

OMAN
DAILY

Observer

SUNRISE - 05:30 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR - 04:09 AM

DHUHR - 12:09 PM

ASR - 03:33 PM

MAGHRIB - 06:42 PM

ISHA - 07:59 PM

Established 1981. Editor-in-chief: Abdullah bin Salim al Shueili

AN OBSE

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■ BUDAPEST

OMAN, HUNGARY TO BOOST RELATIONS

During his visit to Hungary, Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ash'shura, discussed ways of fostering cooperation between the two countries in legislative aspects as well as unifying visions in international parliamentary forums and enhancing cooperation in the areas of investment and other economic aspects based on the effective roles of parliamentary diplomacy in strengthening bilateral cooperation. The chairman of Majlis Ash'shura and his accompanying delegation met with parliamentarians and officials in the economic and investment fields.

DETAILS ON P2

■ MUSCAT

NEW PREMISES FOR DISABLED CHILDREN

Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, will officially inaugurate the new building of the Association of Early Intervention of Children with Disability, in the presence of the Board of Directors of the Association and other dignitaries, on Monday. This event marks a significant milestone for the association as it acts as an integrated system of programmes, procedures and policies for children with disabilities and their families in the country. From Monday, all the services provided to the children with disabilities would be centralised from the new headquarter.

DETAILS ON P2

■ LONDON

SADIQ KHAN WINS 3RD TERM AS MAYOR



The Labour Party's Sadiq Khan has swept to victory in the London mayoral election, winning a historic third term in power, as Labour continues to count gains in the local elections. Incumbent mayor Khan beat his nearest rival, Conservative candidate Susan Hall, in a contest dominated by criticisms of his decision to expand London's ultra low emission zone. Labour leader Keir Starmer had signalled he was confident of Khan's victory before declarations commenced, as he counted mayoral victories for his party in Liverpool.

Preparations underway to start Hafeet Rail construction

MUSCAT: Eng Abdul Rahman bin Salem al Hatmi, CEO of Asyad Group, confirmed the start of preparations for the launch of construction work for the railway project linking the Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates (Hafeet Rail).

He said in a statement that the network was designed using innovative engineering solutions to deal with the terrain and

climate conditions, as it will include two tunnels with a length of 2.5 km and 36 bridges, some of which reach a height of 34 metres.

He said that the project includes passenger stations in Suhar and Al Ain, while freight stations will be in Suhar, Al Buraimi and Al Ain, noting that the train will cover the distance between Suhar and Abu Dhabi in 100 minutes, while it will cover

the distance between Suhar and Al Ain in 47 minutes, with a length of 238 km.

Eng Al Hatmi said that the project will help in boosting economic returns. One trip of the freight train can transport more than 25,000 tonnes of general cargo, or ship more than 270 standard containers, and reduce carbon emissions by 10 times compared to other means of transport. **SEE ALSO P13**



■ RAIN REVS UP WATERFALLS IN DHOFAR



The Darbat waterfalls are in full glory after heavy rains that battered the Governorate of Dhofar. Nature lovers flocked to Wadi Darbat to enjoy spectacular scenes and nice weather. It was also an opportune chance for photographers to freeze natural beauty. Darbat waterfalls are usually active during the June-September period better known as the Khareef season with water pouring down from a height to 1,000 feet. **DETAILS ON P3**

Oman advances 18 places in world press freedom index

PARIS: The Sultanate of Oman advanced 18 places to rank 137th in the annual World Press Freedom Index 2024 report published by Reporters Without Borders.

The Sultanate of Oman secured 42.52 points compared to 37.87 points last year when it ranked 155th globally.

The index measures the state of press freedom in 180 countries and regions annually using five metrics to assess press freedom including the political context, legal framework, economic context, social and cultural context and safety.

This year's report is characterised by a clear lack of political will on the part of the international community to impose the principles of protecting journalists and implementing the United Nations Security Council Resolution No 2222.

The war in Gaza is marked by a record number of violations against journalists and press since October 2023 with more than 100 Palestinian journalists killed by the Israeli army, 22 of whom were killed while carrying out their work.

The World Press Freedom Index 2024 showed a decline in the ranking of the United States, one of the largest economic powers in the world, by ten places.

Sub-Saharan Africa was very affected by political violence during major elections in 2023. More than 8 per cent of African countries are now coloured red on the chart, twice as many as in 2023.

The index described the situation in the Middle East and

The war in Gaza is marked by a record number of violations against journalists and press since October 2023 with more than 100 Palestinian journalists killed by the Israeli army

REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS

North Africa region as 'extremely dangerous', especially in occupied Palestine which is being bombed by the Israeli occupation army. The index showed that Israel dropped four places.

The conditions for practicing journalism in Eastern Europe are deteriorating due to the extent of misinformation and censorship of media outlets accused of undermining national security or terrorism. The Kingdom of Norway topped the index, while the State of Eritrea came at the bottom of the ranking.

Reporters Without Borders was founded in 1985. It is a non-governmental organisation headquartered in the French capital, Paris. It has the status of a consultant to the United Nations. The World Press Freedom Day is celebrated on May 3 of each year. — ONA

Gaza ceasefire talks resume in Egypt

GAZA STRIP: Talks resumed in Egypt on Saturday aimed at halting months of war in Gaza between Hamas and Israel that have triggered protests around the world.

Mediators from Qatar, Egypt and the United States sat down with a delegation from Hamas to hear the group's response to a proposal that would halt fighting for 40 days and exchange captives for Palestinian prisoners, according to details released by Britain.

Israel has yet to send a delegation to Cairo, with a top official telling that it would do so only if there was "positive movement" on



A protester gestures during a pro-Palestinian demonstration in Berlin, Germany. — Reuters

the proposed framework. "Tough and long negotiations are expected for an actual deal," the Israeli official cautioned.

Previous negotiations stalled in part on Hamas's demand for a lasting ceasefire and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's repeated vows to crush the group in the southern city of Rafah, which is flooded with displaced civilians. The prospect of an assault on Rafah has sparked deepening international concern.

The war broke out after the unprecedented October 7 attack on Israel resulted in the deaths of more than 1,170 people. **SEE ALSO P6**

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Oman, Hungary to boost parliamentary relations

BUDAPEST: During his visit to Hungary, Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ash'shura, discussed ways of fostering cooperation between the two countries in legislative aspects as well as unifying visions in international parliamentary forums and enhancing cooperation in the areas of investment and other economic aspects based on the effective roles of parliamentary diplomacy in strengthening bilateral cooperation.

The chairman of Majlis Ash'shura and his accompanying delegation met with parliamentarians and officials in the economic and investment fields including Dr László Kövér, Speaker of the Hungarian National Assembly. During the meeting, they discussed ways of enhancing bilateral cooperation between the two friendly countries especially in the legislative fields and ways



Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ash'shura, with Dr László Kövér, Speaker of the Hungarian National Assembly, in Budapest

to develop them by raising coordination between Majlis Ash'shura and the Hungarian National Assembly in various aspects.

Al Maawali also met with Márton Nagy, Minister of Economic Development. They discussed ways of strengthening relations between the two countries in the economic and

investment fields. The Omani side explained the promising economic sectors in the Sultanate of Oman.

During the visit, the chairman of Majlis Ash'shura received the Honorary Citizenship award from the prestigious Ludovica University of Public Service in recognition of his parliamentary achievements and his outstanding



Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ash'shura, with Márton Nagy, Minister of Economic Development, in Budapest

contributions to strengthening bilateral relations between the Sultanate of Oman and Hungary. The honouring ceremony was attended by Dr László Kövér, Speaker of the Hungarian National Assembly, Malallah al Balushi, Ambassador of Sultanate of Oman to Hungary, Dr Barnabás Fodor, Ambassador of Hungary to the Sultanate of Oman, and a number

of ambassadors of the GCC and Arab countries to Hungary.

In a speech he delivered at the university headquarters, Al Maawali stressed the important roles played by the embassies of both countries in strengthening diplomatic relations and bolstering bilateral cooperation in all fields, expressing his happiness over the development of bilateral

relations between the two friendly countries through reciprocal visits by high-level delegations, adding that the two countries seek to enhance cooperation in various fields.

Al Maawali spoke about the level of development the consultative council process in the Sultanate of Oman has achieved. He stressed the Sultanate of Oman's interest in the field of the environment to achieve environmental balance, reduce harmful emissions and mitigate the risks of climate changes. He valued the cooperation efforts between the two friendly countries in exchanging educational opportunities, strengthening cultural and scientific ties and cooperation in the fields of renewable energy and green hydrogen, as well as the agricultural sector, water management, and the transfer of science and technology.



Khazaen Fruits and Vegetables Central Market opens on June 29

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

Wholesale trade of fruits and vegetables will commence on June 29 at Khazaen Fruits and Vegetables Central Market 'Silal', and the shops at Al Mawaleh Central Market will be permanently closed, Muscat Municipality said.



Al Mawaleh Central Market will be permanently closed, Muscat Municipality said.

the lessees of the cold stores (wholesale market building/ central cold storage) will receive an additional reduction in rental value for the first contract year, along with an extended exemption period from rent, provided the contract is signed before May 20. All companies leasing various commercial units at Silal are requested to provide a copy of the labour cards of its employees and workers for issuing identification cards to them. They should also provide copy of the ownership documents of the trucks belonging to the category of three tonnes and above.

New premises for children with disability

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, will inaugurate the new premises of the Association of Early Intervention of Children with Disability (AEICD) in Airport Heights on Monday.

Speaking to the *Observer*, Sabah al Bahlani, CEO of AEICD, said that the prime object of the association is to detect disabilities early, provide rehabilitation, and improve the quality of life of children and their families through support and education.

According to Oman's E-Census 2020, there are 10,880 children with disabilities, and the number is on the rise. In this scenario, the association aims to reduce the burden on families by supporting them continuously.



The new premises of the Association of Early Intervention of Children with Disability (AEICD) will be inaugurated on Monday.

The team of people working for the Association are committed to inclusion and empowerment of children with disabilities and their families.

The association has been providing services since 2000 at the building provided by the

Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs where it serves 3,000 children.

Due to the increased demand for its services, it was imperative to decide on a building that will encompass a state-of-the-art rehabilitation centre with

improved facilities and high standard and strive for best practices, according to Al Bahlani.

"We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Al Jisr foundation for supporting the construction of the association building along with several foundations, Oman LNG Development Foundation, Eshraqa Foundation, Saud Bahwan Charitable Foundation, MB Foundation, Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) and Sohar Aluminium. Thanks to Alizz Bank for supporting fundraising and to the Ministry of Energy and Minerals and petroleum companies for purchasing the furniture and equipment. Their tremendous support allowed the association to expand and provide services to more children."

'Mandvi to Muscat' lecture series concludes

MUSCAT: The 8-month long landmark lecture series 'Mandvi to Muscat: Indian Community and the Shared History of India and Oman', organised by the Embassy of India, Muscat, drew to a close last week with a final lecture by Prof Dr Calvin Allen from US.

More than 300 people attended the event held at the Mahajan Recreation Centre in Al Wadi Al Kabir including dignitaries, scholars and prominent members from Omani, Indian and Indian-Omani communities.

Dr BR Mani, Director-General



Kanak Khimki felicitating Dr BR Mani, Director-General of India's National Museum.

of the National Museum, New Delhi; Jamal bin Hassan al Moosawi, Secretary-General of the National Museum of Oman;

Sayyid Nooh bin Mohammed al Busaidy, Chairman of Oman Historical Association; and Pankaj Khimji, Adviser for Foreign Trade

and International Cooperation at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, graced the occasion with their presence.

In his address, Amit Narang, Ambassador of India to the Sultanate of Oman, underscored the significance of the 'Mandvi to Muscat' series in revitalising awareness about the contributions of the Indian community in strengthening India-Oman ties. He noted that all the papers presented during the lecture series will be compiled and published into a book.



SAS 48 Hackathon strives to reduce emissions

MOHAMMED AL DIGHAISHI
MUSCAT, MAY 4

The 6th edition of SAS 48 Hackathon kicked off in Muscat last week under the slogan “Green Tech”. The event was organised by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Ali bin Amer al Shaithani, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Communications and Information Technology.

Dr Al Shaithani speaking to the *Observer* that the hackathon is organised every six months, and so far the topic of the next hackathon has not been announced.

He pointed out that there are



Some of the teams taking part in the 6th edition of SAS 48 Hackathon

three winners, who are being entered into a qualification programme to turn their ideas into reality.

He pointed out that there are many participants in previous

hackathons who have now become successful entrepreneurs like Otaxi.

He explained that not all ideas turn into reality, but they are the initial spark for the idea to



Some of the teams taking part in the 6th edition of SAS 48 Hackathon

complete its path to become a well known company.

Al Shaithani added that zero carbon neutrality is the primary concern in the current period and to achieve success in the year 2050,

we motivate youths to think in this direction. He stressed that the hackathon inspires young people to come up with ideas to achieve zero carbon neutrality.

Amira al Harrasi, Director of

the SAS 48 Hackathon Project, indicated that the idea of the hackathon is to use technology to solve various environmental problems.

Abdullah bin Ali al Busaidy, expert of the Zero Carbon Neutrality Team at the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology ..pointed out green technology topics contribute to reducing carbon emissions.

The SAS 48 Hackathon provides ideal opportunities for the participants to develop realistic solutions to overcome the challenges posed to their projects. The jury will select the top three winners who come up with the most innovative ideas from among 1,163 participants who contested the 6th edition of SAS 48 Hackathon.



Rain revs up waterfalls

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY
AHMED AL MAASHANI

The Darbat waterfalls are in full glory after heavy rains that battered the Governorate of Dhofar.

Nature lovers flocked to Wadi Darbat to enjoy spectacular

scenes and nice weather. It was also an opportune chance for photographers to freeze natural beauty.

Darbat waterfalls are usually active during the khareef season with water pouring down from a height of 1,000 feet.

DHOFAR WEARS BLANKET OF MIST

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

With temperatures falling as low as 20 degree celsius amid rains, Dhofar has been under a khareef like cover of mist since Friday.

Tourists and locals are flocking to Jabal Ayoob, Ittin, Shaat and Raysut to enjoy the pleasant weather on the weekend.

Salalah becomes the top tourist destination in Khareef season. Preparations are currently under way for the Khareef Dhofar, which happens from July 15 to August 30 Khareef celebrations, named Khareef Carnival, is an occasion that attracts both domestic and international tourists to the various spots in Dhofar, and the recent opening of Oman-Saudi Arabia road will accentuate the flow of tourists from across the region.

“We are expecting a large number of tourists from both local and international destinations as the Oman-Saudi dual carriageway is instrumental in easing transport

needs,” said Abdul Nasser, social activist and a businessman in Salalah.

The mountain area in Aiteen will no longer be the main attraction. Instead, Awkat Salalah, Tareef Beach and other important places will host a carnival in connection with the Khareef.

Monsoon season in the region is the most awaited time of the year and in Dhofar, the mountain ranges witness sprouting greenery accompanied by the drizzles that give birth to a dreamy place far from the rest of the world.

According to the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, the popularity of Salalah has been on a rise attracting tourists thanks to its chilled, foggy and drizzling weather which turns the whole region of Dhofar from sandy to lush green during Khareef.

According to the National Center for Statistics and Information (NCSI), Khareef Dhofar recorded an increase of 18.4 per cent in visitors at about 962,000 in 2023



compared to 813,000 visitors in 2022.

There is also an increase in spending by visitors to the Dhofar Governorate during the same

period to RO103 million, compared to RO86 million. The number of nights of stay by visitors increased to 7 million nights, compared to 6 million nights in the 2022 season.

