

E-PLATFORM FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN

A team from Sanad student company at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) in Ibbi, Al Dhahirah Governorate, succeeded in developing an electronic platform to provide physiotherapy for autistic children. The team's conceptualisation of the platform gave it access to the final round of qualifiers to Injaz Oman competition. Hajer bint Khalid al Zaidiyah, head of the company's working team, said that the platform is a website that contains meaningful video and audio clips designed by specialists. **DETAILS ON P3**



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NEYMAR JOINS SAUDI CLUB AL HILAL IN TWO-YEAR DEAL



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MILESTONE VISIT AFFIRMS OMAN'S GLOBAL GREEN ENERGY STANDING



27,629 students secure seats in first sorting

55.6% ABSORBED BY GOVERNMENT HIGHER INSTITUTIONS

MUSCAT: The Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC) announced the results of the first sorting of admission to higher education institutions for the academic year 2023-2024, on Wednesday.

A total of 27,629 students were admitted to higher education institutions and domestic and overseas scholarships, according to Dr Hamad bin Khalfan al Numani, Director-General of the HEAC. The government higher education institutions absorbed 55.6 per cent of the total number students admitted whereas home scholarships took up 42.2 per cent and international scholarships

accounted for 2.2 per cent of that total. The higher admission percentage is attributed to the high rates the applicants had achieved in the General Education Diploma (GED). However, 7 per cent of university seats remain vacant due to the fact that the applicant did not meet admission criteria, the official said.

The successful applicants may complete the registration procedures from Thursday (August 17) till Wednesday (August 23) through the HEAC and online without the need for students to show up in person at educational institutions.

The HEAC explained that it



is possible for students admitted in the first sorting to reapply for the vacant seats from August 28 to 30 without being required to reject the opportunities obtained in the first sorting following which the HEAC will announced the vacancies for the second sorting from October 1 to 5, if any.

Dr Al Numani noted that the number of scholarship seats offered by private higher education institutions and private sector companies increased by 59.4 per cent compared to the last academic year. He added that HEAC allowed the students to pick the educational institution and the discipline directly through

the Centre for students admitted to the flexible programmes of the domestic scholarships (STEM, ESAM) at the private higher education institutions shown in the list announced by the Centre and the applicant gets a response within the first three days of the period specified for completing the registration procedures.

Dr Al Numani advised the students to follow up the updates and announcements issued by the HEAC. Regarding the students whose academic results will come after the announcement of the results of the first sorting, have to get in touch with the centre.

— ONA

MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO INDONESIA PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Joko Widodo of the Republic of Indonesia, on his country's Independence Anniversary. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sentiments and best wishes to President Widodo and the people of Indonesia. — ONA

HM GREETINGS TO GABON PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Ali Bongo Ondimba, of the Gabonese Republic, on his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sentiments and best wishes to President Ondimba and the people of Gabon. — ONA

Biden to survey Maui wildfire destruction

LAHAINA: US President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden will travel to Hawaii next week to survey the devastation left in the wake of the deadly wildfires that ravaged the Maui resort town of Lahaina last week, the White House said on Wednesday.

Biden on Monday will meet with first responders and survivors, as well as with federal, state and local officials, the White House said in a statement.

"I remain committed to delivering everything the people

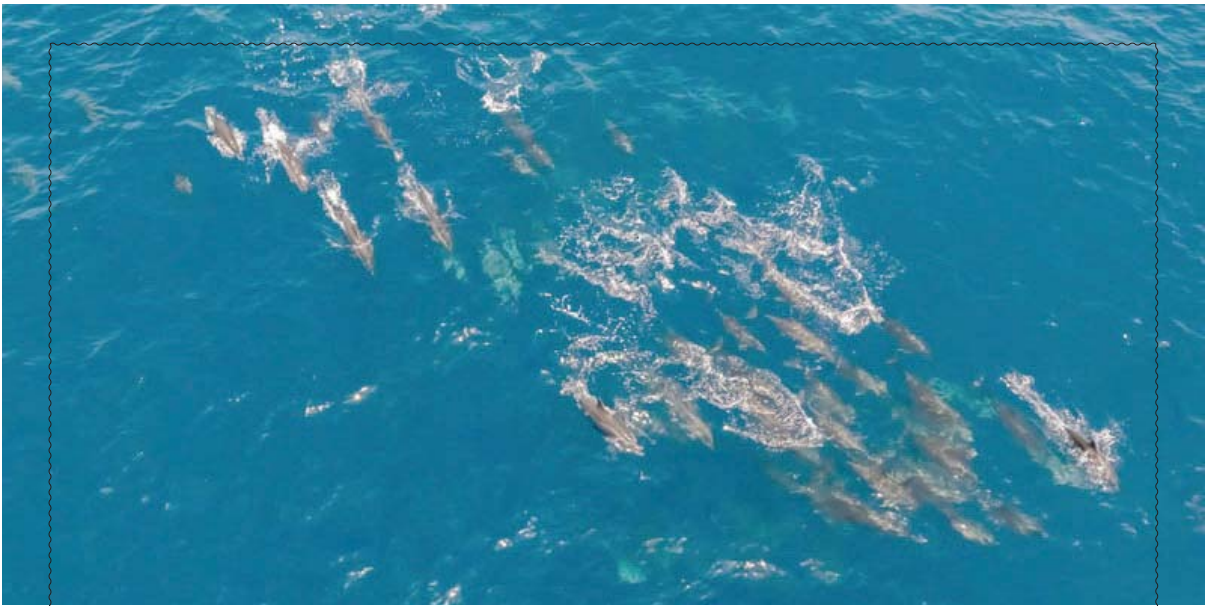


of Hawaii need as they recover from this disaster," Biden said.

The inferno killed at least 106 people after racing from grasslands outside town into Lahaina last Tuesday and charring a 13-square-km area of town in hours.

The fire, which caught residents by surprise, destroyed 2,200 buildings and caused an estimated \$5.5 billion in damage, officials said.

A week later, traumatised residents of the West Maui town have grown weary from living off relief supplies. — AFP



SEVEN SIGHTINGS OF DOLPHIN SPECIES

The initial results of a survey conducted by the Environment Authority to identify maritime mammals in Musandam Governorate resulted in seven sightings of dolphin species including spinner dolphin, humpback dolphin, striped dolphin, Indian Ocean humpback dolphin and the long-beaked common dolphin. — ONA

INSIDE



SPOTLIGHT

P4

How the art of writing evolved into a powerful tool

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Throughout the annals of human history, the art of writing evolved from a mere necessity to a powerful tool for preserving cultures and legacies. As civilisations flourished, leaving behind inscriptions became a way to etch their stories into the tapestry of time for generations to come.

