured items.

Al Rumhi expressed confidence that this figure would rise with phase two underway, as OETC prioritises the inclusion of locally produced transformers and cables wherever feasible.

This commitment to local manufacturing extends to the Dhofar expansion, reinforcing OETC's pivotal role in driving Oman's sustainable development agenda, particularly in the realms



of hydrogen and renewable energy initiatives.

Earlier this week, OETC signed agreements totalling over RO 322 million for the "Rabt – Phase 2" and Dhofar Governorate projects. Rabt – Phase 2 project, with a budget of RO 257 million, aims to establish three grid stations and extend overhead lines over 550 kilometres, crucially connecting the main transmission network with the Dhofar electricity network.

This ambitious undertaking includes provisions for connections to wind farms and the Thamrait Grid Station, slated for completion by 2027.

In parallel, projects in Dhofar Governorate, totalling RO 65 million, involve the establishment of 132 kV transmission lines spanning 269 kilometres and the construction of three 132 kV Grid Stations, expected to be finalised by 2026.

These initiatives represent a concerted effort by OETC to enhance the reliability and sustainability of Oman's electricity supply, facilitating the connection of the nation's northern and southern regions.

Furthermore, they play a pivotal role in contributing to Oman's carbon neutrality goals by reducing emissions and operational costs, thus underlining OETC's commitment to driving forward Oman's energy transition agenda.

Oman to award two more green hydrogen blocks next month

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 26

A pair of land blocks is due to be awarded next month under the second round of Oman's international auction process governing the allocation of renewables-rich land parcels for green hydrogen investment.

According to Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, the new awards — coming not long after landmark agreements covering the development of the first wave of six green hydrogen projects — underscore Oman's commitment to achieving its production target of 1 million tonnes per annum of renewable hydrogen or its derivatives by 2030.

Addressing international energy ministers and industry executives in Berlin last week, Al Aufi said the upcoming awards attest to the relatively rapid pace of Oman's green hydrogen journey.

That journey, he said, began a few years ago with the identification and locking-in of around 65,000 km2 of land dedicated to renewable energy and hydrogen development.

It includes 50,000 km2 of acreage exclusively earmarked for the hydrogen economy. "From the 50,000 km2, we have been successful in auctioning and signing agreements for up to just over 2,000 km2 — that's six



Europe — and in particular Germany — represent 'primary contenders' for some of Oman's green molecule exports, alongside markets in the Far East – a traditional destination for Omani energy exports

ENG SALIM BIN NASSER AL AUFII
Minister of Energy and Minerals

agreements signed to date.

An existing auction is ongoing, and we are potentially signing two more agreements, by middle of, or probably, the end of next month.

In total, they will get us very well on our path toward achieving 1 million tonnes of hydrogen by 2030. Of course, part of it will be consumed locally, and part of it will be converted into whatever derivative that will ultimately allow us to export it to different parts of the world."

Significantly, Europe — and in particular Germany — represent "primary contenders" for some of Oman's green molecule exports, alongside markets in the Far East – a traditional destination for Omani energy exports, said the Minister.

In the interest of transparency as a core value of Oman's green hydrogen programme, the Ministry has made public its policies and regulations governing hydrogen investment and development, Al Aufi said. "We established a dedicated

company, Hydrom, to orchestrate and manage the entire hydrogen economy quite distinct from the Ministry, and to set the policies.

As the orchestrator, Hydrom is also auctioning the plots and managing the entire interactions with the developers, signing the usufruct agreements and all the different terms and conditions of the agreements, and following up with the developers in terms of support and so on."

Further, with the goal of ensuring that Oman's green hydrogen sector is in alignment with standards set by key international markets, the Ministry has been proactively engaging with policymakers and regulators in these markets.

"We have been in communication with our partners here in Germany, in the Netherlands, in Belgium, and of course in (EU headquarters) Brussels itself," said Al Aufi.

In fact, some of these EU standards were successfully 'test-driven' recently in an upcoming green hydrogen project in Oman, while also being tested against various other scenarios of the industry taking shape in the country, he noted.

Energy ministers and high-ranking delegations from over 75 countries attended the 3-day Berlin Energy Transition Dialogue (BETD'24) forum, which concluded in Berlin last week.

Tourism sector embraces culture, sustainability to attract investments

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, MARCH 26

Oman's tourism industry is undergoing a dynamic transformation, leveraging its rich cultural heritage and sustainable practices to attract investments and enhance its position on the global tourism map.

In a recent episode of Tejarah Talks Podcast— hosted by Shabib al Maamari, Managing Director of Visit Oman — Azzan bin Qasim al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Tourism, along with Eng Said al Shanfari, CEO of Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC), shed light on the exciting trends and strategies shaping Oman's business and tourism landscape.

The duo highlighted Oman's recent participation as the host country at the prestigious ITB Berlin 2024, one of the world's largest travel and tourism shows with over 100,000 attendees from 100 countries.



The unique selling point of Oman lies in its authentic cultural heritage, attracting business travellers.

Being the host country provided Oman with a unique opportunity to showcase its capabilities in tourism, foster industry connections, and stimulate economic growth.

The event witnessed Oman's commitment to sustainable tourism practices, cultural preservation, and community engagement, aligning with the Oman Vision 2040.

Investing in sustainability has become a cornerstone of Oman's tourism development strategy. The country is on a mission to preserve its natural and cultural treasures while embracing

innovative technologies and eco-friendly initiatives.

"The idea of applying sustainable practices in developing tourism projects itself reflects how serious sustainability is taken into consideration," Al Busaidy said.