Tender

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) announces the following Tender:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last date of Buying	Date of Submission	Type of Work	Register Degree	Fee (R.O)
10/2024/ PEIE/ HQ-10	Maintenance of Roads Improving and Repairing Damaged Roads at Al Wadi Al Kabir Industrial City	19-05-2024	13-06-2024	Construction of Roads	Third and Above	70

Interested Companies registered with Tender Board may obtain the Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document. Tenders should be submitted on line on given website.

1. Tender Inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the TENDER Inquiry must be online at eTendering System.

2. eTendering System Inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the eTendering System technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om and **+968 24402200**.

Note: Bid Submission will be online only.

Madayn is not bound to accept the lowest or any other Offer and has the right to cancel these tenders and the tenderers have no right to claim for any compensations.

مدائن
madayn

@madaynoman

madayn.om

UTAS debate tournament begins today

MUSCAT: The first debate championship competitions of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences begins at its Ibri branch on Sunday. Students from Ibri, Nizwa, Muscat, Al Musannah, Al Rustaq, Suhar, Shinas, Ibra, Sur, and Salalah are taking part in the event. This tournament aims to strengthen The culture of dialogue and debate among university students. It aims to develop students' critical thinking skills, research, analysis, public speaking, gaining and exchanging experiences among themselves, and enhancing the spirit of fair competition. It also aims to improve the ethics of dialogue, and contribute to creating various activities for university students to refining and shaping their personalities for the labour market.

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Expression of Interest NOTICE

Salalah Free Zone announces the following Expression of Interest for shortlisting of Companies specialized in the related services.

EOI No.	Description	Last Date for Document Collection	Site Visit Date	Clarification Request Closing Date	Expression of Interest Submission Date
1	Business Opportunity in SFZ Green Field Land Development	19/05/2024	21/05/2024 09:00 am HQ Building	19/06/2024	26/06/2024

- Interested companies may obtain the Request for Expression of Interest Document from SFZ email ID SFZ-SupplyChain@asyad.om.
- The Expression of Interest, shall be submitted in a sealed envelope marked "Business Opportunity in SFZ Green Field Land Development".
- The sealed envelope shall be delivered by hand to Supply Chain Department in Salalah Free Zone Company, HQ Building on the date and time specified above.
- All correspondences pertaining to the Expression of Interest enquiry must be directed to email ID SFZ-SupplyChain@asyad.om.



HEAVY RAINS

MAY REDUCE DATES OUTPUT

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MAY 4

HEAVY RAINS have cast doubts on the volume of date output in Oman. Dates are one of the most important agricultural products in Oman, contributing significantly to the national economy. Oman produces approximately 350,000 tonnes of dates annually, some of which are exported to Arab and other countries, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources.

In an interview with Mohammed al Yaarubi, a dates producer, he said that the period from May to September is the time for the growth, development and ripening of dates in Oman. August is the start of the dates harvest season when the temperature rises and air humidity usually decreases.

However, this year is seeing an unusually high amount of summer rainfall, accompanied by increased air humidity and lower sunshine. This unusual weather may reduce yield and reduces quality of the fruit.

OMAN PRODUCES APPROXIMATELY
350,000
TONNES OF DATES ANNUALLY

Al Yaarubi said that during the pollination stage, rains are necessary for fruit growth, but very heavy rains can hinder pollination and lead to lower production. Dates also need small amounts of water during the second stage, which is the growth stage, as heavy rains can cause the fruits to crack and spoil. However, dry conditions are ideal during the ripening stage, as high humidity can lead to the growth of fungi and bacteria on the fruits, in addition to exposure to other secondary damage such as mold, fermentation and acidification, which results in crop damage or reduced market value.

Regarding the methods that farmers should follow to mitigate the damage caused by rain, Al Yaarubi said pruning, where farmers prune some of the clusters from the date palm trees to reduce the amount of fruit on the tree to ensure ventilation between the fruits, which helps to reduce the impact of rain. And covering some of the date palm clusters with nets or plastic bags also protect them from rain. They should also improve drainage systems in date palm farms to prevent water from accumulating around the trees.

Al Yaarubi added that the impact of climate change is leaving its mark on many aspects of our lives, and one of the most prominent aspects of this is on crops. The success of farmers and the quality of crops depend largely on weather conditions, especially in the summer. If heavy rains fall, the fruits may be quickly damaged due to exposure to water, which threatens to spoil the crop.

Therefore, scientific bodies, universities and research centres must pay attention to studying this phenomenon and work to develop effective solutions for drying fruits using modern methods, in order to prevent spoilage caused by heavy rains and to improve crop quality. This will contribute to improving the performance of the agricultural sector and ensuring its sustainability in the face of increasing climate challenges.





Japan's Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa (L) speaks next to Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Ali Sabry during a joint press conference in Colombo. — AFP

Japan seeks Sri Lanka essential recovery for regional stability

COLOMBO: Strategically placed Sri Lanka's economic recovery was essential for stability in the Indo-Pacific region, Japan's foreign minister said on Saturday, urging Colombo to swiftly restructure its foreign debt. Yoko Kamikawa said after talks with her Sri Lankan counterpart that Colombo should secure agreements with bilateral lenders and international sovereign bondholders to unlock suspended foreign funding.

The Sri Lankan government which defaulted on its \$46 billion external debt in April 2022 had hoped to finalise deals with foreign creditors by April but there have been no final agreements yet.

Kamikawa said she "stressed the importance of reaching a debt restructuring agreement with all the creditors", including China -- the largest bilateral lender to the island.

"I also conveyed Japan's intention to further support Sri Lanka's development by swiftly resuming existing yen loan projects (after a debt restructuring deal)," she said.

She said Tokyo considered Colombo's economic recovery as

Yoko Kamikawa said after talks with her Sri Lankan counterpart that Colombo should secure agreements with bilateral lenders and international sovereign bondholders

crucial for the entire region. The island is located halfway along the main east-west international shipping route.

"The restoration of stability and economic development of Sri Lanka, which is at a strategic location in the India Ocean, is essential for the stability and prosperity of the entire Indo-Pacific region," she added.

Sri Lanka must secure agreement from all official creditors and a majority of private bondholders to continue with a four-year \$2.9 billion bailout loan begun since March last year.

Japan, the second largest bilateral lender to the island has expressed concern about big infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in the region.

Unable to repay a huge loan

taken from China in 2017 to build a deep sea port in southern Hambantota, Sri Lanka handed it over to a Chinese firm for \$1.12 billion on a 99-year lease.

Then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who faced allegations of mismanagement and corruption, was forced to flee the country and resign in July 2022 after months of protests.

His successor, Ranil Wickremesinghe has raised taxes, cut subsidies and is enforcing painful economic reforms in line with the IMF bailout.

Meanwhile, Japan hit back on Saturday at US President Joe Biden's comments about the Asian ally being "xenophobic" like China and Russia, calling the characterisation "unfortunate" and misguided. Biden lumped together allies Japan and India with China and Russia at a recent campaign event, arguing the four economic powers were struggling because of their unwillingness to accept immigrants. In response, Tokyo on Saturday said it was "unfortunate that comments not based on an accurate understanding of Japan's policy were made", according to a government statement. — AFP

Rwanda denies its troops attacked displaced camp in DR Congo

KIGALI: Rwanda on Saturday denied US accusations that its forces attacked a displaced persons' camp in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and instead blamed groups it said were supported by the Congolese military for the assault.

The US strongly condemned Friday's attack which killed at least nine people, the US State Department said in a statement.

The attack was mounted from positions held by the Rwandan Defense Forces (RDF) and the Rwanda-backed M23 rebel group, the US statement said. The US is "gravely concerned about the recent RDF and M23 expansion" in eastern Congo, it said. Rwandan government spokesperson Yolande Makolo denied the RDF was behind the attack and instead blamed it on militias supported by the Congolese military.

"The RDF, a professional army, would never attack an IDP (displaced persons). Look to the lawless FDLR and Wazalendo supported by the FARDC (Congolese military) for this kind of atrocity," she said in a post on X.

The Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) is a Hutu group founded by Hutu officials who fled Rwanda after



Members of the Congolese Army, sentenced to death for desertion and cowardice when fighting M23 rebels, walk in a formation as they arrive at the military courtroom for their trial in Goma. — Reuters

orchestrating the 1994 genocide while Wazalendo is a Christian sect.

A two-year offensive by M23 rebels has moved closer to the eastern Congolese city of Goma in recent months, prompting thousands to seek refuge in the city from surrounding areas.

Opposition leaders condemned the attack on X, calling on the international community to back Congo and act against Rwanda's military involvement in the country.

An M23 leader, Bertrand Bisimwa, accused the Congolese authorities of deliberately attacking the camp in an attempt to "manipulate" the international

community.

The Congo branch of medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF) said it had to stop a distribution round and halt medical consultations on Friday morning because of rising insecurity.

MSF Congo "condemns the increasingly regular use of heavy artillery in the immediate proximity of displacement camps around Goma," it posted on X.

The United Nations' peacekeeping mission in Congo, MONUSCO, also condemned the bombing in a statement and called on Congolese authorities to prosecute perpetrators.

— Reuters

■ MIGRANTS CROSS WAVES



In this drone view an inflatable dinghy carrying migrants makes its way towards England in the English Channel, Britain, May 4. Dozens of people in two rubber dinghies reached the southern coast of England on Saturday, the latest among thousands of asylum-seeking migrants to make the risky sea crossing from France this year. — Reuters

Flood-hit Kenya and Tanzania buffeted by tropical cyclone

NAIROBI: Coastal regions of Kenya and Tanzania were buffeted by heavy rains and high winds from a tropical cyclone on Saturday, adding to the chaos caused by deadly floods that have ravaged the region. More than 400 people have lost their lives across East Africa and tens of thousands have been uprooted from their homes in recent weeks as torrential rains triggered flooding and landslides that engulfed houses, roads and bridges. The Kenya Met Department said in a bulletin on Saturday that the effects of Tropical Cyclone Hidaya were already being felt offshore, with strong winds exceeding 40 knots and waves over two metres.

It said heavy rainfall along

More than 400 people have lost their lives across East Africa and tens of thousands have been uprooted from their homes in recent weeks

the Indian Ocean coastal strip was expected from Sunday, intensifying over the following two days. "Current observations indicate that Tropical Cyclone Hidaya has made landfall on the coast of Tanzania. However, there is another depression developing behind it," it said.

There was no immediate confirmation from the Tanzanian



A woman and a man take mud and water out of their house in an area heavily affected by torrential rains and flash floods in Mai Mahiu. — AFP file photo

authorities. In its latest update earlier on Saturday, the Tanzanian Meteorological Authority said

there had been strong winds and heavy rain along the coast overnight. In the Mtwara area,

it said 75.5 millimetres of rain had been reported in 12 hours, compared to the average May rainfall of 54 millimetres.

The Tanzanian agency has advised people living in risk-prone areas and those involved in marine activities to take "maximum precautions". The Climate Prediction and Applications Centre for East African trade bloc IGAD had said on Friday that Cyclone Hidaya will peak at gusts of 165 kilometres per hour when it makes landfall.

Kenyan President William Ruto on Friday described the weather picture as "dire" and postponed the reopening of schools indefinitely with the approach of the nation's first-ever

cyclone.

Around 210 people have died in Kenya from flood-related incidents and nearly 100 are missing while 165,000 have been forced to flee their homes, according to government data.

At least 155 people have also been killed in Tanzania by floods and landslides that have swallowed homes and destroyed crops.

East Africa is highly vulnerable to climate change and this year's rains have been amplified by the El Nino weather pattern — a naturally occurring climate phenomenon typically associated with increased heat globally that leads to drought in some parts of the world and heavy downpours elsewhere. — AFP



Gaza truce talks expected to resume in Egypt

GAZA: Talks were expected to resume on Saturday in Egypt aimed at halting months of war in Gaza between Palestinian groups and Israel that have triggered widening protests around the world.

Mediators from Qatar, Egypt and the United States have been waiting for the Palestinians to respond to a proposal that, according to details released by Britain, would halt fighting for 40 days and exchange captives for Palestinian prisoners.

“All delegations have now arrived in Egypt, and at one o’clock, the first round of negotiations will begin with the presence of all Qatari, Egyptian, and even American delegations,” a senior Palestinian Hamas official said.

Months of negotiations stalled in part on Palestinians’ demand for a lasting ceasefire and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s repeated vows to crush the groups’ remaining fighters in Rafah, along the Egyptian border in Gaza’s far south.

The prospect of a Rafah invasion, threatened for three months alongside stop-start truce talks, has sparked intensifying global alarm.

After a meeting in Cairo about a week ago, the Hamas delegation



Displaced Palestinians fill jerrycans with water in a school used as a temporary shelter, in Beit Lahya. — AFP

returned to Qatar to discuss the truce proposal. The war broke out after unprecedented October 7 attack on Israel resulted in the deaths of more than 1,170 people,

according to a tally of Israeli official figures. Vowing to destroy the Palestinian groups, Israel has carried out a retaliatory campaign of bombardment and fighting on

the ground that has killed at least 34,654 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the territory’s health ministry. Gaza’s Civil Defence agency and hospitals reported several

more deaths from strikes in Gaza’s north, centre, and in Rafah. The United Nations says more than 70 per cent of Gaza’s residential buildings have been completely or partly destroyed,

Mediators are holding a proposal that would halt fighting for 40 days and exchange captives for Palestinian prisoners

and rebuilding will require an effort unseen since World War II. The World Health Organization says 1.2 million people, half of Gaza’s population, have sought refuge in Rafah. Aid groups say an invasion would only add to an existing humanitarian catastrophe. On Friday WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus expressed deep concern “that a full-scale military operation in Rafah, Gaza, could lead to a bloodbath.”

Jens Laerke, spokesman for the UN humanitarian agency OCHA, said a military operation in Rafah could “strike a disastrous blow” to agencies struggling to provide aid. Protesters in Israel have also accused Netanyahu of seeking to prolong the war. The prime minister, on trial for corruption charges he denies, leads a coalition which includes religious and ultra-nationalist parties. Demonstrators have regularly taken to Israeli streets demanding the government reach a deal to bring home the captives. — AFP



Demonstrators rally at television station RTE’s studios calling for to boycott the Eurovision Song Contest because of the Israeli entry, in Dublin. — Reuters

Students erect pro-Palestinian camp at Ireland’s Trinity College

DUBLIN: Students at Trinity College Dublin protesting Israel’s war in Gaza have built an encampment that forced the university to restrict campus access on Saturday and close the Book of Kells exhibition, one of Ireland’s top tourist attractions. The camp was set up late on Friday after Trinity College’s students’ union said it had been fined 214,000 euros by the university for financial losses incurred due to protests in recent months not exclusively regarding the war in Gaza. Students’ union President Laszlo Molnarfia posted a photograph of benches piled up in front of the entrance to the building where the Book of Kells is housed on the X social media platform on Friday. The illuminated manuscript book was created by Celtic monks in about 800 AD. “The Book of Kells is now closed indefinitely,” he said in the post. Trinity College said it had restricted access to the campus to students, staff and residents to ensure safety and that the Book of Kells exhibition

would be closed on Saturday. Similar to the student occupations sweeping US campuses, protesters at Trinity College are demanding that Ireland’s oldest university cut ties with Israeli universities and divest from companies with ties to Israel. Protests at universities elsewhere have included Australia and Canada. In a statement last week, the head of the university, Linda Doyle, said Trinity College’s was reviewing its investments in a portfolio of companies and that decisions on whether to work with Israeli institutions rested with individual academics. Meanwhile, the occupation of a building at Columbia University by pro-Palestinian student protesters was in its 18th hour when photos and videos dinged across students’ phones: police had parked at least seven jail buses south of the campus. The backs of New York police officers standing guard outside the gates of the Manhattan campus could be seen through the railings. — Reuters

Israeli settlers use shepherding outposts to seize West Bank land

RAMALLAH: Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank say armed Jewish settlers are increasingly seizing their lands by bringing livestock to so-called shepherding outposts and refusing to leave. One settler arrived recently near sunset on a hilltop near the village of Deir Jarir, wearing a black shirt and a green headscarf, like many Palestinian farmers, they said. “The settlers imitate us in every way,” said Abdullah Abu Rahme, a member of a Palestinian anti-settler group, who said the hardliners also

employ violence and “throw stones at us and block roads”. One local man, Haidar Abu Makho, 50, looked sadly across to a hill where settlers’ sheep were now grazing, in the rural area near Ramallah. The land, where settlers’ bungalows and cars could be seen ringed by a wire fence, he said, “rightfully belongs to my grandfather and father and is meant to be passed down through the generations”. But now, he said, “this shepherd, who is a settler... has obstructed my access to my land”.