The Sultanate of Oman, with its rich heritage, boasts of ancient inscriptions that span its landscape, tracing back to the remarkable era of the Bronze Age, when Omani ancient script was used.

Among the fascinating historical relics, two distinct scripts hold particular significance — the Ancient Omani and South Arabian scripts — both were used during the Iron Age.



During this epoch, Oman witnessed the flourish of these two scripts, each with its unique character and purpose. The Ancient Omani script, comprised of 29 alphabets, and its South Arabian counterpart, shared the stage as integral components of the nation's linguistic heritage.

Notably, the South Arabian script was predominantly discovered in the southern governorates of Oman, offering them a glimpse into their past.

Interestingly, a convergence of these two scripts is observable at the Oman Across Ages

The Ancient Omani script, comprised of 29 alphabets, and its South Arabian counterpart, shared the stage as integral components of the nation's linguistic heritage

Museum, nestled in Manah in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. This cultural haven serves as a repository of Oman's historical treasures, showcasing not only

artefacts but also a shared heritage of scripts. A significant highlight at the museum is the South Arabian inscriptions in their natural state and original setting at Khor Rori in Mirbat. This location, steeped in history as a key port for the frankincense trade, is now designated as a Unesco World Heritage site.

The interesting factor is that the scholars have now deciphered Ancient Omani and South Arabian and this means they are now able to read it.

That is not all, at the museum's gallery the section specialising on the subject has the facility where one can type out the individual's name in Arabic or English and it would translate it into both scripts — Ancient Omani and South Arabian. Visitors can also purchase ancient script merchandise from the museum shop.



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TRA to start trial ‘shutdown’ of 3G services

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The Telecommunications Regulations Authority (TRA) will conduct a limited trial to stop the third-generation services as part of the plans to identify the challenges ahead of the gradual suspension of all 3G services in the country by the third quarter of the year 2024.

As part of the efforts to upgrade the telecom services to meet the needs of the future, TRA had earlier announced that it will stop providing third-generation (3G) mobile services gradually, starting in the third quarter of 2024.

With this move, mobile devices

limited to 3G and 2G capabilities will have to be phased out, and their users will be forced to upgrade their gadgets in line with the needs of telecommunication services.

Speaking to the Observer, a top TRA official had said that there is a programme in place to close 3G networks so that service providers can use 3G spectrum capacities for new technologies such as 4G and 5G.

The suspension of 3G services will take place gradually starting with the least populated areas. TRA said that it will stop approving and importing communication devices that do not support the minimum of a 4G network. It said



that (VoLTE) or Voice over 4G LTE network must be enabled in all mobile devices.

The decision also reflects the rapid development of the telecommunications sector in

The suspension of 3G services will take place gradually starting with the least populated areas. TRA will stop approving and importing communication devices that do not support the minimum of a 4G network

networks to allow the use of more effective networks, allowing subscribers better quality services and enhancing the experience of using the latest and most advanced networks. According to GSMA Intelligence, by 2025, there will be around 50 million 5G connections, with around 20 million in the GCC States. The report added that 5G will also add pressure to phase out previous generation networks in markets where 5G network rollout has been quick.

The timeline for such phasing out 2G or 3G will depend on various spectrum factors as well as the number of devices used on 2G/3G networks.



ONA chairs GCC news agencies meet

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Information, represented by Oman News Agency (ONA), chaired the 22nd GCC news agencies’ meeting held on Wednesday via video conferencing.

Ibrahim bin Saif al Azri, Director-General and Editor-in-Chief of Oman News Agency (ONA), head of the current session, said, “Today’s meeting seeks to raise the level of media content provided by GCC news agencies, notably amid the rapid development of news

broadcasting technologies.” He pointed out that artificial intelligence (AI), in particular, is expected to generate more advanced shifts forward in news broadcasting.

In his speech during the opening of the meeting, Al Azri laid emphasis on the speedy accomplishment of projects of significance to the goals set out by GCC news agencies.

Al Azri stressed the GCC news agencies realising the mission entrusted to them in conveying accurate information and

consolidating credibility among the recipients of news.

Al Azri stressed the need to develop GCC news agencies’ content, improve performance and devise new methods to make this content accessible to GCC, Arab and international audiences in full ease.

He also underscored GCC news agencies’ ability to garner influence via interactive platforms that attract various segments of public audience eager to keep pace with news and information on global developments. — ONA

Bids invited for integrated transport hub

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, AUGUST 16

Al Dakhiliyah Governorate is inviting bids for developing an integrated Nizwa station for public transport buses and taxis. The scope of the project includes design, construction, financing, operation and transfer of assets.

To be spread over 11, 412 sqm, the investment period for the project is 50 years. The Governor Office in Al Dhakiliyah signed a memorandum of understanding with Mwasalat for an integrated hub for buses and taxis in the Wilayat of Nizwa in 2022.

The agreement was signed by Shaikh Hilal bin Said al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah, and Badr bin Mohammed al Nadabi, acting CEO of Mwasalat. The agreement included exchanging



information, studies and research for the Integrated One Stop Station for buses and taxis, including the economic viability of the project.

The project includes a bus station for transportation within the city and inter-city, a waiting station for passengers, taxis with shaded parking, public parking,

and various commercial activities that create job opportunities for the people of the governorate.

After the completion of this project, Mwasalat will provide integrated, sustainable, efficient, safe and technologically advanced transportation services in the Wilayat of Nizwa.

Oman, Kazakhstan discuss joint military cooperation



NUR-SULTAN: The Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Kazakhstan conducted joint military talks.

The two sides discussed means of promoting the joint military cooperation. The talks were held

during an official visit made by a military delegation led by Brigadier Hamid bin Abdullah al Balushi,



Assistant Chief of Staff of the Sultan’s Armed Forces for Operations and Planning. During the visit, the

Omani military delegation met with officers at the General Staff of the Kazakh Armed Forces. — ONA

Time set for taxi operators to join licensed applications

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology has released the details of the timetable to start implementing the decision to compel taxi owners to join the applications licensed by the ministry through three-time stages.

The ministry stated that the first phase of the programme begins on October 1, which includes taxi drivers operating at the airports of the Sultanate of Oman, while the second phase will cover tourist complexes, hotels, commercial centres, and ports beginning from November 1.

The third phase will cover mobile white and orange from January 1. The ministry stated that it will, during the coming period, invite owners of applications licensed for taxi activity to apply for an additional licence to practice the activity according to the target groups in the programme.