Projects like the The Sustainable City-Yiti and adventure tourism offerings (like the Khasab zipline) are demonstrating Oman's commitment to creating a diverse and sustainable tourism product.

Eng Al Shanfari emphasised the pivotal role of the OCEC in promoting sustainable tourism and attracting business travellers.

The centre, equipped with state-of-the-art facilities, serves as a hub for meaningful business interactions, knowledge exchange, and the showcasing of Oman's unique cultural heritage. Events like the Oman Botanic Gardens project and the Oman Sustainability Week play a crucial role in highlighting Oman's commitment to environmental sustainability and cultural enrichment.

The unique selling point of Oman lies in its authentic cultural heritage, attracting business travellers who are willing to spend more and explore the country beyond their corporate engagements.

The blend of traditional Omani hospitality, historic forts, and vibrant communities offers a compelling narrative for investors and event organisers seeking to create memorable experiences for their audiences.

The ministry's focus on community-oriented tourism projects, such as the management of heritage sites by local companies and the revitalisation of abandoned villages, highlights the government's efforts to involve and empower local communities in the tourism sector. By preserving and showcasing Oman's cultural assets, these initiatives are not only attracting investments but also creating sustainable livelihood opportunities for the local population.

Nesto distributes 1,500 food boxes across Oman

MUSCAT: Nesto Hypermarket, a prominent name in Oman's retail landscape, proudly announces the successful completion of a significant Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative during the auspicious month of Ramadhan.

In collaboration with local communities and authorities, Nesto Hypermarket distributed 1,500 food boxes across three governorates in Oman: Muscat, Al Batinah South, and Dhofar.

Nesto Hypermarket's commitment to social welfare and community development was evident in the meticulous



planning and execution of this noble endeavour. The food boxes, filled with essential food items, were meticulously packed at Nesto's central warehouse in Rumais.

This initiative not only aimed to provide sustenance to those in need but also underscored Nesto

Hypermarket's dedication to serving local communities beyond the realms of retail.

"Ramadhan is a time of reflection, gratitude, and compassion," remarked Haris Palollathil Regional Director of Nesto Hypermarket. "At Nesto, we believe in the importance of giving back to society, especially during this sacred month.

Through the distribution of these food boxes, we sought to bring comfort and support to individuals and families facing hardships." The distribution of the 1,500 food boxes was strategically planned to cover areas where Nesto Hypermarket has a presence, including Muscat, Al Batinah South, and Dhofar governorates.

This initiative exemplifies Nesto Hypermarket's ethos of actively engaging with local communities and contributing to their well-being.

Nesto Hypermarket, with 15 outlets across the region, remains steadfast in its commitment to corporate social responsibility.

This Ramadhan initiative stands as a testament to Nesto's core values of empathy, solidarity, and service to humanity.

BankDhofar introduces Dhofar-Pay: Revolutionising contactless payment

MUSCAT: BankDhofar, Oman's leading financial institution, has announced the launch of Dhofar-Pay, a cutting-edge service that redefines contactless payments for the Sultanate of Oman. With Dhofar-Pay, customers can effortlessly tap and transact using their NFC-enabled Android phones, providing unparalleled convenience and security.

Dhofar-Pay allows users to securely add their existing debit card details to their android phones. Once set up, the mobile phone becomes a digital card, enabling contactless payment transactions with a simple tap on POS terminals. This innovative solution eliminates the need to carry physical cards, offering a seamless payment experience for customers.

BankDhofar's pioneering digital banking solutions also meet customers' diverse needs and transform the way they interact with their financial resources, with a commitment to remaining at the forefront of technological developments.



On the other hand, BankDhofar's Mobile Banking App boasts an intuitive and user-friendly interface, making navigation a breeze. Whether customers are checking their account balance, transferring funds, or paying bills, it is crafted to assist them in managing their finances through a simple and straightforward process.

As per Amjad bin Iqbal al Lawati, Chief Retail Banking Officer at BankDhofar; "We always work towards making

banking easier and better for our customers and Dhofar-Pay is a perfect example of that. We are committed to use the latest technology to give the best banking experience possible for our customers. Our goal is to give easy and safe financial solutions that adapt to the evolving customer needs."

The Bank introduced a customer-centric Vertical Debit Cards, aiming to enhance the banking experience for valued customers.

Ooredoo completes first week of 20th Goodwill Journey

MUSCAT: A dedicated team from Ooredoo has recently completed the first week of its 20th Goodwill Journey (GWJ) across Oman. The GWJ is one of the telco's flagship and community-led Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives and connects Ooredoo and its volunteers with the most pressing requirements of members of local communities.

It involves sustainable endeavours which have a significant positive impact on young Omani job-seekers, women entrepreneurs, disabled people, hospitalised children, students, low-income families, and the natural environment.

This year, the team attended the graduation of fifty Omanis from the Wilayat of Muttrah, who took part in an Ooredoo-sponsored electrician training programme for young Omani job-seekers.

The next stop of the GWJ team was the Wilayat of Qurayat to open the 'Little Innovator Hall', which provides innovative



school students with educational opportunities in technology. This stop also involved a tour of the Ooredoo's Omani Women's Incubator to take note of the latest developments.

In a remote village of the Wilayat of Al Rustaq, the team visited one of the schools where they donated several digital screens and tools to create a more conducive school environment. Next, the volunteers headed to Shinas to renovate the homes of low-income families.

The team also visited Suhar to support local families in collaboration with Takaful Sohar by providing branded booths for SMEs owned by low-income families to display their products.