Israel has occupied the West Bank, home to three million Palestinians, since 1967. Around 490,000 Israeli settlers live there in communities considered illegal under international law. Violence has often flared, but the bloodshed has intensified since the October 7 attack sparked the devastating war in the Palestinian coastal territory. Human rights groups have blamed the hardline settler movement for an upsurge in attacks and land grabs since the start of the Gaza war. Rights groups say settlers in

shepherding outposts carry guns and have used attack dogs to threaten and attack Palestinians, sometimes killing their livestock and destroying their property. The groups have been especially active around Deir Jarir, a village of about around 5,000 people, said the local man, Abu Makho. “The settlers have effectively blocked access to vast stretches of land around Deir Jarir, preventing both agricultural use and grazing for the people across tens of kilometres,” he said. — AFP



An Israeli army bulldozer operates amid the rubble of a demolished building during a raid in the West Bank. — AFP



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In brief

■ BERLIN



GERMANY DENOUNCES POLITICAL VIOLENCE AFTER MEP HURT

German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser on Saturday vowed to fight a surge in violence against politicians after a German member of the European Parliament had to be taken to hospital after being attacked while campaigning for re-election. “The constitutional state must and will respond to this with tough action and further protective measures for the democratic forces in our country,” Faeser said in a statement, saying the attack on Ecke was also an “attack on democracy”. European Parliament President Roberta Metsola was one of many European politicians to sympathise with Ecke, saying in a post on X that she was “horrificed by the vicious attack”. — Reuters

■ MADRID



SPAIN REJECTS ARGENTINIAN CLAIM PM RUINING THE COUNTRY

Spain on Saturday denounced comments by Argentina’s presidency which had accused the Spanish government of bringing “poverty and death” to its own people.

“The Spanish government categorically rejects the unfounded words... which do not reflect the relations between the two countries and their fraternal people,” the Spanish foreign ministry said.

Argentinian President Javier Milei office also accused Sanchez of “endangering the unity of the kingdom, by sealing an agreement with the separatists and leading Spain to its ruin.” — AFP

■ BOBIGNY



ONE DEAD, SEVERAL INJURED IN PARIS SUBURB SHOOTING

One person was killed and six injured overnight in a gritty northern Paris suburb in a shooting likely linked to drug trafficking, prosecutors and the mayor said on Saturday.

The attack in a parking lot near a cultural centre at Sevran took place around 11:45 pm on Friday. Police found four injured people strewn on the ground. One died soon after and the three others were taken to hospitals. Three more people injured by bullets were later taken to hospital and two men had arrived in the parking lot in a car and one of them got out and opened fire. The attackers then fled. — AFP

Death toll in southern Brazil flood rises to 56

PORTO ALEGRE: The death toll from floods and mudslides triggered by torrential storms in southern Brazil has climbed to 56 people, with 74 injured and another 67 missing, the country’s civil defence agency said on Saturday. Fast-rising water levels in the state of Rio Grande do Sul were straining dams and threatening the metropolis of Porto Alegre, one of the largest cities in southern Brazil.

Authorities there were scrambling to evacuate some neighbourhoods that had been submerged — in some cases using helicopters to rescue people stranded on roofs. And heavy rains of “very high severity” are expected to continue into Sunday, Civil Defence authorities said. The rapid rise of the Guaiba River, which runs through Porto Alegre, brought serious flooding to the city’s historic centre.

With waters starting to overtop a dike along another local river, the Gravataí, Mayor Sebastiao Malo issued a stern warning on social media platform X, saying, “Communities must

leave!” That warning came a day after the Rio Grande del Sul governor, Eduardo Leite, warned on X that “in the metropolitan region it’s going to be much worse.” Leite called it the worst disaster in the state’s history.

Residential areas found themselves underwater as far as the eye can see, with roads destroyed and bridges swept away by powerful currents.

Rescuers faced a colossal task, with entire towns — some left without electricity or drinking water — made inaccessible.

At least 300 municipalities have suffered storm damage in Rio Grande do Sul since Monday, according to local officials, displacing more than 24,600.

Roughly a third of the displaced have been brought to shelters set up in sports centres, schools and other facilities.

The rains also affected the southern state of Santa Catarina, where one man died on Friday when his car was swept away by raging floodwaters in the municipality of Ipira.

— AFP



Rescue workers carry a woman after being rescued from the floods in Porto Alegre, Brazil. — Reuters



Firefighters work at a site of a Russian drone strike, amid Russia’s attack on Ukraine, in Kharkiv. — Reuters

Russia says it shot down four missiles over Crimea

MOSCOW: The Russian defence ministry said on Saturday its air defence forces shot down four US-produced long-range missiles over the Crimea peninsular, weapons known as Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) that Washington has shipped to Ukraine in recent weeks. The ministry said later that Russian aircraft and air defence systems had downed a total of 15 ATACMS in the past week.

Russian officials said Ukraine had attacked Crimea with ATACMS in an attempt to pierce Russian air defences of the annexed peninsula but that six had been shot down.

A US official said in Washington last month that the United States secretly shipped long-range missiles to Ukraine in recent weeks.

The ATACMS missiles, with a range up to 300 km, were used for the first time in the early hours of April 17, launched against a Russian airfield in Crimea that was about 165 km from the Ukrainian front lines, the official said.

The Pentagon initially opposed the long-range missile

Russian officials said Ukraine had attacked Crimea with ATACMS in an attempt to pierce Russian air defences of the annexed peninsula

deployment, concerned that taking the missiles from the American stockpile would hurt US military readiness.

There were also concerns that Ukraine would use them to attack targets deep inside Russia, a step which could lead to an escalation of the war towards a direct confrontation between Russia and the United States.

Separately on Saturday, the Russian defence ministry said that in the last week its forces had destroyed a military train carrying equipment and arms produced in the West and supplied to Ukraine by Nato.

The scale of the damage, exact date and location were not disclosed. On Thursday, British Foreign Secretary David

Cameron promised 3 billion pounds of annual military aid for Ukraine for “as long as it takes”, adding that London had no objection to its weapons being used inside Russia, drawing a strong rebuke from Moscow.

Meanwhile, Russia has opened a criminal case against Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and put him on a wanted list, the state news agency TASS reported on Saturday, citing the Interior Ministry’s database. The entry it cited gave no further details.

Russia has issued arrest warrants for a number of Ukrainian and other European politicians since the start of the conflict with Ukraine in February 2022.

Russian police in February put Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, Lithuania’s culture minister and members of the previous Latvian parliament on a wanted list for destroying Soviet-era monuments. Russia also issued an arrest warrant for the International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutor who last year prepared a warrant for President Vladimir Putin on war crimes charges. — Reuters

UK’s Conservatives brace for losses in elections

LONDON: Britain’s ruling Conservatives braced on Saturday for further losses in local elections, their worst results in recent memory and a key test before a general election to be held by January.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s party lost nearly 500 councillors and control of 12 councils as well as a parliamentary seat, after voting across a swathe of England saw the Labour opposition make huge gains.

The beleaguered Tory leader faces more likely defeats when results of crunch mayoral races — in London, Liverpool and Manchester — are announced on Saturday, but is hoping to retain the West Midlands.

In a rare success on Friday, a Tory mayor won a third term in Tees Valley, northeast England — albeit with a vastly reduced majority — providing Sunak with some respite.

PM Sunak’s party lost nearly 500 councillors and control of 12 councils as well as a parliamentary seat, after England saw the Labour opposition make huge gains.

Labour, out of power since 2010 and trounced by Boris Johnson’s Conservatives at the last general election in 2019, seized on its claim to the Blackpool South seat in parliament and other successes to demand a national vote.

“Let’s turn the page on decline,” Labour leader Keith Starmer told supporters on Saturday in the East Midlands, where the party won the mayoral race.



Britain’s main opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer embraces new East Midlands Mayor Claire Ward during a post local election rally in Mansfield, central England. — AFP

Sunak must order a general election be held by January 28 next year at the latest, and has said he is planning on a poll in the second half of 2024.

Writing in Saturday’s *Daily*

Telegraph, Sunak conceded the returns showed “voters are frustrated” but insisted “Labour is not winning in places they admit they need for a majority.” “We Conservatives have everything to

fight for,” Sunak concluded.

Labour has enjoyed double-digit poll leads for all of Sunak’s 18 months in charge, as previous scandals, a cost-of-living crisis and various other issues dent the Tories’ standing.

On Thursday, they were defending nearly 1,000 council seats, many secured in 2021 when they led nationwide polls before the implosion of Johnson’s premiership and his successor Liz Truss’s disastrous 49-day tenure.

With almost all those results in by Saturday morning, they had lost close to half. If replicated in a nationwide contest, the initial tallies suggested Labour would win 34 per cent of the vote, with the Tories trailing by nine points. Its by-election scalp in Blackpool — on a mammoth 26-per cent swing — was the Conservatives’ 11th such loss in this parliament, the most by any government since the late 1960s. — AFP

Assisted dying, an ethical dilemma



Dr Hamed al Sinawi
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The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

FEW weeks ago, the story of the 28-year-old Dutch girl Zoraya Terpak appeared in several social media platforms due to her decision to end her life through euthanasia or assisted suicide. She has been diagnosed with multiple mental health problems such as depression, autism, and borderline personality disorder. Despite living a comfortable lifestyle with her loving partner and a pet she feels she is a “failure” and believes her condition is untreatable. Therefore, her doctors should help her end her life. The court’s decision to grant a person with mental health problems their wish to die sparked controversy and questions as it contradicts the main ethical principle “doctors should do no harm”. It was no surprise that members of the public took to social media platforms to express their surprise that a doctor who is supposed to be treating a person would help him end his life through assisted suicide. Although assisted suicide is considered legal in a few countries it is mainly offered to people suffering from physical pain caused

by complicated and untreatable conditions. In Belgium and the Netherlands, assisted suicide has been provided to people with different mental health problems such as chronic schizophrenia, post traumatic stress disorder, severe eating disorders, autism, personality disorders, and even prolonged grief. In such situations, the court would request evidence that the patient has exhausted a long period of different treatment options before approving their request for assisted suicide. This would not apply to Zoraya Terpak since she is only 28 years of age and is unlikely to have received all possible treatment options. The question many people are asking is, would assisting suicide be an easy way out for people living with severe depression? and what if depression is affecting the person’s judgment when she or he signs up for it? The second question is, since many people with depression and other psychological problems take their own lives by committing suicide and doctors who fail to detect a suicidal patient and intervene to stop them would be charged with negligence. In my opinion, assisted suicide is unacceptable

THE COURT’S DECISION TO GRANT A PERSON WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS THEIR WISH TO DIE SPARKED CONTROVERSY AND ETHICAL QUESTIONS

and doctors are supposed to save lives and not help in ending it. Life is gifted to us by God and should not be taken away. In countries legalising assisted suicide, healthcare professionals believe it should not be offered for people with mental illness for several reasons. First, mental illness is often associated with feelings of hopelessness and helplessness which makes the person believe they will never get better, so they give up easily. Second, who gets to decide that the condition is untreatable and have we explored all possible treatment options before saying so? As psychiatrists, we sometimes come across patients who have treatment-resistant conditions and there are international protocols to treat such patients. Yet not all treatment options are available to everyone. So does that mean countries with limited resources should legalise assisted suicide? Third, mental illness often affects the individual thinking and reasoning which is known as decision-making capacity. Therefore, doctors need to be competent in assessing mental capacity before granting his/ her wish to choose assisted suicide. Such competency is unlikely to be equally available to all doctors.

Pakistan records ‘wettest April’ in more than 60 years

ZAIN ZAMAN JANJUA

PAKISTAN experienced its “wettest April since 1961”, receiving more than twice as much rain as usual for the month, the country’s weather agency said in a report. April rainfall was recorded at 59.3 millimetres, “excessively above” the normal average of 22.5 millimetres, Pakistan’s metrology department said late on Friday in its monthly climate report. There were at least 144 deaths in thunderstorms and house collapses due to heavy rains in what the report said was the “wettest April since 1961”. Pakistan is increasingly vulnerable to unpredictable weather, as well as often destructive monsoon rains that usually arrive in July. A third of Pakistan was submerged by unprecedented monsoon rains that displaced millions of people in the summer of 2022 and cost the country \$30 billion in damage and economic losses, according to a World Bank estimate. “Climate change is a major factor that is influencing the erratic weather patterns in our region,” Zaheer Ahmad Babar, spokesperson for the Pakistan Meteorological Department, said of the report. While much of Asia is sweltering due to heatwaves, Pakistan’s national monthly temperature for April was 23.67 degrees Celsius, 0.87C lower than the average of 24.54C, the report said. The highest rainfall was recorded in the southwestern province of Balochistan with 437 per cent more than average. The South Asian nation has the world’s fifth-largest population and is responsible for less than one per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, according to officials, but is highly vulnerable to extreme weather exacerbated by global warming. The largest death toll was reported in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where 84 people died, including 38 children, and more than 3,500 homes were damaged. The UN children’s agency UNICEF called last month for urgent action to save children on the frontlines of climate change. “Children in Pakistan are at ‘extremely high risk’ of the impacts of the climate crisis,” it said in a statement. “Despite significant aid efforts, 9.6 million children were still in need of humanitarian assistance in flood affected areas by December 2023,” it said. In some areas of Punjab, the most populous province and the breadbasket of a country facing an economic crisis, heavy rains and hailstorms caused damage to the wheat harvest, a staple food source. “The flash floods also caused extensive damage to vast area of crops, particularly the wheat crop, which was ready for harvest,” the UN humanitarian agency OCHA said in a recent report. — AFP

In race to build AI, tech plans a big plumbing upgrade



KAREN WEISE

IF 2023 was the tech industry’s year of the artificial intelligence chatbot, 2024 is turning out to be the year of AI plumbing. It may not sound as exciting, but tens of billions of dollars are quickly being spent on behind-the-scenes technology for the industry’s AI boom. Companies from Amazon to Meta are revamping their data centres to support AI. They are investing in huge new facilities, while even places like Saudi Arabia are racing to build supercomputers to handle AI. Nearly everyone with a foot in tech or giant piles of money, it seems, is jumping into a spending frenzy that some believe could last for years. Microsoft, Meta, and Google’s parent company, Alphabet, disclosed this past week that they had spent more than \$32 billion combined on data centres and other capital expenses in just the first three months of the year. The companies all said in calls with investors that they had no plans to slow down their AI spending. In the clearest sign of how AI has become a story about building a massive technology infrastructure, Meta said on Wednesday that it needed to spend billions more on chips and data centres for AI than it had previously signalled. “I think it makes sense to go for it, and we’re going to,” Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg said in a call with investors. The eye-popping spending reflects an old parable in Silicon Valley: The people who made the biggest fortunes in California’s gold rush weren’t the miners — they were the people selling the shovels. No doubt Nvidia, whose chip sales have more than tripled over the past year, is the most obvious AI winner. The money being thrown at technology to support AI is also a reminder of spending patterns of the dot-com boom of the 1990s. For all the excitement around web browsers and newfangled e-commerce websites, the companies making the real money were software giants including Microsoft and Oracle, chipmaker



Microsoft pledged a \$2.2 billion investment in artificial intelligence and cloud computing in Malaysia to help develop the country’s AI infrastrucur. — AFP

COMPANIES FROM AMAZON TO META ARE REVAMPING THEIR DATA CENTRES TO SUPPORT AI. THEY ARE INVESTING IN HUGE NEW FACILITIES, WHILE EVEN PLACES LIKE SAUDI ARABIA ARE RACING TO BUILD SUPERCOMPUTERS TO HANDLE AI.