The programme is based on the Land Transport Law and its executive regulations for the benefit of taxi owners through the technologies available in the applications and the system that allows the user to track and monitor the route while ensuring his privacy and security.

Oman-USA military drill ‘Valley of Fire 2023’ concludes

SALALAH: The joint Oman-USA military drill ‘Valley of Fire 2023’ concluded on Wednesday in the Governorate of Dhofar.

The drill was conducted with the participation of the Royal Army of Oman (RAO) and infantry units of the United States Army.

Other personnel of RAO and the Royal Air Force of Oman



(RAFO) also took part in the drill.

Simulation and role-playing tasks of the drill were aimed at providing training in accordance with the RAO training plan to sustain preparedness and achieve the desired national objectives.

The drill comes within the context of annual training

programmes that aim to exchange expertise in military fields.

The concluding event was held under the auspices of Brigadier Abdulkadim bin Ibrahim al Ajmi, Commander of the 11th Infantry Brigade. It was also attended by several senior officers of RAO and the US Army. — ONA



Dialogue session looks at humanisation of cities



MUSCAT: The Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science, affiliated to the Diwan of Royal Court, on Wednesday organised a dialogue session titled ‘Humanisation of Cities’.

A group of specialists from government and private institutions took part in the event.

The session tracks back the concept of humanisation of cities over historical epochs and explores its social, economic

and environmental impacts on societies, with special emphasis on raising the quality of life.

The session looked into challenges faced by cities in GCC states and the role of urban planning on augmenting the proportion of humanisation in cities.

On the sidelines of the session, the specialist exchanged views on various aspects of urban planning and humanisation of cities. — ONA

E-platform established to provide physiotherapy for autistic children



IBRI: A team from Sanad student company at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) in Ibri, Al Dhahirah Governorate, succeeded in developing an electronic platform to provide physiotherapy for autistic children.

The team’s conceptualization of the platform gave it access to the final round of qualifiers to INJAZ Oman competition.

Hajer Khalid al Zaidi, head of the company’s working team,

said that the platform is a website that contains meaningful video and audio clips designed by specialists.

The content is aimed at developing autistic children’s skills and helping them to easily integrate into society, besides developing self-reliance in those children.

One of the sections on the website contains strategies envisaged to identify an autistic child’s talents. — ONA

Turtle programme ensures safe hatching at Ras al Hadd

MAI AL ABRI
MUSCAT, AUGUST 16

The preservation of turtle species in Ras al Hadd Reserve and other reserves in the Sultanate of Oman is significantly upheld by the Environment Authority. This responsibility is underscored by the initiation of the Turtle Commando Programme in 2021; a comprehensive initiative focused on the protection, management, and vigilant oversight of sea turtles.

Saleh al Abri, who holds a supervisory role within the Turtle Commando Programme, elucidates their operational procedures. Their duties commence at 7 pm, a critical time when individuals are guided away from the beach, and stringent measures are taken to curtail the use of intense illumination along the shoreline. Specifically, only red-light sources are allowed due to their minimal impact on young turtles.



Al Abri further emphasises the rationale behind these measures. He highlights that young turtles, upon hatching, inherently rely on the moon’s natural light to guide them from their nesting sites to the ocean.

This instinctual behaviour ensures their successful transition into their marine habitat. However, the intrusion of artificial lights severely disrupts this natural process. The presence

of non-natural illumination leads to the disorientation of hatchlings, causing them to veer off course and become stranded on land. This interference poses a significant threat to their survival, as the sea is their ultimate destination and source of sustenance.

Therefore, the proactive measures taken by the Turtle Commando Programme, under the umbrella of the Environment Authority, stand as a pivotal

step in safeguarding the delicate lifecycle of these sea turtle species.

Through the implementation of controlled lighting practices, these efforts aim to mitigate the adverse impacts of human activity on these remarkable creatures, thereby contributing to the long-term health and preservation of their populations.

Notably, official statistics reveal that each year, an estimated 6,000 to 13,000 turtles choose to nest

within this region. These turtles undertake migrations to the Sultanate of Oman from remote areas like the Arabian Gulf, the Red Sea and the coastlines of Somalia. Additionally, it is important to highlight that the reserve serves as a habitat for a diverse array of bird and wildlife species.

The primary objective behind its creation is to safeguard the natural ecosystem from human disruption.

Work begins on RO 2.5m water supply network in Yanqul, to serve 10,000

YANQUL: Nama Water Services announced the start of a project to construct a water network in Al Ulou area in the Wilayat of Yanqul, Al Dhahirah Governorate. The project costs RO 2.5 million.

Speaking at a press briefing

held at the office of Wali of Yanqul, Badr bin Salim Al Rab’aani, Project Manager at Nama Water, said the project is set to be carried out in 18 months, from July 2023 to December 2024.

Al Rab’aani pointed out

that the project includes the construction of a 75-km water distribution network, with 700 connections.

The project is designed to cope with urban expansion, cater to 4,200 beneficiaries, now, and serve as many as

10,000 beneficiaries in future.

The project includes the installation of firefighting nozzles, isolation valves, air valves and pressure control points, as well as culverts for the flow of water in wadis (valleys) and under roads. — ONA

Counterfeit auto parts one of the reasons for accidents, casualties

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Counterfeit spare parts and substandard accessories are one of the major reasons for road accidents and casualties. Keeping this in mind, the Royal Oman Police (ROP) have urged everyone to avoid using such products.

Such parts are available mostly in shops near the motor garages. They are sold as original, and rates are also at par with the original; still, customers, in most cases, are duped into buying the same.

“Counterfeit spare parts in vehicles are one of the main reasons for accidents, and in most cases, casualties as counterfeit spare parts are not as durable as original ones. They cause accidents and fire that erupts after a crash,” a senior police official from the Traffic Department said, adding,

“Saving a few rials by buying counterfeit products is not worth it because it puts the buyer’s life in danger.” Oman’s traffic accidents went up 15.5 per cent in 2022 while insurance companies reported claims down to RO 25m, against 2021 figures when insurers paid RO 28.6m, according to the Capital Market Authority (CMA) report.

Speed is the main cause of most of the accident-related deaths in Oman, followed by mobile phone usage while driving, negligence, overtaking, tailgating, ruthless driving, vehicle defects and improper roads.

In 2022, the total number of traffic accidents was 76,200 compared to the previous year. These include 60,900 minor accidents and 15,300 major accidents during the year.

In light of this, the Consumer Protection Department (CPA)



has embarked upon a random search and seized two commercial establishments that sold filters for engines of counterfeit vehicles as original, violating the Consumer Protection Law and it’s implementing regulations in Al Dhahirah Governorate.