At Sohar Hospital, the team inaugurated an Ooredoo-sponsored digital and age-appropriate entertainment space to support children receiving hospital treatment while distributing gifts to them.

Update KYC details through Bank Muscat mobile and Internet banking

MUCAT: In line with its vision "To Serve You Better, Everyday," Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, continues to upgrade the banking services offered through Mobile and Internet banking to provide a seamless experience for customers.

The bank introduced updating "Know Your Customer (KYC)" details to help customers minimise their need to visit the branches.

KYC is an important process that enables the Bank to verify and maintain customers' identity, information and documents at all times to serve them better, enhance their banking experience and avoid any delays in their transactions.

Bank Muscat is committed to provide innovative services that are in-line with the latest technological developments and customers' current and future needs.

The new feature enables customers to update their KYC details online by logging in to



Mobile or Internet Banking and navigating through the app via Requests / Customer Services KYC Update KYC and follow the on-screen instructions.

After uploading the required documents, the details are instantly updated in the bank records and customers will receive a confirmation SMS and Email notification.

Customers can also update their civil or resident ID details and passport details through this service.

Bank Muscat offers a wide range of online services, including Soft Token App for the approval

of Internet Banking transactions, instant opening of Themaar Savings Plan, view access for minor accounts, payment to Pakistan and Bangladesh wallet, Speed transfer to Egypt, Friendi Mobile Top up, payment to government for Value added Tax (VAT), Excise Tax and Corporate income Tax, VAT statement for Corporate customers, Group Bill Payments which allows user to submit multiple bill payment transactions in single click, setting SMS Language instantly by Internet Banking & Mobile Banking, performing QR payment by doing a phone shake, MEDC electricity prepaid & post-paid payment, Muscat Finance and National Finance Loan Instalment payment and payments to new educational institutions.

In addition, customers can also apply for loan products and a variety of credit cards online and much more. Please call 24795555 or visit <https://www.bankmuscat.com> for more details.

Khimji Ramdas organises annual blood donation drive



MUSCAT: Dedicated to upholding corporate social responsibility, KR Group concluded its 41st annual blood donation drive, a long-standing tradition held during the holy month of Ramadhan. The event was organised under the supervision of the Blood Donation Services Department, Ministry of Health (MoH).

KR Group's employees' family and friends actively participated, embodying the organisation's commitment to service and community welfare for over four decades. A notable number of KR employees graciously stepped forward to donate blood, contributing to the noble cause of saving lives. The response from donors was positive, reflecting the spirit of generosity and compassion.

The event highlighted the critical importance of sustaining blood supplies, especially during Ramadhan, when demand often exceeds availability. Adhering strictly to blood bank guidelines, thorough immunisation histories, travel records, and medical screenings were meticulously recorded prior to blood donation, ensuring the safety and well-being of both donors and recipients. Anil Khimji, Director of KR Group, expressed his profound gratitude to all donors who supported this noble cause. "The spirit of caring and sharing during Ramadhan underscores our commitment to raising public awareness and supporting local communities. We extend heartfelt appreciation to Dr Zainab al Araimi and the entire team at the Blood Bank Services Department for their selfless efforts," stated Anil Khimji.

Dr Zainab al Araimi, Director of Blood Bank Services, emphasised the critical need for blood supplies in the Sultanate of Oman, particularly during the holy month of Ramadhan. "Initiatives like the KR Group's annual blood donation drive serve as beacons of hope for patients in need. We are pleased by KR Group's long-standing dedication to community service and commend their clinic and administrative teams for their tireless efforts in ensuring the success of this initiative," remarked Dr Zainab al Araimi.

Tourism sector embraces culture, sustainability to attract investments



Eng Said al Shanfari, CEO of Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, and Azzan bin Qasim al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Tourism, shed light on the exciting trends and strategies shaping Oman's business and tourism landscape during the Tejarah Talks Podcast.

FROM PAGE 13

As Oman positions itself as a leading destination for conferences, exhibitions and business events, its unique cultural heritage and sustainable practices are driving its competitive edge in the global tourism market.

The emphasis on authenticity, sustainability and community engagement distinguishes Oman as a forward-thinking and culturally rich destination for business and leisure travellers alike.

The collaborations between the public and private sectors, the promotion of sustainable tourism practices and the integration of Omani culture into the tourism experience are paving the way for a vibrant and inclusive tourism

sector in Oman.

By leveraging its cultural heritage as a unique selling point, Oman is not only attracting investments, but also creating a sustainable and authentic tourism ecosystem that resonates with modern travellers.

Oman's strategic focus on culture, heritage and sustainability as key pillars of its tourism development strategy is yielding promising results in attracting investments and positioning the country as a premier destination for both business and leisure travellers.

By blending tradition with innovation and community engagement, Oman is setting new standards for sustainable tourism practices in the region and beyond.

Oman producer price index declines 7.9%

MUSCAT: The Producer Price Index (PPI) in the Sultanate of Oman recorded a drop by 7.9 per cent during the Q4 2023, compared to the same period in 2022 with 2018 being the base year. According to the data released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), a decline was registered in the groups of mining and utilising quarries (7.5 per cent) which is attributed to the drop in products of crude oil and natural gas by 7.7 per cent.

Meanwhile, a rise was recorded in products of metal ores (17.2 per cent) and rock and sand products



(0.5 per cent).

A decrease was recorded in the groups of converting industries (9.1 per cent) as prices in this groups went down such as other transportable products (5.9 per cent) and metal products, machinery and equipment (17.3 per cent). A rise was recorded in foodstuff, drinks and textiles (0.1 per cent). — ONA

Oman Future Fund takes centre stage at OCCI business forum

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, MARCH 26

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) hosted on Monday a forum to explore the potential of the Oman Future Fund — a landmark initiative of Oman Investment Authority (OIA) — as a driver of economic diversification and a reliable investment partner for businesses.