Intel, and Cisco Systems, which made the gear that connected those new computer networks together. But cloud computing has added a new wrinkle: Since most startups and even big companies from other industries contract with cloud computing providers to host their networks, the tech industry’s biggest companies are spending big now in hopes of luring customers. Google’s capital expenditures — largely the money that goes into building and outfitting data centres — almost doubled in the first quarter, the company said. Microsoft’s were up 22 per cent. Amazon, which will report earnings on Tuesday, is expected to add to that growth. Meta’s investors were unhappy with Zuckerberg, sending his company’s share price down more than 16 per cent after the call. But Zuckerberg, who just a few years ago was pilloried by shareholders for a planned spending spree on augmented and

virtual reality, was unapologetic about the money that his company is throwing at AI. He urged patience, potentially for years. “Our optimism and ambitions have just grown quite a bit,” he said. Investors had no problem stomachaching Microsoft’s spending. Microsoft is the only major tech company to report financial details of its generative AI business, which it said had contributed to more than one-fifth of the growth of its cloud computing business. That amounted to \$1 billion in three months, analysts estimated. Microsoft said its generative AI business could have been even bigger — if the company had enough data centre supply to meet the demand, underscoring the need to keep on building. The AI investments are creating a halo for Microsoft’s core cloud computing offering, Azure, helping it draw new customers. “Azure has become a part of call for pretty much anybody who is doing any AI project,” Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella said on Thursday. (The New York Times sued Microsoft and its partner, OpenAI, in December, claiming copyright infringement of news content related to their AI systems.) Google said sales from its cloud division were up 28 per cent, including “an increasing contribution from AI.” — The New York Times

To EV or not EV? That is the question

FOLLOWING on from last week's announcement that Oman's very first electric vehicle, the MAYS, will be on the roads imminently, the gas versus electric debate is probably happening throughout much of the Sultanate of Oman.

Are you, like me, still on the fence about electric vehicles? Or have you made your mind up? Either way, are EVs beginning to look a lot like Marmite, in that you either love them... or not? Most of us though, still have questions. Initially I was dead against the idea, as I couldn't see past the idea that an EV would be just a glorified golf cart, and anyone who has driven a golf cart knows that they are more like a grown-up toy, than something serious. So, my first thoughts were to stick with a gas guzzler!

But then, seeing the first EVs was exciting. Seeing the 'golf cart' transformed into something stylish, uncluttered, and innovative, the only negative appeared to be that everything was linked to Elon Musk, who is himself a marmite! Even now, we can't decide whether he is self-serving, or a global philanthropist; rich, or just looks it; an entrepreneur or a shyster; a success or a failure, honest or... I know it's an awful thing to say, but I can't stand the guy.

His aggression is front and centre, saying "We will not stop until every car on the road is electric," and had the affront to label the first four models of his Tesla vehicles, the S, 3, X, and Y versions. That's not humorous, on any planet its disrespectful, at least contemptuous of an entire generation. See Tesla, think Musk, whose eponymous links to EVs are distasteful, and must create market uncertainty, not just for his, but all EVs.

However, the emergence of the second series of EVs as all manufacturers have embraced a global clamour for environmental solutions, has seen some amazing technologies, and vehicle designs emerge, and overnight it seems, we were swept into probably the most exotic vehicular



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extravaganza the motor industry has seen since the DeLorean. And at the same time, a diversity of purchase and lease options appeared on the scene, encouraging motorists to swing over to the other side of the debate. It was fun time in the EV playground.

The rain on that parade, however, was in the form of the conservationist lobby heavily publicising images of lithium mines and working conditions, which, it's fair to say, are disturbing, lithium being the light, heat-resistant, non-renewable element that stores more energy than any other metal, and therefore, in fact, makes renewable energy in EVs, possible. Clearly affecting environments and habitats, the mines are scars, the ponds surreal palates, and both have been labelled 'the birthplace of batteries,' which is, I doubt, in praise. I guess, as with all things environmental, we must reconcile ourselves as to the picture we can reconcile ourselves with and move forward.

The alarmists, of course, will point to some pretty spectacular fires, and explosions of EVs which have been widely circulated on social media, and make no mistake, they are scary! However, current research by envirosafe.com is that while, globally, there is a 0.1 per cent possibility a conventional, internal combustion motor vehicle catching fire, in fact, EVs are far less likely to burn, at 0.0012 per cent. Now that's a significant difference and means that you are 83 times more likely to go on fire in a petrol or diesel car.

Further muddying my own perspective, I hired a hybrid EV for a week, and drove extensively in all weathers, on a variety of roads, and found myself thoroughly enjoying the experience... once I got used to not hearing any engine sound. That was uncanny. Carlos Ghosn, a leading figure in the automotive industry says that "electric cars are "not going to take the world by storm," that it will be a "gradual process," but also that "the time is right, in fact the time is critical." So, is now the time for EVs, or never?

THE EMERGENCE OF THE SECOND SERIES OF EVS HAS SEEN SOME AMAZING TECHNOLOGIES, AND VEHICLE DESIGNS EMERGE, AND OVERNIGHT IT SEEMS, WE WERE SWEEPED INTO PROBABLY THE MOST EXOTIC VEHICULAR EXTRAVAGANZA

HOLY FIRE CEREMONY!



Orthodox Christian worshippers attend the Holy Fire ceremony at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem's Old City, on Saturday. – Reuters

Climate change is a worse health threat

IT is widely believed that climate change is the single biggest threat to human health. A global temperature increase of 2° Celsius — a threshold that will likely be exceeded by the end of the century — could claim as many as one billion lives, with extreme weather events, heatwaves, droughts, flooding, infectious-disease outbreaks, and food shortages among the causes of death. But the situation may in fact be far worse, because the current forecasts fail to account for the inevitable increase in antimicrobial resistance (AMR).

Climate change could have a profound effect on AMR, as evidence increasingly indicates that adverse weather and rising temperatures can facilitate the emergence and spread of drug-resistant pathogens. But models seeking to gauge the health effects of climate change disregard the growing risk of drug resistance, as do policy responses to global warming — a massive oversight that will hinder our ability to treat infections and keep people healthy.

Despite increasing the likelihood of extinction for nearly 11,000 species, a warmer planet could actually improve conditions for bacteria and fungi. Higher temperatures are associated with increased bacterial growth and infection rates, and can also put selective pressure on microbes to mutate and develop antibiotic



Manica Balasegaram

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resistance. One recent study in China found that each 1°C increase in air temperature was associated with a 14 per cent increase in drug-resistant Klebsiella pneumoniae infections and a 6 per cent increase in drug-resistant Pseudomonas aeruginosa infections.

Similarly, extreme weather, especially floods and droughts, will increase the spread of infectious diseases such as water-borne cholera and typhoid, as well as drug resistance. Such events often disrupt access to clean water and sanitation, making prevention and control of infection much more challenging. Moreover, urban density tends to accelerate the transmission of pathogens. According to some estimates, the climate crisis could displace 1.2 billion people by 2050, likely resulting in ever more crowded cities.

ESCALATING GLOBAL CRISIS

AMR is already recognised as an escalating global crisis. In 2019, it was associated with nearly five million deaths, making drug resistance one of the world's biggest killers. The World Health Organization has identified AMR as one of ten major threats to global health, alongside climate change, and world leaders are

serious about addressing the problem, with a high-level meeting on AMR to be held on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in September.

But many still think of AMR as distinct from global warming. For example, the latest Lancet Countdown report on health and climate change makes no mention of AMR, drug resistance, or antibiotics. Similarly, the Quadripartite Secretariat for One Health — comprising the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, the UN Environment Programme, the WHO, and the World Organization for Animal Health — has failed to study

the relationship between global warming and AMR, let alone how AMR will affect the health risks of climate change.

The international community is severely underestimating the impact of climate change on people's health and our ability to treat them. To prepare for the mounting AMR crisis, we must increasingly rely on preventing and controlling infection, and, more importantly, ensure the judicious use of effective antibiotics. That will require developing new antibiotics, which is often unattractive for pharmaceutical companies, and also making the right investments and establishing the right incentives so that existing

antibiotics reach the people that need them.

To this end, organisations like mine, the Global Antibiotic Research & Development Partnership, are encouraging the creation of new drugs and working to improve access to essential antibiotics that are already on the market, particularly in lower-income countries. Equitable antibiotic use and distribution will become increasingly important, because, as with climate change, it is the poorest communities that are usually hit hardest by AMR.

But that won't be enough. Global policymakers must significantly increase funding for AMR research to ensure that they are ready to respond to new forms of drug resistance caused directly or indirectly by global warming. Doing so will require including AMR in climate-change contingencies and, more importantly, viewing drug resistance and rising temperatures as interconnected, rather than distinct, challenges, starting at the UN high-level meeting on AMR in September and this year's UN Climate Change Conference (COP29) in Baku. Otherwise, the effectiveness of existing drugs will falter just when they are most needed.

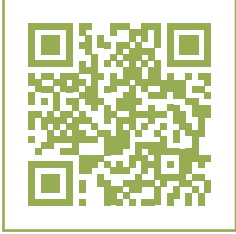
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A warmer planet could actually improve conditions for bacteria and fungi.

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MUSCAT TO HOST AFC CUP 2023/24 FINAL



ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MAY 4

The Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex is all set to host the prestigious AFC Cup 2023/24 final as Al Ahed FC will take on Australia's Central Coast Mariners in the concluding clash on Sunday. The football stadium in the Sultan Qaboos

Sports Complex, which is under supervision of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, is ready for hosting international matches and AFC approved the venue in Muscat to host the final for the first time ever. In the recent years, the ministry had made some improvements in the stadium to be a perfect venue to host

the mega events. One of the developments were the lighting which had changed by international standards and is appropriate for television coverage beside renovations of many other facilities inside the complex. The stadium originally had a capacity of over 40,000, but after recent renovations the capacity

was reduced to 28,000. The main stadium was the venue in the 19th Arabian Gulf Cup in 2009, and was also used in the 13th Arabian Gulf Cup competition in 1996. The Complex has strong security in addition to over 10,000 parking slots. On the other side, both sides completed their preparations for

the final clash as Lebanon's Al Ahed FC will eye to lift the AFC Cup for the second time after they had won the cup in 2019 edition, while the first Australian side would like to create history by clinching the title. Al Ahed FC secured slot in the final as they beat Oman's Al Nahda 1-0 in the first leg in Kerbala, Iraq, while the second

leg match ended in a 2-2 draw in Muscat. Raafat Mohammed, head coach of Al Ahed club, affirmed in Muscat after Al Nahda match that they will do their level best to win the title. "I am confident that our team can deliver their top show in the final match to capture the triumph and win the title," he said.

OAA honours Oman's international motorsport drivers

MUSCAT: The Oman Automobile Association (OAA) organised an award ceremony to appreciate and honour the most talented and passionate motorsport drivers of the Sultanate of Oman. The ceremony was held to celebrate the remarkable achievements of three drivers, Al Faisal al Zubair, Ahmad al Harthy and Abdullah al Rawahi, who brought enormous pride to Oman on a global scale. The drivers were awarded by Brigadier Salim al Maskari, Chairman of the Board of Directors, and Brigadier Jamal al Tai, Vice-Chairman, to acknowledge their remarkable accomplishments in the field of motorsport. Al Faisal al Zubair, a renowned race car driver, achieved impressive results in international racing competitions. He secured second place in the Asian Le Mans Series in Dubai and also secured pole position and second place podium in the Gold Cup

category of the Fanatec GT world challenge endurance in France. He continued his winning streak at the opening round of the International GT Open held in Portimão, where he secured a dominant first place. Ahmad al Harthy was also honoured for his contributions to Omani motorsport and recent racing achievements. He received a royal commendation badge for his significant contributions, and he showcased his talent by securing the fourth position in the World Endurance Championship's opening round held in Qatar. He finished sixth in the Fanatec GT World Challenge's first-round race held in France and secured the second place in the second round of the World Endurance Championship held in Imola, Italy. He was also honoured by HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, for his notable accomplishments in Omani motorsport.

Abdullah al Rawahi, an accomplished rally racer, was honoured at the ceremony for his recent victories in the field of motorsport. He became the first Omani driver to win the Middle East Rally Championship in 2023. He received the FIA prize for this accomplishment shared with the legendary Nasser al Attiyah. His dedication was honoured by HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth. He also secured a respectable third-place finish in the opening rounds of the Middle East Rally Championship 2024 held in Qatar. The honour awarded to Al Faisal Al Zubair, Ahmad al Harthy and Abdullah al Rawahi by the OAA is evidence to the association's commitment to promoting and supporting motorsport in Oman. The OAA has been instrumental in creating a platform for Omani drivers to showcase their talents and compete at the highest levels.



Ahmad al Harthy (C) honoured by Salim al Maskari (R) and Jamal al Tai (L)



Faisal al Zubair (C) honoured by Salim al Maskari (R) and Jamal al Tai (L)



Abdullah al Rawahi (C) honoured by Salim al Maskari (R) and Jamal al Tai (L)



Al Maladdah team lifts ‘Dermo Cup’

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Al Maladdah team crowned the 2024 Dermo Cup, which saw eight teams vying for the coveted title during the tournament held over a month on Al Musannah ground.

Thirty days of excitement, love for soccer and passion for teamwork, all culminated in the grand finale at the ground as the spectators shouted and cheered for their favourite players.

The teams, Al Maladdah, Al Jazira, Al Quraemm, Al Shuaiba, Wadam Al Ghaf, Shars Al Sahel, Al Awaid, and Al Arabi, besides Al Maladdah, fought for the 2024 Dermo Cup keeping the spectators of different ages spellbound.

Hosted by the Al Musannah Club, the Dermo Cup was organised by Dermo Center for Skin Care Services as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility to activate sports events in the Wilayat of Al Musannah and its surrounding areas.

“The tournament comes within the framework of corporate social responsibility, and that support for the local community to offer the youths with more avenues for sports and other entertainment activities. We will continue to support the local communities in future too,” said Saeed bin Saif al Nofali, CEO of the Dermo Center.

“The tournament also sought to discover talents in sports commentary and arbitration by providing them with the opportunity to participate in the Dermo Cup and they passionately participated in the tournament which shows the success of the same in ensuring maximum people participation,” he added.

Mavs top Clippers to advance in NBA playoffs, Magic stay alive against Cavs

LOS ANGELES: The Dallas Mavericks beat the Los Angeles Clippers 114-101 to advance to the second round of the NBA Playoffs on Friday as Orlando forced a decisive game seven against Cleveland despite 50 points from Cavs star Donovan Mitchell.

The Magic dominated late on their home floor in Orlando to overcome a heroic performance from Mitchell, beating the Cavaliers 103-96 to knot their best-of-seven Eastern Conference first-round series at three games apiece.