CPA acted upon a tip-off that some commercial establishments sold counterfeit spare parts and engine filters wrapped in a cover bearing one of the well-known trademarks as original filters.

“We spare no effort to intensify monitoring the markets and control everything that may harm public health and pose dangers to the consumers. Legal measures are initiated against violators. Consumers are requested to report any violations that they may notice in the markets through the various communication channels of the authorities,” he further said.



PARKING WOES

NEED TO DRAW
STRATEGIC PLANNING
TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, AUG 16

The capital city of Muscat is grappling with an increasingly severe parking shortage, an issue that continues to intensify. The prevailing scarcity of parking spaces within modern investment structures, restaurants, and financial institutions highlights the dire need for comprehensive planning and forward-looking strategies among building proprietors.

The consequences of this parking crisis are manifold, ranging from social tensions among citizens to unsightly scenes in public areas. Illegitimate parking on sidewalks and in front of stores and the surge in traffic violations and accidents further emphasise the gravity of the situation. Particularly concerning are the unsettling congregations of vehicles in densely populated residential hubs, notably in Bausher, Al Ghubra, and Al Khoudh.

Said al Harthy, a resident in one of Bausher’s buildings, underscores the correlation between traffic congestion and the parking predicament. He contends that the shortage of parking spaces has contributed to the burgeoning traffic woes, asserting that prudent urban planning should extend to compelling investors to allocate parking provisions.

Al Harthy underscores the symbiotic relationship between adequate parking and flourishing investments. He emphasises that a prosperous future hinges on prioritising the parking conundrum, proposing it to be as indispensable as the properties’ efficiency. Contrary

to prevailing notions, Al Harthy attributes the current traffic congestion less to traffic mismanagement and more to urban planning inadequacies.

In concurrence, Sultan al Yaarubi has urged attention to the Bausher district, where multi-story structures housing apartments, eateries, offices, and clinics are juxtaposed with an acute shortage of parking spaces.

Al Yaarubi discerns a glaring planning deficit, advocating for a legislative directive that mandates building owners to designate parking facilities within their premises. He criticises the trend of transforming residential spaces into commercial hubs without adequate consideration for residents’ parking needs, branding it as a stark example of poor planning by the building owners.

Highlighting a potential pathway towards mitigation, Al Yaarubi recommends that any building with over five or six floors ought to allocate a basement floor for parking, alongside parking spaces encircling the structure, in line with its residential and commercial activities. The expansion of vehicle numbers in Oman demands a radical rethink of urban infrastructure, necessitating the provision of well-organised and sufficient parking spaces. Al Yaarubi says: “Among the reasons that created a shortage of parking spaces is the lack of a societal culture to use public transportation”.

Khalid al Balushi, a resident of Al Ghubra, attributes the parking shortage crisis to population growth and the parallel rise in vehicle numbers. The absence of designated parking in front of buildings due to closely situated structures has further aggravated the crisis. Al Balushi beseeches the relevant authorities to address this burgeoning parking shortage crisis with effective and immediate measures to safeguard the city’s liveability and functionality.

“The absence of sufficient parking spaces is adversely affecting the lives of citizens and residents. Muscat is experiencing severe traffic congestion and a dire parking crisis. This situation has forced individuals to allocate extra time before appointments to secure parking spaces, affecting their daily schedules and productivity,” Al Balushi adds.

The city’s aesthetics are negatively impacted, and congestion is intensifying in service-oriented streets due to the shortage of available parking spaces. People have to waste a substantial amount of time looking for suitable parking. Broad planning is the only answer to this issue.





Ukraine reports new attack on grain storage facilities

KYIV: Ukraine said Russia had attacked its grain storage facilities overnight, but a container ship left the Black Sea port of Odesa on Wednesday despite Moscow’s threat to target shipping after it abandoned an export deal.

In the Russian capital, five sources said authorities were considering reimposing stringent capital controls as the rouble showed the strains of Russia’s attack of its neighbour, which has brought huge military spending and Western sanctions.

The departure from Odesa of Joseph Schulte, trapped in the port since dispute started on February 24 last year, followed the latest Russian attack on the country’s grain export infrastructure.

Overnight air strikes damaged silos and warehouses at Reni on the Danube river, a vital wartime route for food exports, Ukrainian officials said. They posted photos of destroyed storage facilities and piles of scattered grain and sunflowers.

There was no comment from Moscow. An industry source said the port was continuing operations, tempering a rise in benchmark wheat prices in Chicago off their two-month low.

Moscow has threatened to treat any ships leaving Ukraine as potential military targets and on Sunday its navy fired warning shots at a ship travelling towards Ukraine.

Despite the threats, Ukraine last week announced a “humanitarian corridor” in the Black Sea to release cargo ships that have been trapped in its ports by a de facto Russian blockade, pledging to make clear they were serving no military purpose.

“A first vessel used the temporary corridor for merchant ships to/from the ports of Big Odesa,” Deputy Prime Minister Oleksandr Kubrakov said on Facebook.

Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement (BSM), which owns the ship jointly with a



The Joint Coordination Centre officials sail through cargo ship Mehmet Bey as she waits to pass the Bosphorus strait off the shores of Yenikapi during a misty morning in Istanbul, Türkiye. — Reuters file photo

Chinese bank, confirmed that the ship was en route to Istanbul.

Kubrakov said it was carrying more than 30,000 metric tonnes of cargo in 2,114 containers, adding that the corridor would primarily be used to evacuate ships from the Black Sea ports of Chornomorsk, Odesa and Pivdennyi.

Moscow has not indicated whether it would respect the shipping corridor, and shipping and insurance sources have expressed concerns about safety.

Ukraine is a major grain and oilseeds exporter and the United Nations says its supplies are vital to developing countries where hunger is a growing concern. Neither Kubrakov nor the shipping company specified the cargo on board the Joseph Schulte but grain is rarely carried in containers.

The attacks on Ukraine’s grain followed its launch of a Western-backed counteroffensive in early June to try to dislodge Russian forces from territory they occupy in the south and east. — Reuters

Spain’s acting PM says he will seek investiture vote

MADRID: Spain’s acting Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said on Wednesday he intended to seek the support of the lower house to form a new government after an inconclusive election on July 23. “I will ask for parliament’s confidence to form a progressive government,” Sanchez said in a address to the legislators of his Socialist Party (PSOE). He said his party, which won the second-highest number of seats in the general election held last month, will first seek to clinch the lower house speaker position on Thursday. Spain’s election in July produced no outright winner, with the conservative People’s Party



Spain’s PM and Socialist Party (PSOE) leader Pedro Sanchez attends a campaign closing rally ahead of the general election, in Getafe, Spain. — Reuters file photo

(PP) gaining the most seats but falling short of a majority. Both the PP and PSOE have since begun negotiating with smaller parties to court their votes in parliament to form a government.