The forum delved into the Fund's objectives, operational mechanisms and public-private partnership opportunities it offers. Additionally, it discussed the Fund's role in stimulating investments through financing for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The forum emphasised the importance of integrating the Fund's resources with existing government financing initiatives to provide companies with a wider range of funding options.

Various presenters highlighted the need for a balanced approach to project evaluation, considering both profitability and potential developmental returns.

Representatives from the Oman Future Fund provided detailed presentations on the Fund's goals and strategies.

Rashid bin Sultan al Hashimi, First Investment Manager, explained how the Fund aims to strengthen the Omani economy by diversifying income streams.

Moreover, he elaborated on the Fund's structure, highlighting its RO 2 billion (\$5 billion) capital allocation over five years, with 90 per cent dedicated to large-scale projects and 10 per cent specifically targeted at SMEs and startups.

He mentioned partnerships with the Ministry of Finance and SME development agencies like Oman Talent and OOC Development and he emphasised the Fund's collaborative approach.

On the other hand, the Fund seeks commercially viable projects with significant growth potential and offers a range of financing options, including equity share purchases and loans.

Loan amounts vary from RO 5 million to RO 100 million for large projects, with a maximum of RO 5 million available for SMEs, he said.



The Ramadhan forum of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry attracted a sizable turnout on Monday night.

THE FORUM DELVED INTO THE FUND'S OBJECTIVES, OPERATIONAL MECHANISMS, AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES IT OFFERS. ADDITIONALLY, IT DISCUSSED THE FUND'S ROLE IN STIMULATING INVESTMENTS THROUGH FINANCING FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES (SMES).

Furthermore, the application process for accessing the Fund's resources is designed to be user-friendly, so applications can be submitted electronically through the Fund's website, and applicants can expect a response within 60 working days.

Al Hashimi concluded by inviting businesses from all sectors to participate in leveraging the Fund's resources to contribute to national economic diversification.

He reiterated the importance of public-private cooperation for achieving the Fund's objectives. Dr Yusuf bin Hamad al Balushi, another key figure associated with the Fund, offered a broader perspective.

He placed the Fund within the context of Oman's economic development journey, highlighting past phases focused on infrastructure building (1970-1995) and financial sector development (1995-2020).

He emphasised the current focus on diversification and job creation. Listing challenges hindering

economic diversification, such as dependence on oil revenue, limited non-oil investment, and a weak savings culture, Dr Al Balushi explained how the Oman Future Fund aims to address these issues by supporting a wider range of investment projects, attracting foreign capital and empowering SMEs.

He also stressed the need to transform Oman's economic model by prioritising production and exports while strengthening the private sector and ensuring adequate investment financing.

Dr Al Balushi emphasised the importance of collaboration among various entities for achieving economic transformation. He envisioned the government providing a conducive investment environment, the Fund financing projects, the private sector driving investment, commercial banks supporting SMEs, and the OCCI nurturing the private sector.

Qais bin Rashid al Tobi, General Supervisor of the Omani Promising Start-ups Programme, focused his presentation on SMEs and he acknowledged His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's support for these vital economic contributors and their crucial role in achieving Oman Vision 2040's goals. Al Tobi detailed the Authority for SMEs' initiatives to support entrepreneurs. These include providing financial and advisory services, offering training programmes, streamlining licensing procedures, and connecting entrepreneurs with

relevant authorities. SMEs registered by the Authority total over 135,000 entities as of November 2023, with around 29,000 business cards having been issued, and around RO 24 million provided in financing to SMEs in 2023.

The launch of the Omani Promising Start-ups Programme and the establishment of a dedicated investment path for SMEs in cooperation with the Oman Future Fund further demonstrate the government's commitment to fostering this sector.

A rise in demand for SME financing and development services is anticipated, he said, adding that their contribution to GDP is projected to increase from 24 per cent to 31 per cent by 2030.

He concluded by calling for continued collaboration among all stakeholders to empower SMEs and realise the aspirations of Oman Vision 2040.

The fourth Ramadhan Forum of the Chamber, set to take place on March 26, will focus on criminal responsibility in the Commercial Companies Law and litigation procedures in light of the progress of information technology.

Presenters included Judge Saif bin Abdullah al Hosani from the Supreme Judicial Council, and Khalfan bin Said al Maawali, Chief Prosecutor. The forum will be moderated by lawyer Maymouna al Sulaymani, member of the Omani Human Rights Committee.

SHORT TAKES

GENEVA

China opens WTO dispute against US subsidies

China has initiated dispute settlement proceedings against the United States at the World Trade Organisation to safeguard its interests in the electric vehicle industry, the Chinese mission said on Tuesday and the WTO confirmed.

China said it was contesting "discriminatory subsidies" under the US Inflation Reduction Act that it said resulted in the exclusion of goods from China and other WTO countries.

The wide-ranging law provides billions of dollars in tax credits to help consumers buy electric vehicles and companies produce renewable energy, as President Joe Biden aims to decarbonise the mighty US power sector.

"Under the guise of responding to climate change,



reducing carbon emission and protecting environment, (these subsidies) are in fact contingent upon the purchase and use of goods from the United States, or imported from certain particular regions," the Chinese mission said.