In Dallas, Luka Doncic scored 28 points and Kyrie Irving scored 30 —28 in the second half —as the Mavericks locked up a 4-2 Western Conference victory over the Clippers, who were again without injured star Kawhi Leonard.

Doncic added seven rebounds and 13 assists to gain a measure of revenge against a Clippers team that ousted his Mavs in the first round in 2020 and 2021.

Dallas next face the Oklahoma City Thunder, the surprise Western top seeds who swept New Orleans 4-0.

The series will offer a tantalising matchup between Slovenian star Doncic and Oklahoma City’s Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, both Most Valuable Player award finalists along with Nikola Jokic -- whose reigning champion Denver Nuggets face Minnesota in the second round.

“We stayed together,” Doncic said of a Mavs team that led by 13 in the second quarter only for the Clippers to tie it up by halftime at 52-52.

Irving’s driving layup in the first minute of the third quarter put Dallas ahead for good.



Dereck Lively II (2) shoots the ball over Norman Powell (24). – USA TODAY Sports

It was just the beginning of Irving’s dazzling second half display that also featured an off-balance three-pointer as he was fouled, with Irving converting the free-throw to push the Mavs’ lead to 24 points.

His performance had former teammate LeBron James tweeting his admiration, which was echoed by Doncic after the game.

“He’s amazing,” Doncic said of Irving, who won a title with James and the Cleveland Cavaliers in 2016 and joined the Mavs last year. “Never count him out -- it’s amazing just having him on our team.”

Paul George scored 18 points and grabbed 11 rebounds for the Clippers. James Harden had 16 points and handed out 13 assists.

FULL TEAM EFFORT

In Orlando, Paolo Banchero scored 10 of his 27 points in the fourth quarter, drilling a three-pointer that put the Magic ahead for good with 3:39 left to play in a tight back-and-forth battle.

Franz Wagner added 26 points for Orlando and Jalen Suggs made six three-pointers on the way to 22 in what Wagner called a “full team effort.” It wasn’t the kind of rout Orlando put together in games three and four, but the Magic had enough to overcome Mitchell, who was clearly troubled by a nagging knee injury but nevertheless had all 18 of the Cavs’ fourth-quarter points.

“Obviously, Mitchell had an amazing game, but we stuck with it and got stops when we needed it,” Wagner said. “The whole group just stayed with it.” With the series tied at three games apiece, the Cavs host game seven on Sunday. — AFP

Verstappen takes sprint pole in Miami

MIAMI GARDENS: World champion Max Verstappen grabbed pole position for Saturday’s sprint race at the Miami Grand Prix but was far from happy with the performance of his tyres.

Verstappen finished 0.108 seconds ahead of Ferrari’s Charles Leclerc with his Red Bull team-mate Sergio Perez third.

“To be honest with you, it felt pretty terrible. Maybe that last session, it was just really difficult to get the tyres to work. I didn’t improve much on the soft but I’ll take it,” said the Dutchman, who was also fastest in the earlier practice session.

“It didn’t feel enjoyable to drive - practice was really comfortable, I was quite confident we could fight for pole. But qualifying it didn’t look like that for me - I don’t know what happened to the other cars on that last lap,” he said.

All the drivers opted for a single flying lap in SQ3 with Verstappen posting his time of one minute 27.641 seconds.

Australian Daniel Ricciardo had an encouraging qualifier finishing fourth fastest in his RB ahead of Ferrari’s Carlos Sainz.

“I know it’s in me - but did I expect to do a second-row start? Probably not that good,” said Ricciardo.

“It was wild. The laps were good but it’s hard to be really clean around here, it was a tricky track. Both laps I kissed the wall, I was definitely pushing. I’m very proud of what I did today but also the team has been bringing



Max Verstappen races during the practice. – AFP



Bull’s Max Verstappen during the Sprint Qualifying Pool via. – Reuters

upgrades the last few races,” he added. McLaren threatened in the early stages but weren’t able to make the most of the soft tyres in SQ3 with Oscar Piastri sixth while Lando Norris will start from P9.

“I just pushed too hard. The car was feeling very good. Just silly to be honest,” said Norris.

“A couple of mistakes in Turn One and it was a big spiral from there,” he added.

Aston Martin’s Lance Stroll and Fernando Alonso were seventh and eighth with Haas’s

German driver Nico Hulkenberg 10th. It was a disappointing session for Mercedes who saw both Lewis Hamilton and George Russell go out in SQ2.

“We need to work overnight and make some improvements for the main qualifying,” Russell said. “I’ve got no doubt we will move forward in the Sprint. We need to try and get on top of our qualifying woes. It’s always difficult to fight with the cars ahead when we have started on the back foot,” added the Englishman.

Earlier Verstappen posted the fastest time in practice while Leclerc managed just three laps.

Verstappen, who has won four of the five Formula One races this season, posted a best practice lap time of 1:28.595 despite having some handling issues earlier in the session.

The Dutchman, who has won both the previous Miami races, finished with a time 0.105sec quicker than McLaren’s Piastri.

— AFP

Sinner withdraws from Italian Open with hip injury



Italy’s Jannik Sinner. – Reuters

MILAN: Australian Open champion Jannik Sinner announced on Saturday he will not play at the upcoming Italian Open due to a hip injury which forced him out in Madrid earlier this week.

Italian Sinner was a doubt for the Rome event which starts on Wednesday and is the last big tournament before the Grand Slam French Open.

“After speaking again with the doctors and specialists about my hip problems I have to announce that unfortunately I will not be able to play in Rome,” the world number two said on X, formerly Twitter.

“I’m very sad that I wasn’t able to recover as it is one of my favourite tournaments.”

The 22-year-old would have been one of the favourites for the Masters 1000 tournament in the Italian capital after winning the Australian Open, his first Slam title, at the start of the year and following that up and his second Masters 1000 crown in Miami in March.

Sinner, who holds a 28-2 record on the season, was due to face Felix Auger-Aliassime in the Madrid quarter-finals on Thursday but revealed he had been battling through a hip issue in the Spanish capital.

Sinner joins world number three Carlos Alcaraz in withdrawing from the clay-court event in Rome after the Spaniard succumbed to a right forearm injury that sidelined him in Monte Carlo and Barcelona.

The pair will now try to recover in time for an assault on the French Open, the season’s second major, which starts in Paris on May 26.

— AFP

ARSENAL KEEP PRESSURE ON MAN CITY WITH WIN OVER BOURNEMOUTH

LONDON: Arsenal cleared another hurdle in their Premier League title quest with a 3-0 victory over Bournemouth in their penultimate home game on Saturday to pile the pressure on Manchester City.

A penalty shortly before half-time converted by Bukayo Saka gave Arsenal the lead, Leandro Trossard eased the nerves inside the Emirates Stadium with a second goal on 70 minutes and Declan Rice added the third deep into stoppage-time.

Victory put Arsenal on 83 points from 36 games with champions City on 79 from 34

ahead of their home clash with Wolverhampton Wanderers later on Saturday.

Bournemouth had cause to feel aggrieved with the Arsenal penalty confirmed after a long VAR check and they also had a goal ruled out in the second half after another VAR check.

Gabriel also had a goal ruled out for Arsenal but Rice put the icing on the cake as Mikel Arteta's team stayed firmly in the hunt to win a first Premier League title for 20 years.

With City playing later, Arsenal had the chance to crank up the pressure

and they did so in relatively routine fashion even if it did take them a long time to get in front.

As expected, they dominated possession but 10th-placed Bournemouth frustrated the hosts with 10 men behind the ball for much of the opening half.

Trossard twice had shots blocked as Bournemouth threw players in front of the ball and captain Martin Odegaard was also denied early on in the Arsenal siege.

The inevitable nerves surfaced as a mistake by Gabriel let in

Bournemouth danger man Dominic Solanke but William Saliba rescued his side with a last-ditch tackle.

SOFT PENALTY

Arsenal made the breakthrough just before half-time thanks to a rather fortuitous penalty.

Kai Havertz was played in behind Bournemouth's defence and the German's first touch took him past keeper Mark Travers before he fell to the

ground and referee David Coote pointed to the spot.

A lengthy VAR check followed and the decision was allowed to stand despite Havertz appearing to have dragged his foot to initiate contact with the leg of Travers when it would have been simpler for him to convert the chance.

Saka then calmly rolled the penalty into the net past a static Travers, his 16th league goal of the season met with relief around the stadium.

Bournemouth were more adventurous after the break, aided by Arsenal mistakes, and

Solanke had a chance but his angled shot was easily saved by David Raya.

Arsenal then doubled their lead with Rice setting up Trossard for a clinical finish.

There was still anxiety, though, and a crazy goalmouth scramble ended up with the ball in Arsenal's net but Solanke was adjudged to have impeded Raya with minimal contact.

In the end, Arsenal won with a flourish and will now focus on beating Manchester United and Everton in their final two games and hope that City falter.

— Reuters



Arsenal's Leandro Trossard celebrates scoring their second goal with Declan Rice. – REUTERS



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Salalah Port gears up for new role as Oman’s hydrogen export hub

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MAY 4

Last week’s award of two new green hydrogen blocks in Dhofar Governorate, to a pair of international consortiums, has firmed up a leading role for the Port of Salalah as an important gateway for green molecule exports from Oman.

The winning consortiums were: (a) EDF Group, J-POWER and Yamna, and (b) Actis and Fortescue. Both have committed to producing an aggregate of 378,000 tonnes of renewable hydrogen per annum by 2030, with part of the output targeted for export to international markets via the Port of Salalah.

Earlier in December 2023, Hydrom – the orchestrator of the green hydrogen industry in Oman – signed a similar agreement with the SalalaH2 consortium for the development of a renewable hydrogen project in Dhofar Governorate. SalalaH2 comprises Marubeni Corporation, OQ Alternative Energy, Dutco and Samsung C&T Corporation.

All three ventures are due to set up their respective downstream components in Salalah Free Zone, and export part of their production in the form of hydrogen derivatives, via the adjoining Salalah Port.

In effect, Salalah Port is set to become the second hub for green molecule exports, complementing



“We have been diligently collaborating with Hydrom throughout the process, and now with the agreements finalised, our focus shifts to working closely with the awarded companies to understand their specific needs.”

KELD MOSGAARD
CEO, Port of Salalah

the Port of Duqm, which is the designated hub for exports from hydrogen projects – five in all to date - located in Al Wusta Governorate.

In remarks to the *Observer*, Salalah Port CEO Keld Mosgaard Christensen, said the port is committed to playing its part in the crystallisation of Oman’s green hydrogen ambitions.

“We are delighted that Port of Salalah will play a pivotal role as the gateway for green molecules exports with the recent announcement of two new projects in Salalah,” said the CEO.

“This marks a significant

milestone for Oman, and we take pride in our contribution towards fostering a sustainable planet.

These developments not only benefit the nation but also propel us closer to our sustainability goals as a port.

We remain committed to furthering our efforts in this direction and look forward to the positive impact these projects will have on the global trade, environment and community.”

In anticipation of the project awards, Salalah Port has working closely with various government agencies to ensure that the requisite terminal infrastructure

is designed and rolled out in a timely and cost-effective manner.

“We have been diligently collaborating with Hydrom throughout the process, and now with the agreements finalised, our focus shifts to working closely with the awarded companies to understand their specific needs.

This collaboration will enable us to tailor our infrastructure to serve as a terminal operator effectively.

While timelines will be influenced by various factors, including regulatory requirements and project complexities, rest assured, we are committed to initiating groundwork as swiftly as possible,” said Christensen.

Furthermore, as the port gears up to shoulder its new role, there are potential opportunities for collaboration with key stakeholders, notably AP Moller Maersk, which is spearheading green fuel conversion initiatives for its fleet, according to the CEO.

“As our largest customer and a leader in sustainable practices, Maersk’s expertise and capabilities can undoubtedly support Salalah Port in our green initiatives.

Given Salalah’s strategic position as one of their key hubs, there is clear potential to leverage their resources and knowledge.

As the Port of Salalah, we are fully committed to facilitating and nurturing this collaboration for the mutual benefit of the port and Oman as a whole,” he added.

Total bank loans in Oman reach RO 30.6 billion



Local liquidity in Oman increased by about RO 3.3 billion in February.

MUSCAT: The total loans and financing in commercial banks and Islamic windows increased by 2.7 per cent by the end of February 2024 to reach RO 30.612 billion, compared to RO 29.812 billion at end of February 2023.

The average interest rate on total loans also increased by 3.4 per cent, reaching 5.542 per cent at the end of last February, according to preliminary statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

The Centre’s data indicated that local liquidity in the Sultanate of Oman increased by the end of February 2024 by about RO 3.3 billion, to record RO 23.939 billion, an increase of 15.8 per cent compared to the same period in 2023.

The total cash issued decreased by 1.9 per cent, recording RO 1.571 billion at the end of February 2024, compared to RO 1.602 billion at the end of February 2023.

On the other hand, the money

supply in its narrow sense, which consists of the total cash outside the banking system in addition to current accounts and demand deposits in the local currency, increased by 6.9 per cent, recording RO 6.117 billion, compared to RO 5.721 billion at the end of February 2023.

The total foreign assets of the Central Bank of Oman also increased by 4.3 per cent, recording at the end of last February a value of RO 6.862 billion, compared to the end of February 2023, when the total foreign assets at that time amounted to RO 6.581 billion.

Private sector deposits in commercial banks and Islamic windows by the end of February 2024 amounted to about RO 20.112 billion, an increase of 14.8 per cent over the same period in 2023, amounting to RO 17.512 billion.

The effective exchange rate index for the Omani riyal rose by 0.1 per cent at the end of February 2024 to reach 114.6 points. — ONA

More than 3.84 million passengers use Oman airports

MUSCAT: The number of passengers passing through the airports of the Sultanate of Oman increased by 16.8 per cent by the end of March 2024, recording 3.840 million, compared to 3.287 million by the end of March 2023.

Preliminary statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information showed the number of passengers travelling through Muscat International Airport reached 3,482,325 passengers, an increase of 17.7 per cent. They travelled on 25,204 flights, with an increase in the number of flights of 13.8 per cent by the end of March 2024.

Among the flights were 23,237 international flights on which 3,232,76 passengers travelled, and 1,967 domestic flights on which 250,249 passengers travelled. Indians topped the number of passengers travelling through Muscat International Airport during the month of March, with the number of arrivals reaching



79,810 passengers and 77,646 departing passengers, followed by Bangladeshis with 14,469 arriving passengers and 20,909 departing passengers, then Pakistanis with 24,097 arriving passengers, and 20,191 departing passengers.

The number of passengers travelling through Salalah Airport reached 325,035 passengers, an increase of 6.7 per cent. They travelled on 2,288 flights, an increase in the number of flights of 4.8 per cent.

The number of international flights through Salalah Airport reached 1,218 flights, carrying 162,651 passengers, while the number of domestic flights reached 1,70 flights, carrying 162,384 passengers. — ONA

Preparations underway to start Hafeet Rail construction, says CEO

MUSCAT: Engineer Abdulrahman bin Salem al Hatmi, CEO of Asyad Group, confirmed the start of preparations for the launch of construction work for the railway project linking the Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates (Hafeet Rail).

He said in a statement that the network was designed using innovative engineering solutions to deal with the terrain and climate conditions, as it will include two tunnels with a length of 2.5 kilometres and 36 bridges, some of which reach a height of 34 metres.

He stated that the project includes passenger stations in Suhar and Al Ain, while freight stations will be in Suhar, Al Buraimi and Al Ain, noting that the train will cover the distance between Suhar and Abu Dhabi in



The project includes passenger stations in Suhar and Al Ain, while freight stations will be in Suhar, Al Buraimi, and Al Ain.