Sanchez did not say on

Wednesday who his coalition partners would be, but has previously said he intends to ally with far-left alliance, Sumar that includes Podemos.

His PSOE, which together with Sumar has 152 seats, will need the 14 parliamentary

votes of Catalan separatist parties Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) and the more hardline Junts to win an investiture vote in the 350-seat parliament. While the ERC has indicated a willingness to reach an accord, Junts has stuck to its demands of permission to hold a referendum on Catalan independence and an amnesty for all separatists facing legal charges related to the region’s 2017 failed independence bid. This includes its exiled leader Carles Puigdemont, who Spanish authorities are seeking to extradite from Belgium.

In a nod to the separatists, the Socialists have proposed Francina Armengol as speaker of the lower house. — Reuters

Philippines appoints outspoken diplomat as ‘special envoy’ to China

MANILA: Former Philippine foreign minister Teodoro Locsin has been appointed the president’s special envoy to Beijing, the government said on Wednesday.

Locsin, currently the ambassador to Britain and Ireland, often used strong language while serving as foreign secretary under former president Rodrigo Duterte and once swore at China online over the presence of its vessels in the disputed South China Sea.

His expletive-laden demand prompted a rebuke from Beijing and Locsin later apologised to his Chinese counterpart.

The Philippine foreign affairs department declined to comment on Locsin’s surprise appointment, which was announced by the Presidential Communications Office on its official Facebook page.

It said in a brief statement Locsin had been appointed “Special Envoy of the President to the People’s Republic of China for



Special Concerns”.

No other details were provided.

Presidential communications chief Cheloy Garafil told reporters Locsin would serve in a “concurrent capacity”, suggesting he would remain as ambassador.

The decision comes at a delicate time for relations between the Philippines and China, which are embroiled in another diplomatic spat over the South China Sea.

Beijing claims almost all of the waterway, through which trillions of dollars in trade passes annually, and has ignored a 2016 international court ruling that its

assertion has no legal basis.

Tensions flared this month when the Philippines accused Chinese Coast Guard vessels of blocking and firing water cannon at boats on a resupply mission.

Manila summoned Beijing’s envoy over the incident, which resulted in one of the boats carrying supplies failing to reach a Philippine Navy vessel grounded on Second Thomas Shoal in the Spratly Islands.

The handful of Filipino marines stationed on the crumbling ship to assert the Philippines’ territorial claims depend upon resupply missions to survive their remote posting.

Beijing has defended its actions as “professional”, and accused Manila of “illegal delivery of construction materials” to the grounded ship.

The Philippines has insisted that Second Thomas Shoal is within its exclusive economic zone and its efforts to resupply troops and repair the BRP Sierra Madre are legitimate. — AFP

Tender at Buraimi Industrial City



The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (MADAYN) is pleased to announce a tender in Buraimi Industrial City for investors and developers to construct, develop, and administrate a market of fruits and vegetables in Humaydah area.

Opportunity Number	Project Name	Last date of buying	Date of submission	Fee (OMR)
4/2023	Constructing, Developing and Administrating a Market of Fruits and Vegetables	21/09/2023	02/11/2023	50

The following procedures apply:

1-Tender Documents can be obtained from Mada'ayn Support Department at Buraimi Industrial City (Tel: 25657768 / 25657764) during official working hours, against non-refundable fee as mentioned above.

2- Completed bids according to the terms of the tender document shall be deposited in the Bid Box at Buraimi Industrial City administration office before 12 pm on the specified date.

3- For further inquiries, please contact us at,

25657756

25657779



Tender Announcement

Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG invites Bidders to submit their proposal for the below detailed tender:

Tender No.	Description	Tender Fee (Non-refundable) OMR	Tender Purchase Deadline	Clarification Deadline	Tender Submission Date
TENDER/2023/08/ENG/012	MANUFACTURE AND SUPPLY OF FUEL STORAGE TANKS	150	24.08.2023	29.08.2023	03.09.2023

Bank Name & Account Number
Bank Muscat (0423005687760617)

The Conditions:

- Collection of Tenders:** Interested, specialized companies and establishments registered under grade 3 and above (in C.R) with minimum of 3 years' experience in the same field. Bidders can collect the tender documents from the procurement department by sending a copy of the payment slip to procurement@almaha.com.om
- Bank Guarantee:** The bidder should enclose a bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for an amount equivalent to (1%) of the tender value, with a validity of (90) Days from the last date of submission and addressed to Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG.
- Offer Submission:** Tender bid should be submitted a sealed envelope and addressed to the **Chairman of Tender Committee**, Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG marked with tender number and subject. Other marks or any reference must not be printed outside the envelope. The exterior of the envelope containing the tender document must not reveal the identity of the bidder.
- Submission Location:** The bid should be deposited in the tender box at Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG head office located in Ghala before 01:00 PM on the submission date.
- Any bid received after the specified date or if it does not meet the conditions will not be considered.
- Each bid shall be signed and stamped with the signature of the authorized person.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to accept, reject or cancel the tender without giving any reasons.
- Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to add or cancel some of the works mentioned in the tender if necessary.
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North Korea claims ‘racial discrimination’ drove US soldier to defect



A man walks past a television showing a news broadcast featuring a photo of US soldier Travis King (C), Seoul. – AFP

SEOUL: Travis King defected to North Korea to escape “mistreatment and racial discrimination in the US Army”, state media said on Wednesday, Pyongyang’s first official confirmation they were holding the American soldier.

A private second class with a chequered disciplinary record, King was due to fly back to America in July but instead slipped out of South Korea’s main airport, joined a tourist trip to the DMZ and ran across the border into the North.

The United States has previously said that King crossed the border at the Joint Security Area in the Demilitarised Zone separating the North and the South “willfully and without authorisation”.

Following a North Korean investigation, King “admitted that he illegally intruded”, Pyongyang’s Korean Central News Agency reported.

“Travis King confessed that he had decided to come over to the DPRK as he harboured ill feeling against inhuman maltreatment and racial discrimination within the US Army,” KCNA said, referring to the North by its official name.

King “came to be kept under control by soldiers of the Korean People’s Army” after he crossed the border, KCNA said.

“He also expressed his willingness to seek refugee in the DPRK or a third country, saying that he was disillusioned

at the unequal American society,” KCNA said, adding that a government investigation was still ongoing.

The United Nations Command confirmed last month it had begun a conversation with the North over King.