It said it was launching the proceedings "to safeguard the legitimate interests of Chinese electric vehicle industry and to maintain a fair level playing field of competition for the global market". — Reuters

LONDON

Oil little changed as markets weigh supply woes

Oil was little changed on Tuesday after rising in the previous session as investors took a more mixed view towards the loss of Russian refinery capacity after recent Ukrainian attacks while a slightly weaker US dollar offered some support.

Front-month Brent crude futures due to expire on Thursday were unchanged at \$86.17 a barrel at 1310 GMT, while US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures edged up 13 cents to \$82.12.

More actively traded Brent futures for June were up 4 cents to \$86.12. Brent rose 1.5 per cent in Monday's session while WTI gained 1.6 per cent higher after Russia's government ordered companies to cut output in the second quarter to meet a 9



million barrels per day (bpd) target to comply with pledges to the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries group.

Russia, a top three global oil producer and one of the largest exporters of oil products, is also contending with recent attacks on its oil refineries by Ukraine.

Goldman Sachs analysts estimate the attacks have knocked about 900,000 bpd of capacity offline, possibly for weeks and in some cases permanently.

— Reuters

ABUJA

Nigeria's central bank raises rate to 24.75 per cent

Nigeria's central bank raised its monetary policy rate by 200 basis points to 24.75 per cent from 22.75 per cent, its governor Olayemi Cardoso said on Tuesday.

The decision by the bank's Monetary Policy Committee was just the second since Cardoso took office last September, as it did not hold a meeting under him until February.

At that meeting, the Central Bank of Nigeria delivered its largest rate hike in around 17 years to try to get price pressures under control, raising it by 4 percentage points.

Inflation is above 30 per cent in annual terms, its highest in almost three decades. Cardoso told a press conference that the members of the Monetary Policy Committee were convinced they



needed to continue with the tightening cycle to tame inflation.

Price pressures have been spurred by reforms implemented by President Bola Tinubu in his first year in charge, chiefly ending a costly fuel subsidy and devaluing the country's naira currency twice.

Tinubu has defended those reforms as necessary to lift growth and attract investment, but they have prompted public anger and in some cases, desperation.

— Reuters

UK economy is showing positive signs of recovery

The UK economy is set to take its first steps out of a recession this month with GDP figures for January showing a return to growth. The economy grew 0.2 per cent in the first month of the year, driven by a strong performance from the all-important services sector.

This would put the UK on the road to recovery after it fell into a shallow recession in the second half of last year as the economy battled the impacts of stubborn inflation and high interest rates.

Chief UK economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, Rob Wood, said last year's minor recession was "already disappearing in the rear-view mirror."

An economist at Investec, Sandra Horsfield, said the key driver of growth would be a



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The author is our correspondent based in the UK

THE ECONOMY GREW 0.2 PER CENT IN THE FIRST MONTH OF THE YEAR, DRIVEN BY A STRONG PERFORMANCE FROM THE ALL-IMPORTANT SERVICES SECTOR.

"stronger performance" from the service sector, which has performed well since the start of the year.

S&P's services purchasing managers' index (PMI) for January showed business activity in the sector rising at its fastest pace in eight months. Retail sales figures for January also showed that sales volumes were up 3.4 per cent month-on-month, offsetting the steep fall seen in December.

Horsfield said: "Underlying all this, we think, is that inflation is falling more rapidly than wage growth, as a consequence, amid a resilient job market, households are seeing faster real income growth."

The Office for Budget Responsibility now predicts that household disposable income will return to its pre-pandemic peak by 2025-26, two years earlier than its November forecasts. This

largely reflects the unwinding of last year's energy price shock. Wood said that January's GDP figures, marked the start of an upturn for the UK economy. "This is not a flash in the pan," he said, pointing to high levels of corporate confidence.

According to S&P's PMI, business confidence hit its highest level since February 2022 last month thanks to the prospect of lower interest rates.

Meanwhile, a separate survey released from accountancy firm BDO showed a fourth consecutive month of improving UK economic activity, bringing its output index to its highest level since July 2022.

"It's heartening to see signs of recovery from our resilient services and manufacturing sectors after a tough period of high interest rates and lower demand," said Kaley

Crossthwaite, a partner at BDO.

New figures sw, wage growth came in slightly below expectations as evidence builds that the Bank of England's interest rate hikes are creeping into the wider economy. Annual pay growth including bonuses averaged 5.6 per cent between November and January, according to figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Economists had expected it to remain more or less stable at 5.8 per cent.

Excluding bonuses, the figure was 6.1 per cent compared to 6.2 per cent previously.

Although wages are now growing more slowly than before, lower inflation means households are actually still seeing a boost to their real pay, which rose 1.4 per cent between November and January.

ONS director of economic Liz

McKeown said: "Recent trends in the job market are continuing with earnings, in cash terms, growing more slowly than recently but, thanks to lower inflation, real terms pay continues to increase."

There were other signs that the labour market, which has so far been remarkably resilient to the Bank's rate hikes, might be easing. Unemployment crept up to 3.9 per cent from 3.8 per cent, above market expectations. The number of vacancies fell by 43,000. This means that vacancies have been falling for 20 consecutive quarters.

"The ONS figures paint a familiar picture of further gradual softening in the labour market and easing pay pressures, but it remains an incremental process," Jack Kennedy, senior economist at Indeed said in relation to the new data.

Oil market saw frenzy of hedge fund buying



JOHN KEMP

The is a senior market analyst specialising in oil and energy systems.

Investors have purchased oil at the fastest rate for more than four years, amid optimism that Saudi Arabia and its Opec+ allies will continue to restrict production while an improving economic outlook boosts consumption.