100 minutes, while it will cover the distance between Suhar and Al Ain in 47 minutes, with a length of 238 kilometres.

Al Hatmi said that the project will contribute to economic returns. One trip of the freight train can transport more than

25,000 tonnes of general cargo, or ship more than 270 standard containers, and reduce carbon emissions by 10 times compared to other means of transport.

He pointed out that the speed of the freight train will reach 120 kilometres per hour, while the speed of the freight train will reach 120 kilometres per hour.

The speed of the passenger train is 200 kilometres per hour.

It is expected that the project will achieve savings in goods transportation costs ranging from 35 per cent to 40 per cent compared to the cost of other means of transportation, in addition to saving 80 per cent of the travel time for transporting goods between Suhar and Abu Dhabi compared to sea transportation, and up to 50 per cent of the time for transporting goods via trucks. — ONA

OETC celebrates 19th anniversary

MUSCAT: The Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) celebrated its 19th anniversary, which falls on the first of May each year, in a journey filled with achievements and aspirations, and vital strategic plans and projects that align with both national visions and global practices in the various relevant fields.

The OETC's efforts have succeeded in enhancing the electricity sector through the establishment and completion of various projects spread throughout all governorates in Oman, ensuring the sustainability, reliability, safety and availability of the electricity network.

Furthermore, the company responds to the continuous growth in all sectors along with empowering the national economy in line with the developmental journey pursued by the Sultanate of Oman.

OETC has completed and inaugurated more than 110 grid stations, extended 132 kilovolt electricity transmission lines for a distance exceeding 4600 kilometres, 220 kilovolt electricity transmission lines for more than 1800 kilometres, and 400 kilovolt electricity transmission lines reaching over 2800 kilometres. In addition, it has achieved the highest



We reaffirm our commitment to ensuring and improving the quality, reliability, sustainability and safety of the electricity transmission network

ENG SALEH BIN NASSER AL RUMHI

CEO, Oman Electricity Transmission Company

standards of quality in various operations and reached high levels of reliability and availability of the electricity network, which confirms OETC's commitment to achieving the highest levels of performance and meeting targets at the institutional and national levels.

Additionally, OETC, in collaboration with other partners, thrives to achieve the Sultanate of

Oman's Net-Zero goal by 2050, alongside connecting the electricity generation stations with renewable energy resources.

The electricity transmission network will also contribute to enabling and connecting various strategic projects, including the green hydrogen projects, which will have a direct and positive impact on supporting the national economy.

The company has achieved an Omanisation rate of up to 97 per cent, reflecting the OETC's confidence in national competencies across various positions that require high levels of knowledge, experience, and skills. OETC also monitors relevant international systems and policies, ensuring their application and compliance to guarantee the highest levels of health, safety, and environmental standards.

This is demonstrated by achieving over 48 million safe man-hours since the last lost-time injury (LTI) and zero major environmental incidents, as all OETC's members strive to achieve environmental sustainability.

Eng Saleh bin Nasser al Rumhi, OETC CEO, emphasised the company's commitment to supporting the developmental journey of Oman, continuing to

work efficiently and with high quality to achieve the aspirations and visions according to national plans.

Al Rumhi also highlighted the OETC's commitment to establishing various professional relationships and communicating with experts in the field to transfer knowledge, expertise and skills, and enhance the company's performance to reach the highest global standards in this field.

Al Rumhi added: "As we celebrate the sector's day, we recall the starting point and sharpen our ambitions to continue the developmental journey in the country under the wise and visionary leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik with OETC working as one of the leading institutions and major supporters of continuous growth in all sectors.

Through every new vital project, we reaffirm our commitment to ensuring and improving the quality, reliability, sustainability, and safety of the electricity transmission network, which extends throughout the Sultanate of Oman to supply all sectors with the life's nerve to continue our developmental journey together for a more prosperous future for Oman."

BEC, SVT Products conduct seminar on cutting-edge passive fire protection solutions



MUSCAT: Bahwan Engineering Company LLC (BEC) and SVT Products, Germany jointly conducts technical seminar with live demonstration, showcasing the effectiveness and importance of implementing passive fire protection measures.

Bahwan Engineering Group (BEC Group) who regularly bring leading products and innovative solutions to Oman, hosted a technical seminar together with SVT Products Germany, a leading provider of world class passive fire protection solutions, on April 30.

Aimed at showcasing state-of-the-art 'Passive Fire Protection Products and Solutions', the seminar, held at Crowne Plaza, Qurum garnered significant attention from major clients representing diverse sectors such as healthcare, infrastructure, defence, utilities, Engineering, Construction and more.

Among the distinguished attendees were prominent organisations including Public Authority of Civil Defence and Ambulance, Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Defence Engineering Services (MODES), Royal Oman Police (ROP), Ministry of Education, and Nama Electricity Distribution Company (NEDC).

The diverse representation highlighted the widespread recognition and relevance of SVT Products' offerings across various industries.

The seminar featured an insightful agenda designed to provide attendees with comprehensive knowledge and practical insights into passive fire protection offering attendees an

in-depth understanding of the latest advancements in the field of passive fire protection.

SVT team of experts covered several topics such as fire-stop materials, passive fire protection solutions, installation techniques, regulatory compliance and more.

One of the highlights of the event was a live demonstration conducted outdoors, showcasing the effectiveness and reliability of SVT Products' passive fire protection solutions.

Attendees had the opportunity to witness firsthand how these solutions perform under simulated fire conditions, emphasising their critical role in safeguarding lives and property.

Commenting on the success of the seminar, Thomas Frommeyer, Vice President, Head of Sales, Construction-Emerging Markets at SVT Products, expressed gratitude to the attendees for their participation and engagement. "We are delighted to have had the opportunity to share our expertise and solutions with such esteemed clients. The overwhelming response underscores the importance of proactive fire safety measures in today's world," he said.

The seminar served as a platform for meaningful dialogue and collaboration among industry stakeholders, paving the way for enhanced fire safety standards and practices across various sectors.

Several attendees commended the BEC Group for its commitment to driving innovation and excellence in all spheres of the industry, be it products, projects or services.

Omantel hosts first Oman chapter meeting of MEIRA

MUSCAT: Omantel, the leading provider of integrated telecommunication and ICT services in the Sultanate of Oman, on Wednesday hosted this year's first meeting of the Oman chapter of the Middle East Investor Relations Association (MEIRA), marking a significant milestone in its commitment to advancing Investor Relations (IR) practices within the region.

This significant event, held for the first time at Omantel's headquarters, underscores the company's dedication to promoting transparency and best practices in investor relations. By facilitating this important meeting, Omantel not only reinforced its role as an industry leader but also demonstrated its commitment to boosting Oman's investment landscape.

Ghassan al Hashar, Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of Omantel, said: "Hosting the MEIRA Oman chapter meeting aligns with Omantel's strategic vision to lead by example in the realm of investor relations. Omantel strongly believes in the need to drive initiatives that



Ghassan al Hashar, Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of Omantel

foster a deeper understanding of the financial markets and create a more transparent dialogue between companies and investors. We are extremely proud to host this meeting and network with organisations having similar focus on Investor Relations."

Paolo Casamassima, Chief Executive Officer of MEIRA stated: "This Oman chapter meeting comes at a time when the regional capital markets are witnessing higher levels of maturity as well as

global interest. We are confident this event will be a catalyst for greater networking among all MEIRA members, and that we can all benefit from learning about new trends in Investor Relations. We appreciate Omantel's role in hosting this important meeting."

The meeting, facilitated by Omantel, brought together leading professionals and stakeholders from across the Middle East, comprising with more than 100 attendees, including 14 CFOs, 25 IROs, and a

significant representation of local Analysts.

Discussions focused on current IR trends, challenges and strategies to elevate the overall investment framework within the region. The networking highlighted the crucial role of cross-regional knowledge exchange in enhancing the standards and practices of investor relations.

The event began with a presentation by Omantel CFO Ghassan al Hashar on "The importance of the Investor Relations function in communicating with institutional investors" highlighting key aspects of "Omantel IR program and Equity Story."

The presentation also demonstrated how Investor Relations can foster transparency and communication and how effective IR practices, especially in ESG disclosures, can boost any company's international presence. Omantel's proactive approach in hosting the MEIRA meeting not only reflects its commitment to best IR practices but also its dedication to contributing to the economic prosperity of Oman.

Sohar International pioneers payment gateway solutions

MUSCAT: Affirming its position as a leading digital bank in Oman, Sohar International, the fastest-growing bank in Oman, unveils a cutting-edge payment gateway meticulously crafted to empower merchants with unprecedented efficiency.

This state-of-the-art solution serves as a seamless conduit for online transactions, facilitating the smooth flow of information between websites, mobile applications and payment processors.

In the rapidly evolving landscape of digital commerce, Sohar International's payment gateway promises merchants a host of advantages, including streamlined payment processes, reduced friction in transactions, and heightened operational efficiency.

Commenting on the same, Sajael Bashiruddin, Chief Digital Officer at Sohar International, said, "As the wave of digitalisation continues to surge and online transactions become increasingly widespread, Sohar International's payment gateway is poised to help merchants navigate the intricacies of the digital economy while simultaneously enhancing overall customer satisfaction in online operations.

At Sohar International, we remain committed to rolling out innovative features across all digital channels. These endeavours are multifaceted, as they not only streamline financial transactions but also catalyse business expansion and economic activity, ultimately empowering enterprises to flourish in the digital era.



This dedication to innovation mirrors our overarching vision of cultivating an environment conducive to growth and

prosperity, one that encourages businesses to seize the opportunities prevalent in the digital landscape."

With the capacity to handle a diverse range of card payments, spanning from credit and debit to prepaid cards, this advanced solution reflects Sohar International's dedication to providing merchants with a reliable platform to elevate transaction experiences and streamline the checkout process for their customers.

By automatically routing transactions based on card type, the new platform eliminates the need for cardholders to manually select their card type, ensuring a seamless and efficient checkout experience. Tailored to address the evolving requirements of online businesses, Sohar International's payment gateway offers a range of essential features.

It facilitates multiple payment

options, accommodating both local and global preferences. Merchants can adapt to meet diverse customer needs, whether they opt for direct checkout or prefer secure methods like Authorise and Capture.

Additionally, the 'Link Payments' functionality enables merchants to effortlessly send payment links to customers via email and SMS. Particularly beneficial for small businesses without a dedicated website for payment acceptance, Link Payments provides a convenient solution to facilitate transactions seamlessly.

Employing a holistic strategy, Sohar International's payment gateway also provides a 'Recurring Payment' feature tailored for businesses with subscription models.

EV market in Oman gets a boost from infra push, affordable models

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, MAY 4

There are 650 registered electric vehicles in the country, according to estimates, which are catered to by over 100 charging stations, according to a company that has been working on such projects.

Ziad Helou, CEO of Electric Vehicles One LLC, said that these figures are not official but it is expected to only double in the future.

Last year, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) indicated around 350 to 400 electric vehicles operate on the roads of the Sultanate of Oman.

Speaking to the *Observer* during the Oman Sustainability Week, Helou said, "We own and operate EV charging stations in Oman and all these chargers are connected via a mobile application. There are around 250 who have registered in our application itself.

He sees great potential for the growth of the EV market in the Sultanate of Oman



New EV brands are being launched in the domestic market at reasonable prices.

due to the special emphasis from the government. "Previously, there were not many options available for interested buyers. New brands are now coming at reasonable prices into the market and people do not have to depend only on a brand like Tesla."

Earlier, an EV brand would cost

around RO30,000 but today it is much cheaper with prices starting from RO12-15,000, according to industry sources.

EVO chargers are located from the UAE border up down to Salalah, which means nearly 85 per cent of the corridors have EV chargers, which will go up to 98 per cent in the future with new

installations.

An AC charger will typically take 15 to 20 minutes to charge a vehicle from 20 to 80 per cent. Depending on the type of the vehicle, on a full charge, it can travel up to 300, 400, or even 500 km. "If you're driving on the highway you get lower range.

So some vehicles will travel up to 600km, but only on the city roads. In general, all EVs, when you drive them on the highway, are less efficient than in the city because they have regenerative charge."

It may be noted that the Chinese brand BYD will return to the Oman market with only electric vehicles in June.

The first "Made in Oman" electric SUV (Mays) is expected to roll out from the production line in Duqm in the last financial quarter on a 'first-ordered' basis.

The company said that it has around 1,400 preorders, including 350 from within the Sultanate of Oman. The SUV will be able to cover a distance of around 500 on a single charge and fast charging can be done from anywhere, including at home.

Real estate trading in Oman reaches RO 587.5 million



The traded value of sales contracts amounted to RO 284.9 million for 16,877 sales contracts.

MUSCAT: The total value of real estate trading in the Sultanate of Oman at the end of March 2024 amounted to RO 587.5 million, a decrease of 19.5 per cent compared to the same period in 2023, amounting to RO 730.1 million.

Statistics issued by the NCSI indicated that the fees collected for all legal transactions amounted to RO 16.5 million, a decrease of 10.3 per cent from the end of March 2023.

The traded value of sales contracts amounted to RO 284.9 million for 16,877 sales contracts. The value

increased by 3.3 per cent, while the number of contracts decreased by 1.8 per cent.

The traded value of mortgage contracts decreased by 30.8 per cent, recording RO 299.8 million for 4,858 contracts, while the number of swap contracts reached 383 contracts, worth RO 2.8 million.

The number of properties issued reached 57,167 properties, a decrease of 6.9 per cent, by the end of March 2024, while the number of properties issued to citizens of GCC countries reached 323 properties, a decrease of 1.2 per cent. — ONA

OCCI delegation visits Singapore

MUSCAT: A delegation from the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) begins its visit to the Republic of Singapore yesterday, aiming to strengthen trade and investment relations between the two countries in the private sector and benefit from Singaporean expertise and experience in various fields.

Mustafa bin Ahmed Salman (pictured), member of the Board of Directors of OCCI head of the delegation, said this visit seeks to explore trade and investment opportunities between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Singapore and to benefit from Singaporean experiences in the commercial field.

The visit comes after the two countries signed number economic agreements within the framework of a state visit made by



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to the Republic of Singapore in December 2023.

In a statement, he said that the delegation aims to learn about the latest developments in agricultural industrialisation, trade technology, food security, urban planning, finance, stock exchanges, banks, and others.

OCCI, in cooperation with the Singapore Business Federation, has prepared a visit programme for the trade delegation that includes a number of Institutions in the public and private sectors

and meeting their business counterparts in Singapore.

The delegation will seek investment opportunities in real estate development, attracting more investments to Oman, and activating the "Share with Us to Promote" initiative by involving entrepreneurs and owners of SMEs in the delegation. This will give them opportunity to learn about the products and learn on the experiences of countries and meeting with owners of commercial companies.

Mustafa pointed out that the volume of trade exchange between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Singapore amounted to about RO 767.6 million by end of 2023, while the number of Singaporean companies in Oman reached 24 with total investments of more than RO 55 million. — ONA

KCA Deutag secures \$45 million funding to build automated rigs

MUSCAT: KCA Deutag, a leading drilling, engineering, and technology partner based in the United Kingdom has secured an additional \$45 million of project financing from Oman Arab Bank (OAB). This builds upon the previous \$45 million acquired in 2023.

The total funding package of \$90 million supports the construction of four highly automated new build rigs, the first to be constructed in Oman.

The first two rigs have been completed and commenced operations at the beginning of the year, while the construction of the remaining two rigs is under way and is expected to be completed in 2024. The project financing will be repaid over ten years following completion.