But US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said at the time that while contact had been made with the North Koreans, Washington still had no idea where King was or in what condition.

KCNA did not provide any details about King’s health or location, or about what they planned to do with him.

King crossing the border comes as relations between the two Koreas are at one of their lowest points ever, with diplomacy stalled and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un calling for increased weapons development, including of tactical nuclear warheads.

Seoul, Tokyo and Washington are set to hold a trilateral summit at the US presidential retreat in Maryland on Friday, during which the leaders are expected to announce plans for expanding military cooperation against Pyongyang’s nuclear threats.

With their limited disclosure on King, North Korea is clearly “hoping or preparing for the issue to be raised in the trilateral meeting”, said Yang Moo-jin, president of the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul. — AFP

NIGER SAYS 17 SOLDIERS KILLED IN AMBUSH NEAR BURKINA FASO BORDER

NIAMEY: Niger’s junta on Wednesday said 17 of its soldiers were killed in an ambush by insurgents, the deadliest attack since a July 26 coup whose leaders have cited persistent insecurity as a justification for deposing the civilian government.

The ambush took place on Tuesday about 60 km from the capital Niamey, in a southwestern area that borders Burkina Faso, the defence ministry said, adding that 100 attackers it referred to as “terrorists” were killed.

“The swift reaction of the soldiers and the air-land response at the scene of the skirmish enabled the enemy to be dealt with,” the ministry said.

Niger, like other countries in West Africa’s Sahel region, has been struggling for years to contain an insurgency by groups linked to al Qaeda and IS that have killed thousands, forced millions to flee their homes and caused food shortages. The perceived inability of civilian governments to overcome the problem has been one of the factors in a string of coups in the region, although in the case of Niger



Niger’s junta supporters take part in a demonstration in front of a French army base in Niamey. – Reuters file photo

the main drivers of the army takeover were internal politics.

Members of the presidential guard, headed by General Abdourahmane Tiani, deposed President Mohamed Bazoum and are still detaining him, defying pressure from the United Nations, West African bloc ECOWAS and Western powers to reinstate him.

While Tiani said the takeover was necessary to quell the insurgency, analysts say attacks, though still frequent, had been falling under Bazoum.

Niger hosts US, French, German and Italian troops as part of international efforts to combat the insurgency, under agreements with the now deposed civilian government.

The future of those foreign contingents is unclear, with the junta using vitriolic anti-French rhetoric and resisting pressure from ECOWAS, the UN and Western countries to negotiate a way out of the current situation.

Niger has extra strategic importance to global powers due to its uranium and oil deposits. — Reuters

Truce holds in Libya after clashes kill 55

TRIPOLI: Tripoli’s worst armed clashes in a year have killed 55 people and wounded 146, Libyan media reported on Wednesday, as a truce took hold.

Fighting erupted on Monday night and raged through Tuesday between the influential 444 Brigade and the Al Radaa, or Special Deterrence Force.

Libya’s Al Ahrar TV reported the new toll, citing Malek Mersit, spokesman for the Emergency Medical Centre. Medics had previously reported 27 dead and 106 wounded over the two days of fighting in the capital.

Libya has seen more than a decade of stop-start conflict since the Nato-backed revolt that toppled Kadhafi.

A period of relative stability had led the United Nations to express hope for delayed elections to take place this year, and the latest fighting triggered international calls for calm.

The clashes were triggered by the detention of the head of the 444 Brigade, Colonel Mahmud Hamza, by the rival Al Radaa



Forces affiliated with the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU) deploy following two days of deadly clashes between two rival groups in Libya’s capital. – AFP

Force on Monday, an interior ministry official said.

Late on Tuesday, the social council in the southeastern suburb of Soug el Joumaa, a stronghold of the Al Radaa Force, announced that an agreement had been reached with Prime Minister Abdelhamid Dbeibah, head of the UN-recognised government based in the capital, for Hamza

to be handed over to a “neutral party”.

In a televised announcement, the council said a ceasefire would follow the transfer of the force’s commander, and late on Tuesday the fighting abated.

Both armed groups are aligned with Dbeibah’s government.

A total of 234 families were evacuated from frontline areas

in the capital’s southern suburbs, along with dozens of doctors and paramedics trapped by the fighting while caring for the wounded, the Emergency Medical Centre said.

Overnight Tuesday-Wednesday, Dbeibah visited the southeastern suburb of Ain Zara, which saw some of the heaviest fighting on Tuesday, accompanied by Interior Minister Imed Trabelsi.

The interior ministry put in place a security plan to deploy officers to battleground districts to oversee the truce announced between the two sides.

The Libyan capital’s only civilian airport, Mitiga, which lies in an area under Al Radaa’s control, reopened to commercial flights on Wednesday, officials said. Flights had been diverted to Misrata about 180 kilometres to the east.

The UN mission in Libya said it was “following with concern” the security deterioration in Tripoli and its impact on civilians. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

TENERIFE

Wildfire in national park prompts evacuations

A wildfire that broke out in a national park on the Spanish island of Tenerife has spread to 300 hectares, prompting authorities to order the evacuation of five villages and to cut off access to the forest surrounding the Mount Teide volcano.

Early on Wednesday, the fire had devastated about 130 hectares (320 acres) near the Mount Teide volcano, Spain’s highest peak. In a few hours, the fire has spread to over 300



hectares and there are many secondary fires, Pedro Martinez, head of Tenerife’s emergency services, said. — Reuters

HELSINKI

Ex PM Stubb announces run for presidency

Finland’s former conservative prime minister Alexander Stubb announced on Wednesday his candidacy in the country’s presidential election in January to succeed Sauli Niinisto, who is stepping down after two terms.

Stubb served as prime minister in 2014-2015 and has held the portfolios for finance, foreign affairs and EU affairs. He currently works as a professor at the European University Institute in Italy.

“When the fatherland calls,



you go,” Stubb told reporters, referring to being asked by conservative Prime Minister Petteri Orpo and his National Coalition Party to be their candidate in the election. —AFP

REYKJAVIK

Volcanic eruption in southwest Iceland ends

Iceland’s meteorological office on Wednesday declared that the volcanic eruption near the country’s capital Reykjavik was officially over.

“Ten days have passed since activity was last measured in the Litli-Hrutur crater. There is no longer any deformation observed in the area and seismic activity has decreased considerably,” the Icelandic Meteorological Office (IMO) said in a statement.