Ukraine's drone attacks on oil refineries and export terminals in Russia, which threaten to disrupt production and exports of both crude and fuels, have turbocharged the shift in sentiment to more bullishness.

Over the seven days ending on March 19, hedge funds and other money managers purchased the equivalent of 140 million barrels in the six most important futures and options contracts linked to petroleum prices.

The buying was the fastest since December 2019, and among the ten fastest weeks since records began in 2013, according to position reports filed with exchanges and regulators.

There were purchases almost across the board in NYMEX and ICE WTI, Brent, European gas oil and US gasoline but no change in US diesel.

In a sign of how bullish investors were becoming, most buying came from the creation of new long positions with only a moderate amount of short covering.

The combined position

across all six contracts had increased to 641 million barrels, the highest for six months, and up from just 207 million in the middle of December.

Fund managers had become moderately bullish or at least neutral towards the entire petroleum complex for the first time in months.

Inflation-adjusted crude oil prices were almost exactly in line with the long-term average since the start of the century.

But many fund managers now expect production restraint and strong consumption will lift them into the upper half of the historic range in the next few months.

In contrast to oil, portfolio investors remained bearish about US gas, even though gas prices are close to their lowest level in real terms for more 30 years.

Fund managers purchased the equivalent of 113 billion cubic feet (bcf) in the two major futures and options contracts linked to the price of gas at Henry Hub in Louisiana.

Even so, the fund community still had a net short position of 449 bcf on March 19. Managers were more bearish about the outlook than a year ago, when they held a net long position of 75 bcf. Several major producers have already announced cuts to drilling and production that should eventually eliminate the excess inventories.

El Nino conditions in the Pacific are also fading, which means winter 2024/25 is likely to be significantly colder than winter 2023/24. In the meantime, however, the run of mild weather has continued and the market is still struggling to bring inventories under control.

Inventories had ballooned to 662 bcf above the prior ten-year seasonal average on March 15, up from a surplus of just 64 bcf on October 1.

— Reuters

Savings may not be Europe's super weapon in economic battle



FRANCESCO CANEPA

The author is an ECB correspondent at Reuters

As Europe seeks to hold its ground against economic rivals, politicians think they have a secret weapon: the untapped savings of its citizens.

From Italy selling government bonds to households, to French talk of a pan-European savings product or Britain offering tax breaks for investment in UK shares, governments across Europe are seeking ways to mobilise household wealth.

All these plans share an underlying thinking: Europe is sitting on plenty of cash that could be channelled towards its goals, from the green transition to beefing up militaries.

Politicians hope private money, invested in local stocks or government debt, can help close a growth and productivity gap with the United States and China, which have been doling out massive subsidies to their industries.

But critics say such schemes risk disappointing savers while failing to address deep-rooted shortcomings in the European economic model that they see as dissuading investment.

"It's a way of inventing an easy solution to problems that are very complicated," said Daniela Gabor, a professor at the University of the West of England.

IDLE MONEY?

Europeans have long saved more than their US counterparts and the gap has widened recently, possibly due to uncertainties such as the war in Ukraine.

Politicians like French finance



A woman holds a 20 and 50 euro bank notes in front of an ATM in this illustration picture. – Reuters

minister Bruno Le Maire are now eyeing this nest egg, which includes 8.4 trillion euros of euro zone bank deposits.

Le Maire, who has spoken of money "sleeping" in accounts instead of contributing to prosperity, wants a pan-European savings product.

French lawmakers have meanwhile suggested savings could be channelled towards domestic defence companies via state-guaranteed deposits.

Outside the European Union, the UK government has proposed a new type of account that would allow Britons to invest up to 5,000 pounds (\$6,301.50) in domestic companies tax-free.

Such schemes have a chequered past.

Italians who bought into government-sponsored funds investing in local small-to-medium sized enterprises would have underperformed global stocks by around 35 percentage points in the past five years on average, according to data from consultancy firm Analysis.

Many economists dismiss the very idea of dormant money, noting that deposits are a vital source of funding for banks.

"The notion of money that is 'sleeping' because it is in

a bank account is honestly quite ludicrous, because there's nothing that prevents a bank from making a new loan when it has an opportunity," said Benjamin Braun, a political economist at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Society. Indeed, European companies have consistently put funding as the least of their problems for nearly a decade and generate enough revenues to finance all their investments, data from the European Commission and the ECB show.

Instead, Braun and others argue that low investment in Europe reflects meagre growth prospects compared to the United States. Multinational corporations investing abroad mean the euro zone is even exporting capital, they say.

"They have a solution looking for a problem," Dirk Schumacher, head of European macro research at Natixis, said.

"I don't think corporate investment spending is held back by tight funding conditions, but by a lack of demand and lots of structural changes." He mentioned competition from China, high energy prices and a lack of skilled labour among other factors. Former European Central Bank chief Mario Draghi

is due to report to EU leaders this summer on the issues that are holding Europe back.

PUBLIC DEBT

Some governments are themselves borrowing directly from citizens.

Italian households were the biggest buyers of the country's public debt last year, with a recent bond pitched as a shortcut to a cruise holiday. Britain has announced new savings bonds, joining Belgium and Greece.

The main advantage of tapping retail investors is that they are less fickle than professionals and more likely to hold the bonds until they mature because they don't have to worry about their quarterly performance.

"There is a great savings product that has worked pretty well throughout history that allows the state to direct public money into areas of priority, and that is the sovereign bond," Braun said.

He and other economists said more investment by the state, which doesn't need to make an immediate financial return, had to be part of the solution to long-term challenges for Europe such as building a greener economy.