Sulaiman al Harthy, Chief Executive Officer at OAB, commented: "This project strengthens our relationship with a key industry player in the world and demonstrates our commitment to financing high-value projects that drive economic progress.

It also underscores our belief in the power of partnerships and collaboration, enabling us to deliver



Sulaiman al Harthy and Jan Hetherington sign the financing agreement.

solutions that not only meet our client's evolving needs but also drive mutual value creation.

Jan Hetherington, Head of Corporate Development and Treasury at KCA said: "We are delighted to be working with a local bank as we build and deliver these four highly-automated rigs in Oman. Our ongoing presence in the country, ten-year contracts, and enviable footprint in the Middle East region have made this project finance deal possible.

Sustainable Italian tiles redefine interior design in Oman

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, MAY 4

Sustainable design has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary interior design, with an increasing emphasis on eco-friendly materials and products. Italian tiles, renowned for their quality and craftsmanship, are leading the charge in promoting sustainability in the industry.

Caterina Carannante, partner of Tricolore, delivered a lecture during the Design Muscat 2024, sponsored by Scientific College of Design and held under the auspices of Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Oman's Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

The event, under the theme 'Preserving national identity through the creative industries', provided a platform for industry leaders and scholars to discuss topics such as the impact of Artificial Intelligence on the creative industries, integrating AI in academic programmes, governmental strategies and

support in incorporating technologies, designing Muscat as a smart sustainable city and with case studies from Italy, Egypt, Oman and more.

In an interview with the *Observer*, Caterina said, "In the wake of growing environmental awareness, consumers are seeking not just beauty but also sustainability in their design choices. Italian tiles embody both elegance and eco-consciousness, offering a perfect blend of style and environmental responsibility."

The conversation surrounding sustainable construction and design practices has gained renewed momentum.

These platforms have provided a stage for industry leaders to showcase innovative solutions that prioritise environmental responsibility, and Italian tiles have emerged as a frontrunner in the quest for sustainable interior design options.

With a strong focus on eco-conscious manufacturing processes and materials, Italian tile manufacturers are not only meeting



Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Oman Minister of Heritage and Tourism, is the Guest of Honour during the 2nd day of Design Muscat 2024.

the demand for sophisticated design but also aligning with the global shift towards sustainability.

Italian tiles have long been synonymous with elegance, durability, and craftsmanship, making them a staple in upscale interior design projects. However,

as sustainability takes centre stage in the design world, these tiles are undergoing a transformation to meet the growing demand for environmentally-friendly solutions.

Porcelain tiles offer a sustainable alternative to finite natural materials like marble, stone, and wood.

Their long-lasting durability, high resistance, and low maintenance requirements make them an eco-friendly choice.

Unlike traditional materials, porcelain tiles do not necessitate harsh cleaning chemicals that pose risks to water systems and indoor air quality.

Tricolore, in partnership with leading Italian suppliers like Atlas Concorde, is at the forefront of this sustainability revolution, ensuring that their product range not only meets stringent environmental standards but also offers a diverse array of stylish and sustainable tiling options for customers in Oman.

The integration of sustainable Italian tiles into interior design projects is not merely a matter of aesthetics but a conscious choice towards reducing environmental impact and promoting eco-conscious practices.

As the industry evolves to prioritise sustainability, consumers are increasingly seeking products that not only enhance the visual appeal of their spaces but also contribute positively to the planet.

Italian tiles are highly valued for their quality and resistance.

Unlike other types of tiles, porcelain tiles are unglazed and full-bodied, making them the most compact and high-density products available.

With a lifespan of up to 20 years, porcelain tiles are a low-maintenance choice that can maintain their aesthetics and structural integrity over time.

In a country with weather conditions like Oman, these tiles can be used even for outdoor and building facades, with their capability to be UV resistant, maintaining their appearance even when exposed to direct sunlight, and to promote energy savings, by effectively moderating the changes in temperature of the rooms.

"We believe that sustainable design is not just a trend but a responsibility towards the environment and future generations. By choosing eco-friendly tiling options, customers can make a style statement while also making a positive impact on the planet," emphasised Caterina.

Bitcoin dominance declines as crypto scrutiny intensifies



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Bitcoin's market dominance is slipping, with altcoins like Solana (SOL), Pepe (PEPE), and Dogwifhat (WIF) gaining traction last week.

Cryptocurrency analysts are suggesting that Bitcoin's long-held dominance over the market could be reaching a turning point.

Its market share has seen a slight decline, potentially signalling growing investor interest in altcoins (alternative coins).

This shift aligns with the view that 'alt seasons' – periods when altcoins significantly outperform Bitcoin – are on the horizon.

From my point of view, BTC might experience seasonal dominance based on market conditions. When the market is bullish, altcoins might attract

more liquidity due to their higher volatility and potential for rapid upward gains.

Conversely, during bearish markets, BTC might regain higher market dominance as investors seek the relative safety of the more established cryptocurrency.

Bitcoin's dominance, which currently sits at 53.90%, experienced a 1.75% drop over the past week. While this figure remains up 4.63% since the beginning of 2024, it suggests a potential shift in investor preferences.

Recent gains by altcoins like Solana (SOL), Pepe (PEPE), and Dogwifhat (WIF) support this observation.

However, overall market sentiment is marked by caution. Bitcoin's price has declined 10.44% in the past week, and heightened investor fear levels suggest uncertainty. This could lead some investors to favour the perceived stability of Bitcoin over riskier altcoins.

The Federal Reserve's decision to maintain current interest rates comes as no major surprise to markets. This pause follows a string of consecutive rate hikes aimed at tackling inflation.

While short-term inflation expectations have been fluctuating, longer-term expectations remain anchored, indicating that the Fed may hold rates steady for some

time. This decision has resulted in a muted market reaction, with both cryptocurrencies and traditional stock indices showing minimal movement.

Bitcoin, in particular, continues to hover below the \$60,000 mark, with analysts anticipating potential downward pressure in the near term.

Analysts suggest that the Fed's policy trajectory will significantly influence the cryptocurrency market. Persistent inflation could discourage investors from riskier assets like Bitcoin and altcoins.

However, if the Fed can carefully navigate a path towards reduced inflation while supporting economic growth, the resulting market stability could prove beneficial for the cryptocurrency landscape.

Ultimately, the balance between the Fed's actions and evolving market conditions will hold the key to determining the direction of Bitcoin and the broader cryptocurrency sector.

Meanwhile, Changpeng Zhao (CZ), the former CEO of global cryptocurrency exchange Binance, has been sentenced to four months in federal prison. This follows his guilty plea to failing to implement an effective anti-money laundering (AML) programme within the exchange.

The sentence marks a significant turning point for

crypto regulation as CZ becomes one of the industry's highest-profile figures to face jail time.

CZ's sentence stands in sharp contrast to the 25 years former FTX CEO Sam Bankman-Fried (SBF) faces for alleged fraud and misuse of customer funds. While both cases involve legal violations, CZ's charges focus on regulatory oversight, whereas SBF is accused of intentional deception and large-scale theft.

Legal experts emphasise the importance of compliance for cryptocurrency companies. Zhao's imprisonment demonstrates the increased scrutiny the crypto sector faces from US authorities, signalling the end of a less regulated era.

While CZ's jail time is relatively brief, the impact could be significant for both Binance and the broader market. Market confidence in Binance may be shaken, opening the door for competitors. The case also underlines the ongoing debate surrounding the need for clear and robust crypto regulations.

Zhao has accepted the sentence, stating he will complete his jail time and focus on education-based initiatives after his release. Binance emphasises its commitment to regulatory compliance.

The exchange still faces a separate legal challenge from

the US Securities and Exchange Commission, adding complexity to its future trajectory.

The week in crypto continued with Jack Dorsey's Block, the company behind Square and Cash App, reportedly facing a federal investigation for alleged compliance violations, specifically within its Bitcoin business.

US prosecutors have been investigating Block's internal processes, including a spotlight on its cryptocurrency transactions.

A former employee, who claims the company has "widespread and years long compliance lapses," has provided information to prosecutors.

Block allegedly mishandled cryptocurrency transactions involving terrorist groups and economically sanctioned countries like Iran, Russia, Cuba, and Venezuela.

Furthermore, the company reportedly failed to address compliance concerns and may not have reported the majority of suspicious transactions, including Bitcoin transactions, to the government.

Block has issued a statement emphasising its commitment to compliance, highlighting their systems, tools, and processes for sanctions screening. The company also states it is continually improving its safety and security measures and invests significantly

in its compliance programme.

The whistleblower, who provided a substantial amount of supporting documents, alleges that Block's compliance structure was deeply flawed and that Block executives were aware of the pitfalls.

Block disputes this claim, stating it has voluntarily reported numerous flagged transactions to the Office of Foreign Assets Control.

The legally heavy week in crypto also involved Roger Ver, a somehow controversial figure in Bitcoin's history and author of the recently released book 'Hijacking Bitcoin,' has been arrested in Spain on tax fraud charges.

This arrest follows a US indictment alleging he concealed Bitcoin holdings to avoid over \$48 million in taxes.

Ver, once known as 'Bitcoin Jesus,' was a vocal advocate for increasing Bitcoin's blocksize, leading him to support the Bitcoin Cash (BCH) fork.

The US Justice Department claims Ver attempted to evade an 'exit tax' by strategically shifting Bitcoin ownership prior to renouncing his US citizenship.

They also allege he provided false information to his attorney. Spanish authorities are holding Ver pending extradition to the United States, where he faces a potential trial and prison sentence.

What's driving the global gold rush?



HAROLD JAMES

The writer is a Professor of History and International Affairs at Princeton University, and is the author of *Seven Crashes: The Economic Crises That Shaped Globalization* (Yale University Press, 2023).

A RECENT SURGE IN THE GOLD PRICE IS SYMPTOMATIC OF A CHANGING WORLD ORDER AND THE ONSET OF A NEW AGE OF CONFLICT AND UNCERTAINTY. GOVERNMENTS AND CENTRAL BANKS HAVE LONG VIEWED THE PRECIOUS METAL AS A POTENTIAL SOURCE OF MONETARY STABILITY AND ECONOMIC SECURITY, AND THIS TIME IS NO EXCEPTION.



A goldsmith wearing a protective mask arranges golden bangles at a jewellery shop at the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul. – Reuters

Gold has returned to the international monetary system. Over 50 years ago, US president Richard Nixon "closed the gold window" (ended the dollar's fixed-rate convertibility into gold), and the world moved on from its obsession with precious metals.

A new era of fiat currency had begun. But now, fiat money is being challenged by fiscal worries and new technology (blockchains/distributed ledgers), and the price of gold has reached all-time highs above \$2,400 per ounce.

Goldbugs, of course, argue that the metal remains an ideal investment for preserving value over the long term. But it is a mistake to believe that gold is uniquely stable.

On the contrary, its price measures a fever curve of discord, with spikes indicating a rush for assurance in a world where other values are endangered.

The price slumped in the 1990s, when the end of the Cold

War – and the "end of history" – had instilled a new sense of peace and stability. At the turn of the millennium, the price was under \$300 per ounce, and its rise since the 1970s was below the general rate of inflation.

But the price surged after the 2008 financial crisis and after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic; and it has done so again this year.

Much of the heightened demand for gold is driven by central banks. China, which had relatively small gold reserves of 395 tonnes in 2000, now has 2,260 tonnes.

Notably, it increased its stock of gold substantially in 2009 and 2015, which we now know to be watershed years for a world that was becoming more sceptical about globalisation.

Russia and Türkiye too, started building up massive war chests after 2015, and the same trend is also evident more recently in the European Union, where the Czech Republic and Poland have both been augmenting their reserves.

Security concerns are at the heart of the new politics of

gold. When the Czech Republic joined Nato in March 1999, it immediately sold almost its entire gold stock. The message could not have been clearer: a reliable security guarantee obviated any need for a monetary defence.

Yet in the last quarter of 2023, the Czech National Bank bought 19 tonnes, and it has signalled its intention to get that figure up to 100 tonnes.

The message this time is equally clear: Nato membership is not enough. And with its closer proximity Russia, Poland has also made its motivations clear, so much so that the central bank building currently features a giant poster announcing that it holds 360 tonnes of gold.

The association of gold with security has deep historical underpinnings in Poland,

where it was fundamental to the original idea of statehood.

When Poland was re-established after World War I – following the destruction of the Austrian, German, and Russian empires – its new currency took as its name the Polish word for "golden" (złoty).

Then, in September 1939, Poland conducted a dramatic operation to evacuate its gold to France, by way of Romania, Türkiye, and Lebanon. That sent the message that Poland still existed, despite the German invasion.

But the most remarkable use of gold as a source of stability was the Soviet experiment in 1922. Pushed by the most prominent Polish Bolshevik leader, Felix Dzerzhinsky, the chief of the secret police, the state issued chervonets ("red gold" coins) to

ward off inflation.

When the gold standard emerged as the basis of monetary order in the early 1870s, it ushered in a new international political system. One country after another – including the US, Germany, and Italy – wanted to stabilise its currency in the wake of destructive civil wars.

At the same time, the previous monetary standard, silver, was receding, following France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. The French had previously run a joint gold and silver system, but they were obliged to pay a costly reparations bill in silver coins.

Silver flooded the market, and its price collapsed. Gold was all that was left.

The abandonment of a parallel silver currency system in the 1870s might be a precedent for

the world of 2024. After all, there is rampant speculation about the imminent dethronement of the dollar, which would be the modern equivalent of the demonetisation of silver.

Since 2020, the US government has been amassing large fiscal deficits, and now one must consider the risk that a new Trump administration would try to devalue the dollar in order to destroy foreign competitors and create more American jobs.

Moreover, one also must worry about the stability of the financial system, and about US rivals' own efforts to replace the dollar.

The search for golden stability is thus a response to a world in flux. It reflects a growing belief that a new political order is emerging.

The Shanghai-based New Development Bank (or "BRICS bank") is actively pursuing a substitute for the dollar in the form of a synthetic currency, and more and more countries are trying to join the Brics grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, plus Egypt Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE).

They regard the greenback today as the equivalent of silver in the late nineteenth century: an outdated monetary hegemon.

A century ago, as the world was going back to the gold standard after WWI, John Maynard Keynes described the metal as a "barbarous relic," because it was the currency of conflict.

When political stability returns, the gold price will fall. In the meantime, governments and central banks that have invested in gold will have bought themselves a hedge in an insecure world.