“As a result, we can say



that another chapter in the resurgence of volcanism on the Reykjanes peninsula has come to an end,” it added. — AFP

The Aquarelle of nature

Birds weren't aware of the colour wheel and the mysterious language of colours. The scarlet macaw, the rainbow lorikeet, or the flame bowerbird are examples of nature working with Aquarelle. Should they be eradicated because of their exquisite plumage? Should the optical phenomenon between sunlight and atmospheric conditions be disregarded in narratives? I doubt rainbows will disappear.

The problem is the attitude towards colours, particularly when shunning one or two in favour of hues with symbolic weight. Sir Isaac Newton would have to be brought to account. He is to blame for the distress that certain colour combinations produce in some social groups. When Newton invented the colour wheel in 1666, he certainly had a fundamental theory of a complex topic. His text, published in 1704, explained his findings regarding colours and light.

The confiscation of products based on colour combinations would have shocked Newton. He would also be mortified that some groups have taken ownership of his studies for ideological reasons. Keeping in mind that ideas can be silenced, not destroyed. The use of political colours and associated emblems plays an essential role in the emotional life of social movements. Unfortunately, less illuminated minds tend to reinforce a stiffened narrative based on the combinations.

The earliest traces of the colour concept date back to ancient times. Its voyage through the Renaissance has been the subject of serious study. The original theory was put forth by Aristotle. He identified four colours corresponding to the elements of earth, fire, air, and water. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is known, along with other theorists such as Tobias Mayer, Philipp Otto Runge, and Thomas Young, to have dedicated time and effort to researching and understanding the colour wheel. The theory is both based on science and art.

Later, industrialisation created



SONIA AMBROSIO
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The writer is journalist, academic, researcher in media studies

a focus not just on theory but also on the standardisation of colour and colour naming. Most of us start learning about colours in nurseries and elementary schools. Will children be restricted in their choices when colouring books?

We are driven by colour preferences. We think about colour when choosing an outfit for a special event or taking a photo for social media. Girls express themselves by using colours and designs on their nails as an expression of beauty. Men also use a broad range of colours and designs to spice up their looks. Colour is context-dependent, either in art, literature, education, or even political systems.

Besides influencing emotion, colour also holds meaning in various cultures, from traffic lights to patriotism to holidays to marketing, branding, wealth, ecology, medicine, and religion. Colour is also used in therapy, known as chromotherapy, based on the idea that coloured lights can help treat physical or mental disorders. Or the opposite, as the use of white torture can be destructive of a person's psychological senses; it can drive a person to the brink of madness, causing both visual and auditory hallucinations.

The vivid clouds give wings to imagination and dreams. I look into the sky, and I can see a pink plane or a small dot, and I think of a bird, a dash of silver, and flying fish. A full moon paints the world silver. I can draw a yellow sun on a leaf or a blue bird on a white piece of paper. We have a strong bond with the colours of nature.

Colour has played a significant role in human evolution. It explains how humans perceive colour and its visual effects. As we are attracted to colourful birds' plumage, blue skies, sunsets, rainbows, and the use of filters for photos for social media, giving a shallow narrative to colour combinations is dismissing the relevance of past studies, development, and education.

"We live in a rainbow of chaos," according to the French artist Paul Cezanne.

SHOULD THE OPTICAL PHENOMENON BETWEEN SUNLIGHT AND ATMOSPHERIC CONDITIONS BE DISREGARDED IN NARRATIVES?

DEMONSTRATION OF SKILLS



Saudi equestrian Noura al Jabr demonstrates her sword fighting skills at a training centre in Dammam, in Saudi Arabia's eastern province. Al Jabr organises mounted archery and tent-pegging training sessions that are especially popular among women. — AFP

As Trump wrestles, Biden focuses on economy

ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS

As criminal charges against Donald Trump mount, his rival for the White House President Joe Biden is determined to avoid commenting on the Republican's legal troubles.

A day after Trump was indicted for the fourth time, for alleged racketeering and election interference in Georgia, Biden delivered a public speech in another key swing state, Wisconsin, focused on wind power and job creation.

In a factory busy with new orders for wind turbines, the Democrat boasted of new jobs and investments linked, in his view, to the major energy and infrastructure policies he has enacted during his first term.

Though the speech was aimed squarely at countering Trump's message of American decline, he was careful not to even mention his predecessor's name — and certainly not the Georgia indictment.

"They tell us America is failing," Biden said of Republicans' political messaging.

"They are wrong... America isn't failing. It's winning."

Asked about Trump's latest legal development, White House

BIDEN IS WALKING A CAREFUL LINE AHEAD OF HIS POSSIBLE 2024 REMATCH WITH TRUMP, WHO REMAINS THE FRONTRUNNER FOR THE REPUBLICAN NOMINATION

spokeswoman Olivia Dalton said on Tuesday aboard Air Force One that she was "certainly not going to comment."

Biden is walking a careful line ahead of his possible 2024 rematch with Trump, who remains the frontrunner for the Republican nomination.

Trump's refusal to accept his 2020 election loss to Biden has led to the slew of indictments against him — first in federal court in August, and again in the southern state of Georgia on Monday, where he was painted as leading a Mafia-like operation to subvert Biden's victory.

Biden, 80, has maintained his silence since Trump was hit with his first indictment — in New York earlier this year, over hush-money payments made to Stormy Daniels.

The US leader knows that the slightest comment he makes will be seized on by rival Republicans as alleged proof that he has unleashed the Justice Department to immobilise his likely 2024 opponent.

Already not fond of speaking with reporters, Biden has carefully avoided the press since the beginning of the summer and their

persistent questions about Trump.

He frequently ignores shouted questions as he boards his plane or while taking bike rides at his beachside home in Delaware. The Democrat instead sticks to well-practiced speeches on major economic policies, especially his signature "Inflation Reduction Act."

While its name was designed to show Americans he was taking action over rising prices, the gut of the policy is incentives for investment and job creation in the renewable energy sector.



US President Joe Biden arrives at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland on Tuesday, as he returns to the White House. — AFP

Biden says it has already generated \$110 billion in private investment.

"In Wisconsin alone, companies have committed over \$3 billion in manufacturing and clean energy investments since President Biden was sworn into office," the White House said on Tuesday.

For his 2024 reelection campaign, Biden likely knows he cannot drown out all the noise about Trump's indictments and coming trials. But he is betting that ultimately the robustness

of the US economy, which has defied predictions of recession, will convince voters to support him.

To set himself out from his rival, Biden does not see the need to stoke the fires of Trump's legal woes.

Equally so, he is mute on the legal problems of his own son, Hunter Biden, who faces possible criminal tax and other charges from a Justice Department special counsel appointed just last week.

While that drew big headlines, it was quickly eclipsed by Georgia's indictment of Trump.