— Reuters

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The Prophet said, "None of you will have faith till he wishes for his (Muslim) brother what he likes for himself."

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And what is the appropriate time to pay this kind of Zakat?

At the time of sunset on Eid al Fitr's night (the night preceding Eid day), whoever is adult, sane and is neither unconscious, poor nor the slave of another, he should give, on his own behalf as well as on behalf of all those who are his dependents.

QURAN

VERSE OF THE DAY

When My servants ask you 'O Prophet' about Me: I am truly near. I respond to one's prayer when they call upon Me. So let them respond 'with obedience' to Me and believe in Me, perhaps they will be guided to the Right Way.

Surah Al Baqarah



Ramadhan

WEDNESDAY | MARCH 27, 2024 | RAMADHAN 16, 1445 AH | OMAN OBSERVER | www.omanobserver.om | features@omanobserver.om



THE LEGACY OF AL SHARJAH MOSQUE IN NIZWA

ARWA AL HASHIMI
PHOTOS BY MAJD AL HASHIMI

The huge number of mosques in Oman differ in their designs, architecture and the number of people they host. However, they serve the same purpose, which is holding prayers and spreading and teaching Islam. Building mosques has always been a big priority in Oman.

Al Sharjah is one of the most ancient mosques in Oman built on a historical village dating back to prehistoric times. Many archaeological

monuments were found in the mosque dating back to the second and first millennia. It was built on a plain area surrounded by several Islamic tombs and ancient residential buildings.

This amazing mosque is located on the northern side of Nizwa in a village called Saal. The mosque was named after the area in which it is located, which is called Al Sharjah, and it is one of the most popular rural agricultural villages in Nizwa. Therefore, it was inhabited by dozens of tribes, so it was nec-

essary to build a religious, intellectual and social mosque for the five daily prayers to be performed and for them to gather in it like one family connected by the bond of faith and religion.

Al Sharjah Mosque is distinguished for its historical character in design and shape. It can host about 50 people and it has two cylindrical columns that form two obtuse arches, forming the prayer room and two prayer galleries. It also has four windows and three curved wooden doors preserving the heritage character common in the doors of ancient mosques in Oman.

Inside the mosque is a masterpiece that combines history and architecture.

The mihrab of Al Sharjah Mosque dates back to the year 924, and it maintained its durability even before the restoration process began. This mihrab is one of the most magnificent works of Abdullah Al Humaimi, an architect from the Wilayat of Manah.

Its size is proportional to several other Plaster mihrabs of ancient mosques in Nizwa. Above the mihrab are the letters of the Shahada written in



Kufic calligraphy. Most amazingly are the decorative shapes spread throughout the mihrab using plaster.

In the corners of the mihrab, there are four recesses decorated with Chinese porcelain, part of which fell, as did the ceramics that decorated the largest recess in its middle. The mihrab also contains

several interwoven letters in Naskh calligraphy, their words distributed on different parts of it.

In its first part, the names of those responsible for building the mihrab, and in its second part, the name of Al Humaimi, the architect of the mihrab, and the of its construction. In its third part, it is

mentioned that the mosque's nearby community had contributed to its construction.

The mosque had been renovated in 2017 giving it back the life it lost due to degradation and preserving it to remain as a cultural and religious centre along with many other historical mosques in Nizwa.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF MUSLIM FAITH

630 Attempted Siege of Ta'if

The 630 Attempted Siege of Ta'if was a pivotal event during Prophet Muhammad's time. Despite the victory at the Battle of Hunayn, the siege of Ta'if failed. Lasting about 20 days, Muhammad's forces couldn't conquer the city or convert its people to Islam. This event emphasises perseverance in spreading Islam, highlighting the importance of patience and diplomacy.

DOS & DONTs: ETIQUETTE GUIDE DURING THE HOLY MONTH

BE CONSIDERATE IN PUBLIC SPACES

Be considerate of those who are fasting by avoiding engaging in behaviours that may be considered disrespectful, such as public displays of affection. Public displays of affection (PDA) are discouraged during Ramadhan to respect the solemnity of the month. To be sensitive to Islamic needs, refrain from PDA, maintain modesty in dress and behaviour.

RAMADHAN AROUND THE WORLD

WESTERN SAHARA



Islam in Western Sahara has historical roots dating back to the spread of Islam across North Africa. The region saw gradual Islamisation through trade routes and interactions with neighbouring Muslim societies. However, due to Western Sahara's complex political status, the history of Islam in the area is intertwined with colonialism and subsequent conflicts.

One unique Ramadhan tradition in Western Sahara is the communal breaking of the fast, known as "Iftar," where families and communities come together to share meals and prayers. This fosters a strong sense of solidarity and kinship during the holy month.

As for cuisine, a standout dish in Western Sahara is "couscous," often prepared with lamb or chicken and an array of vegetables. It reflects the region's cultural heritage and culinary traditions, showcasing a blend of flavors and spices distinctive to the area.

RAMADHAN TRIVIA HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW THE HOLY MONTH

WHICH DIRECTION DO MUSLIMS FACE WHEN PERFORMING THEIR DAILY PRAYERS, INCLUDING DURING RAMADHAN?



Radio shows help listeners to spend time in Ramadhan positively



**KHALID AL BALUSHI
@KHALID_ALBALUSHI94**

People who spend a lot of time driving their cars find time for radio. Some eagerly await their favourite programme, while others tune in to programmes while driving to work or home or running errands.

Radio serves as a source of entertainment and knowledge and plays a vital role in the lives of youth during Ramadhan. It offers a variety of programmes tailored to them, addressing contemporary issues directly and engagingly. These programmes cater to diverse interests and needs of young people.