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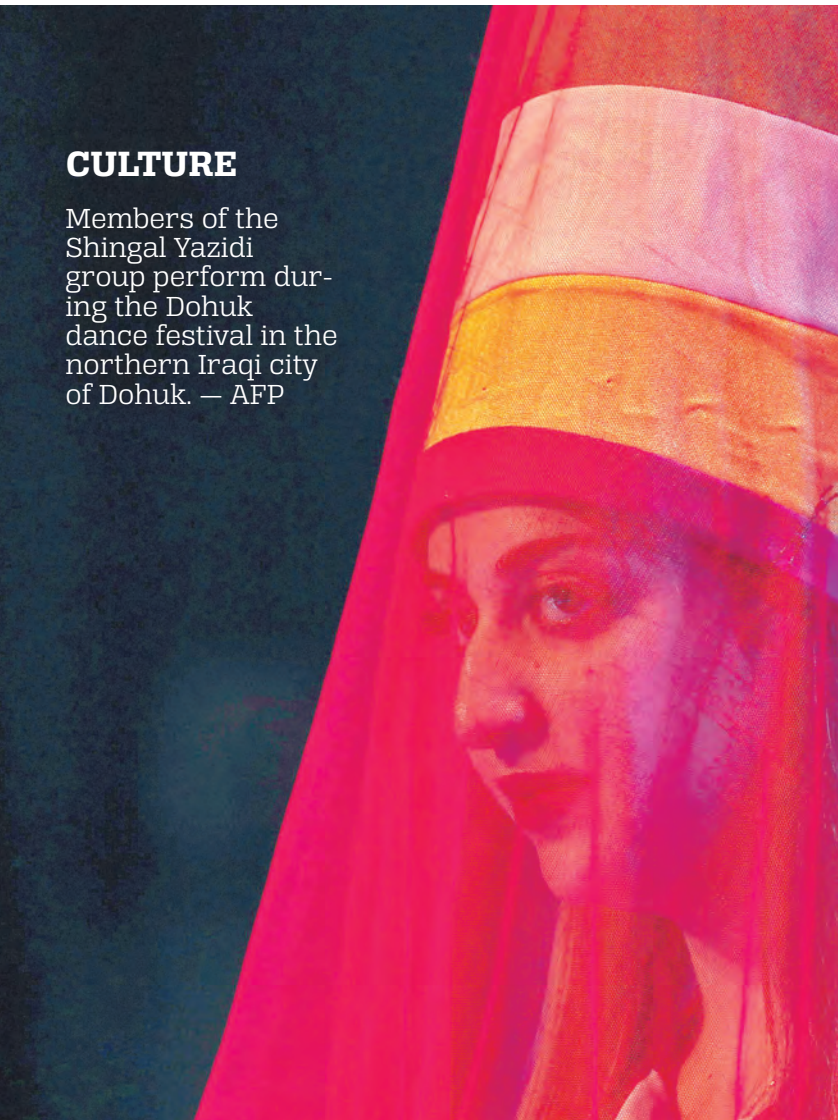
LIFESTYLE

A person on a Getir motorcycle drives through a snow-covered street in Berlin. Struggling Turkish grocery delivery app Getir said on Monday it was withdrawing from the United States and its remaining locations in Europe. — AFP



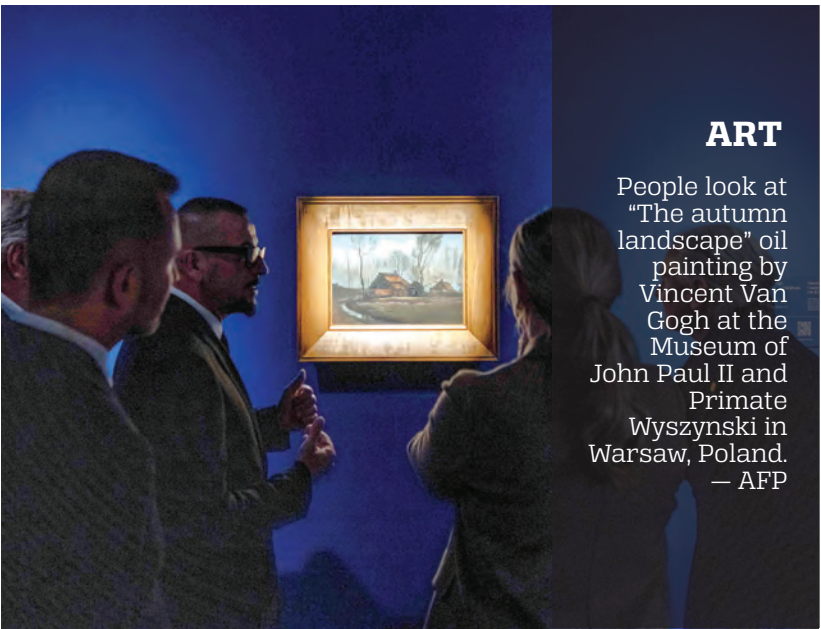
CULTURE

Members of the Shingal Yazidi group perform during the Dohuk dance festival in the northern Iraqi city of Dohuk. — AFP



ART

People look at "The autumn landscape" oil painting by Vincent Van Gogh at the Museum of John Paul II and Primate Wyszynski in Warsaw, Poland. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

US actress Sarah Cooper attends Netflix's "Unfrosted" premiere at the Egyptian Theatre in Los Angeles, California. — AFP



FESTIVAL

Live snakes cover the statue of St Dominic during the procession in the village of Cocullo, central Italy as part of the traditional festival of the 'Serpari' (snake catchers). — AFP



art & life

SUNDAY | MAY 5, 2024 | SHAWWAL 26 , 1445 AH | OMAN OBSERVER | www.omanobserver.om | features@omanobserver.om

SNAKE CANYON:
PLUNGING IN AN
ADVENTURE THROUGH
NATURE’S SERPENTINE
BEAUTY

The Snake Canyon is renowned for its natural beauty and adventurous offering taking explorers on winding paths, rope descents, and crystalline pools. A true hidden gem, it is a also a kick off point to many hiking paths... P20



ART

Zwirner
Anchors Los
Angeles Art
Neighbourhood
With New
Gallery

DAVID ZWIRNER WILL open its new flagship Los Angeles gallery on May 23 with a 30th-anniversary exhibition featuring works by all of the gallery's 80 artists. Zwirner's decision to plant a flag in a third new space on North Western Avenue represents a powerful vote of confidence in the West Coast art market as well as in the Melrose Hill neighbour-

hood, which has recently exploded with galleries. "I've been a bit of a holdout with Los Angeles just because there is this traditional thinking that Los Angeles collectors like to buy in New York," Zwirner said in a telephone interview. "That's no longer true." Zwirner reached what he called a "tipping point" when Eli Broad's museum downtown decided to expand, and Michael Govan, the director of Los Angeles County Museum of Art, pressed through a \$715 million building project. "Visual culture was really front and centre," the gallerist said. "All these incredible artists were working there," Zwirner said of Los Angeles. "It's always been a hub for talent." While Zwirner's spaces at 612 and 616 N. Western Ave. — both former movie prop shops — opened last May, the gallery is now opening its flagship building at 606 N. Western Ave. by architect



Annabelle Selldorf, who is also designing Zwirner's next New York space. The three-storey building features more than 15,000 square feet of exhibition space, and the total square footage of all three galleries is 30,000. It includes an outdoor terrace with views of the Hollywood sign. While street parking can be a challenge in the neighbourhood, Zwirner will offer nine spaces. Among the galleries that have over the past few years flocked to Melrose Hill's vacant warehouse buildings are Clearing, Morán Morán, Sargent's Daughters, James Fuentes, Fernberger, Southern Guild, Rele and Shrine. Soon to open are Château Shatto and LAXART. Many of the galleries were attracted by the area's low-slung historic buildings. A crop of new hip eateries has also blossomed in the area — an Eater headline this year trumpeted, "How Melrose Hill

Became LA's Hottest Culinary Boom Town." "It's rare for historical fabric to run unbroken for hundreds of feet," said Zach Lasry, a property developer in the area. "Melrose and Western has that natural potential because of the architecture." Among the works on view will be new pieces by artists who have been with the gallery since the beginning, like Luc Tuymans and Stan Douglas, and those who recently joined the gallery, like Elizabeth Peyton, Michael Armitage and Emma McIntyre. To be sure, there are those concerned about gentrification who caution against pronouncing the arrival of a neighbourhood that already had its own value and character ("Art Galleries Are Not Reviving a 'Desolate' LA Neighbourhood," wrote Hyperallergic last summer). At the same time, the density of galleries is unusual for Los Angeles, attracting more foot traffic and giving North Western Avenue a new energy. "The street feels so alive and exciting," Lasry said. "And you can go gallery hopping like you're in New York." — NYT

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MOROCCO'S FARMING REVOLUTION: DEFYING DROUGHT WITH SCIENCE

IN THE HEART OF sun-soaked Morocco, scientists are cultivating a future where tough crops defy a relentless drought, now in its sixth year.

"Look at these beautiful ears of wheat," said Wuletaw Tadesse Degu, the head of wheat breeding at the International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA).

"The difference in quality between our field and others is striking," he said, pointing towards a lush expanse in Marchouch, south of Rabat, that stood in stark contrast with the barren lands elsewhere.

By 2040, Morocco is poised to face "extremely high" water stress, a dire prediction from the World Resources Institute, a non-profit research organisation.

Figures from the North African country's central bank paint a grim picture.

Cultivated areas across the kingdom are expected to shrink to 2.5 million hectares in 2024 compared with 3.7 million last year, with cereal yields more than halving to 25 million quintals (2.5 million tonnes) over the same period.

"It has become essential to use resilient seeds and to employ them as quickly as possible," said Tadesse, whose centre recently inaugurated a plant gene bank.

ADAPTED GENOTYPES
Tadesse's mission is to develop gen-

otypes that not only withstand drought and heat but also yield abundantly.

Last year, while the nation struggled, Marchouch achieved a yield of four tonnes per hectare with just 200 millimetres of rainfall.

Controlled irrigation and strategic sowing techniques are behind this agricultural revolution.

Looking to maximise production, farmers are experimenting with planting times and judicious irrigation.

Even a scant 10 millimetres of water, carefully applied, transformed barren soil into thriving fields.

Barley, too, has seen a resurgence, with yields jumping from 1.5 to two tonnes per hectare last year, thanks to climate-smart genotypes, said Miguel Sanchez Garcia, a barley specialist at ICARDA.

The centre, which operates in 17 countries in Africa and Asia, says it has developed 30 "elite lines" of grain.

Most of them are produced in Morocco by breeding genotypes of wild wheat with different ancestors, said ICARDA genetics researcher Ahmed Amri.

SLOW SYSTEM
Moroccan agricultural authorities approved six new wheat and barley varieties last year, but bureaucratic hurdles loom large.

Approval processes drag on, impeding the timely dissemination of new varieties to farmers, researchers at



the centre said, resulting in a five-year journey from approval to market-ready seeds.

"The certification system takes too long and should be revised quickly," said Moha Ferrahi, head of genetic resources conservation and improvement at the National Institute of Agricultural Research.

Ferrahi also pointed to the lack of engagement from private companies and farmers who opt for "foreign seeds to have a quicker return on investment while these seeds are not adapted to the climate of Morocco".

Yet many see room for improve-

ment, even in a drought-hit country where the average citizen consumes about 200 kilogrammes of wheat per year - significantly above the world's average, according to official figures.

"Unlike countries like Egypt or Ethiopia, Morocco has chosen to liberalise its market," said researcher Amri, meaning that authorities have no control over what varieties farmers select.

But Amri remains convinced that, coupled with the national agricultural programme, the widespread adoption of resilient varieties will help offset mounting losses. — AFP



SCIENCE

T. rex is at the centre of a debate over dinosaur intelligence

SURMISING EVEN THE physical appearance of a dinosaur - or any extinct animal - based on its fossils is a tricky proposition, with so many uncertainties involved. Assessing a dinosaur's intelligence, considering the innumerable factors contributing to that trait, is exponentially more dif-

ficult.

A study published last year by Vanderbilt University neuroscientist Suzana Herculano-Houzel that evaluated the intelligence of Tyrannosaurus rex, focusing upon estimated brain size and the number of brain neurons, as comparable to that of primates - specifically a baboon - caused a stir in scientific circles.

Now, an interdisciplinary scientific team has published a study in rebuttal, questioning Herculano-Houzel's methodology and challenging her appraisal of the smarts of T. rex and other big dinosaur predators in the dinosaur clade called theropods.

They instead suggested a more holistic approach to assess the braininess of Tyrannosaurus or any extinct animal, with brain size and neuronal count considered alongside other factors such as an animal's anatomy and ecology, data from living relatives, and fossil evidence about



how it moved about and fed that offer insight into its life.

"Our key findings are that the brains of most dinosaurs, including T. rex, were comparable in relative size to those of living reptiles, such as crocodiles and alligators. Furthermore, their neuron numbers were likely not exceptional, especially for animals of their body mass," said zoologist Kai Caspar of Heinrich Heine University in Germany, who studies the behaviour of living animals and was the lead author of the study published this week in The Anatomical Record journal.

"What needs to be emphasized is that reptiles are certainly not as dim-witted as is commonly believed," Caspar added. "Their behaviours can be very complex, and the experimental data we have point to many cognitive similarities between them, mammals and

birds. So whereas there is no reason to assume that T. rex had primate-like habits, it was certainly a behaviourally sophisticated animal."

Herculano-Houzel said she stands by her findings and called the new analysis flawed.

"The only thing that is under dispute is what already was at the time of my study: what was actually the size of dinosaur brains. Even then, we're talking about the difference between a T. rex brain being baboon- or monkey-sized," Herculano-Houzel said.

"Their conclusion hinges on a single extremely important point: whether theropods like T. rex shared their (brain-to-body size) relationship with their extant warm-blooded ostrich and chicken cousins, or with their more distant living relatives, crocodiles. I said the former, because I compared theropods to ostriches and chickens; they now say the latter," Herculano-Houzel added.

Caspar said the comparison to modern birds also was an integral part of the new study. — Reuters

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SUNDAY | MAY 5 | 2024

SNAKE CANYON: PLUNGING IN AN ADVENTURE THROUGH NATURE'S SERPENTINE BEAUTY

BY ARWA AL HASHIMI
PHOTOS BY RIYADH AL HINAI

In Oman, the beauty of nature is evident in the sound of chirping birds and the pure breeze, creating a magical atmosphere that captivates the senses and delights the soul. Such beauty becomes even more apparent when heavy rains fall and fill the canyons with water, where breathtaking natural landscapes are created.

Among the country's spectacular ravines, where people venture for unique escapades mixing relaxation and thrill, the Snake Canyon has been a preferred destination for a lot of extreme adventurers. An expedition to this place is not just about experiencing adventure; it's a holistic journey where travellers revel in both the voyage and the destination.

It's intriguing how some think the canyon is named after the different species of snakes living in the area, but in reality, it's named for the canyon's serpentine curves, resembling those of a snake. It's also referred to as Al Zama Canyon, named after the quaint village it winds through.

The canyon lies within the tranquil yet enchanting village of Bilad Sayt, in an area right at the divide of Al Batinah South and Al Dakhiliyah governorates. The village boasts terraced agricultural lands, ancient dwellings, and renowned falaj systems, with around seven of them originating from the mountains. Its scenic canyons further add to its allure.

For thrill-seekers, Snake Canyon provides options for long-distance walks, canyon crossing, swimming, rappelling, and other adventures. Nonetheless, it remains accessible to the average person with appropriate guidance, following the easier path to reach the canyon, as adventurers can reach it through Wadi Bani Auf Crossing, either from the Al Batinah or Al Dakhiliyah governorates.

Inside the serpentine canyon, there are two paths one can choose from: the lengthy trail, commencing from Al Hajjar village and winding its way to Al Zama village, adorned with three rope descents, with the grandest spanning 23 metres. Moreover, the canyon features a cascade of over 13 natural water pools, stretching across 3 kilometres.

As for the second path, aptly named "Sayir Al Zama" or the brief journey, it boasts a single rope descent, a mere 4 metres in length, inviting adventurers to plunge into crystalline pools and glide upon polished rocks, leading to serene waters.

There is also the recently unveiled "Sayir Hat," a hidden gem within this realm of wonders, adorned with astonishing vistas and sculpted rock formations, where the descent is a daring venture spanning over 30 metres.

On the opposite horizon, the mountain roads beckon, offering a symphony of exploration and athleticism. Among these trails is Bilad Sayt-Al Hamra Road, known scientifically as "W8" or locally as "Al Madhami". It ascends towards different paths leading to destinations such as the timeless village of Misfat al Abriyeen in Al Hamra, the towering summit of Jabal Shams, the tranquil atmosphere of Wadi Al Sahtan, or Sharaf Al Alamayn.

If you're looking for a destination that offers both thrills and amazing views, make sure to add the Snake Canyon to your list.