Oman's English-language radio provides a range of diverse programs targeting all listeners, Muslims, and non-Muslims alike. Many of these diverse programmes have a special Ramadhan spirit, aiming to touch the hearts of listeners during this holy month.

Among these programmes is "We Fast Together, We Pray Together," which discusses various aspects of

social and religious life during Ramadhan. Presented by Shaikh Hatim al Abdulsalam and Ahmed al Busaidy, this programme stands out for providing a unique atmosphere by the dialogue and interaction among listeners.

Her Highness Sayyidah Mayya al Said's inspiring and motivational show "Love Your Life," aims to inspire listeners to live a life closely connected to Allah. It is one of the essential shows that young people listen to during Ramadhan.

Another notable show is "Muscat Candid," known for its diversity, allowing listeners to ask questions and participate in the programme via WhatsApp. It also covers various entertainment news and interviews with different authors.

Competitions and games are an integral part of Ramadhan radio programmes. "Night Time Drive" hosted by Yousef al Tae'e combines artistic and entertainment elements, featuring interviews with individuals with various skills, entertaining competitions, and purposeful discussions

that captivate listeners.

The radio also offers pre-recorded shows like "Knowing Your Religion," presented by Shaikh Dr Kahlan bin Nabhan al Kharousi, the Assistant Grand Mufti of Oman. It discusses Islamic values and principles for a full hour every Friday at 2:10 pm. Another programme by Dr Kahlan titled "Seeking Guidance" airs every Monday and on Wednesday at 5:00 pm, focusing on finding inner stability through the teachings of Islam.

Shaikh Dr Hatim al Abdulsalam's show "Road Map," is a heartfelt dialogue with the audience, airing every Friday and on Saturday at 1:14 pm. It looks at some concepts and ideas from the Quran. "Insights on Being" by Mutasim al Sharji discusses the relationship between philosophy and religion. It is aired every Sunday and on Tuesday at 7:00 PM.

"Future Fantasy," hosted by Ali al Shihí, blends musical pieces from various countries with English-language poetry composed by the host, and is broadcast every day at 11:00 am for an hour.

Amar al Naimi presents various vignettes reflecting Omani traditions and heritage, in a show called "Majan Chronicles." It is aired every Monday and on Thursday at 11:00 am for 20 minutes.

Talal al Shuhry, Director of Foreign Channels in Ministry of Information, said what distinguishes this programming season, "This programming season shows again the strength and presence of Omani youth, with almost all shows being hosted by young talented Omanis representing all facets of the Omani community."

Al Shuhry said, "You can catch all our programmes on our live shows throughout the holy month. Shows are also available on our Soundcloud and podcast platforms @omanfm.om"

These radio shows reflect the cultural diversity of Oman. They witness significant interaction from the audience, contributing greatly to building the Islamic identity of young people through diverse, enjoyable, and informative programmes, enabling them to positively invest their time during Ramadhan.



LIFESTYLE

Walking in Ramadhan: A Unique Experience for Body and Soul

AHMED AL KAABI
PHOTO BY ABDUL WAHID AL HAMADANI

During the last hours of the day, before the maghrib call to prayer and the breaking of the fast, many citizens and residents flock to walk in designated areas on streets and tourist walkways. At the same time, others prefer to walk after eating their iftar meal, especially in places that provide a safe and comfortable environment for pedestrians.

In Ramadhan, walking after sunset takes on an added dimension, as fasting and physical activity meet to create a unique and stimulating experience for the body and mind. Walking at this time promotes physical health, helps to renew activity and increase the basal metabolic rate. It also works to clear and calm the mind, making it effective in achieving balance between the soul and body, and enhancing willpower and concentration.

This month, the capital Muscat and other areas in the Sultanate of Oman are witnessing a noticeable increase in the number of walkers who practice walking. This increased turnout for physical activity reflects a positive interaction with the many health benefits that walking offers.

The increase in the number of people who practice walking in Ramadhan is also a clear indicator of the growing awareness of the importance of physical activity and its positive impact on public health. Through this simple sporting activity, individuals express their desire to take care of their physical and psychological health during the holy month of Ramadhan.

The Government of the Sultanate of Oman has also played a vital role in promoting health aspects by establishing networks of sidewalks and walkways



with longitudinal dimensions, and finding vents and parks that serve the public benefiting from the city. The government is keen on creating green spaces on beaches, within residential neighbourhoods, on open squares, public and secondary roads, and various locations suitable for agriculture and afforestation.

As a result of these efforts, it is noticeable that many citizens have begun to accept the practice of walking. They benefit from the infrastructure available for walking in different places, which enhances awareness of the importance of physical activity and contributes to improving the health and fitness of the community in general.

Omar al Balushi, one of the practitioners of walking in the month of Ramadhan, said that we find in this sport an opportunity to renew physical activity and achieve integration with nature at times that reveal its beauty



before sunset.

Al Balushi added that the existence of an appropriate infrastructure makes it easier for people to practice sports and physical activities with their friends and relatives. It encourages us to go out and enjoy nature and the fresh air, which enhances the health and fitness of the community in general.

There are also many charitable initiatives during the month of Ramadhan to encourage people to practice walking, the most prominent of which is the "Benevolent Step" initiative through the Vodafone mobile phone application, which enables its subscribers to double the good and leave a positive impact on society with every step they take.

The initiative aims to harness modern technology to encourage healthy habits and sound practices, and to transform daily steps into charity in partnership with the Al Rahma Charity Organization.