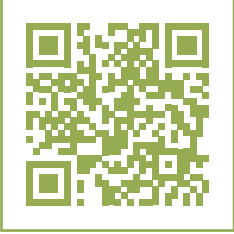
Still, Biden faces an uphill battle. Opinion polls show he has a low confidence rating among voters, who don't completely understand his economic policy and are put off by his age. If reelected, Biden would be 86 when he finishes his second term.

Still, at the peak of a five-decade political career, the US leader is gambling that time favours him and that voters will prefer his personality to Trump's.

"This is still a country that believes in honesty, decency and integrity," Biden said on Tuesday in a thinly veiled swipe at his Republican opponent. — AFP

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Clinical England march into final

COACH WIEGMAN FEELS LIKE LIVING IN A ‘FAIRYTALE’

SYDNEY: England coach Sarina Wiegman said she felt she was living in a “fairytale” after her team advanced to the Women’s World Cup final with a 3-1 win over tournament co-hosts Australia in Sydney.

Wednesday’s semifinal victory saw Wiegman become the first coach to guide two different countries to a Women’s World Cup final, after she took her native Netherlands to the 2019 showpiece match, where they were defeated by the United States.

It also left reigning European champions England, who face fellow first-time finalists Spain in Sunday’s title decider in Sydney, on course for a notable double.

“We achieved the final!” Wiegman told the BBC. “It’s unbelievable, it feels like we won (the tournament) which we didn’t, we just won this game — in an incredible stadium, an away game, the way we played — it was a hard game, but we found a way to win again.”

‘RUTHLESSNESS’

The 53-year-old added: “People have been talking about ruthlessness all the time, in this team there is ruthlessness, up front or in defence. We really want to keep the ball out of the net and we want to win. “We stick together, we stick to the plan, and it worked again.”

“Having the chance as a coach or a player to make it to two finals is really special. I never take anything for granted, but it’s like I’m living in a fairytale or something.”

England went ahead through Ella Toone’s 36th-minute strike into the top right corner before Australia heroine Sam Kerr, making her first start of the tournament, equalised with a long-range shot in the 63rd minute.

Lauren Hemp, however, restored England’s advantage in the 71st minute after firing into the bottom far corner from Millie Bright’s long ball upfield.

Alessia Russo then put the result beyond doubt when she made it 3-1 four minutes before full-time, beating Australia goalkeeper Mackenzie Arnold with a well-struck low shot.

“When they (Australia) scored they got momentum, the place erupted and then Hempo’s goal just flipped the momentum which was crucial so to get 3-1 you can settle a bit and see the game out,” said Russo. — **AFP**



England’s Georgia Stanway and Rachel Daly celebrate after the match as England progress to the final of the World Cup. – Reuters



England’s Georgia Stanway in action with Australia’s Hayley Raso and Clare Polkinghorne. – Reuters



SEEB MISS OUT PLAY-OFF MATCH IN ASIAN CL PRELIMS

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, AUG 16

Seeb dreams to secure a slot in the group stage of the AFC Champions League 2023-24 were dashed after they lost 1-0 against Uzbekistan’s AGMK FC on Tuesday at the AMMC Sports Complex. The victory meant that the Uzbek team will meet Qatar’s Al Arabi club on Tuesday in Doha for a ticket to play in the group stage of the most prestigious club competition in Asia.

The only goal in the fixture was scored by Khurshid Giyosov in the 47th minute which was allowed by the main referee despite the tough interference of the Uzbek player on Seeb goalkeeper Ahmed al Rawahi who was down when Khurshid shot the ball to the net.

The 2022 AFC Cup Champion tried to work hard and press to score the equaliser during the remaining period but all their attempts were saved by the opponent defenders and the goalkeeper.

The hosts played with 10 players from the 74th minute after Martin Boakye received a red card. However, the shortage in the rival team was

not utilised properly by Seeb players to score the equaliser. It was clear that Seeb’s men were lacking the match spirit as there were not any real scoring solutions for them. AGMK, supported by the home fans, managed to tighten their defence in the last minutes of the match and blocked all the movements by Seeb’s attackers.

Seeb, mentored by newly appointed head coach Jorvan Vieira, began the match with Ahmed al Rawahi as the goalkeeper. The defence was headed by Mohammed al Musallami, Ahmed al Khamisi, Ali al Busaidi and Hassan al Ajmi. The captain of the team, Eid al Farsi, monitored the middle line accompanied by Tamim al Balushi, Zahir al Aghbari and Yazeed al Masahni. Both Abdulaziz al Maqbali and Mohsin al Ghassani were the attackers in the front line.

After their early exit from the 2023-24 AFC Champions League preliminary round, Seeb club will return back to Muscat and start vying in the domestic competitions. The Muscat-based team will meet Ibri in the opening round of the top league at Ibri Sports Complex. Then, they will meet Al Nasr at Seeb Stadium on August 27.

Neymar joins Saudi club Al Hilal in two-year deal

RIYADH: Neymar has signed a two-year contract at Saudi Arabia’s Al Hilal after six years with Paris St Germain in which the Brazil forward won several domestic trophies but not the Champions League the club craves.

No financial details were disclosed on Tuesday but the fee was reported to be about 90 million euros (\$98.24 million) plus add-ons and subject to a medical for the 31-year-old.

French newspaper *L’Equipe* said the deal could net Neymar 160 million euros.

Saudi Professional League (SPL) club Al Hilal announced that Neymar had signed a contract until 2025, with the Brazilian saying, “I am here in Saudi Arabia, I am Hilali” in a video on the team’s social media accounts.

“I have achieved a lot in Europe

and enjoyed special times, but I have always wanted to be a global player and test myself with new challenges and opportunities in new places,” Neymar said after signing the contract on Tuesday in Paris.

“I want to write new sporting history, and the Saudi Pro League has tremendous energy and quality players at the moment.

“I have heard a lot and learned that I am following a long list of Brazilian players who have played in Saudi Arabia over the years, so I believe it is the desired place.

“I love winning and scoring goals, and I plan to continue doing that in Saudi Arabia and with Al Hilal.”

RECORD FEE

Neymar joined PSG in 2017 from Barcelona for a world record



Al Hilal’s new signing Neymar holds their shirt as he poses with President Fahd bin Saad al Nafel in Paris. – Reuters

fee of 222 million euros. He scored 118 goals in 173 appearances for the Paris club and won numerous trophies, including five Ligue 1 titles.

Neymar won the Champions League with Barcelona in 2015 but had to settle for a runners-up medal in the 2020 final, which PSG lost to Bayern Munich.

“It is inevitably difficult to say goodbye to a club legend, which Neymar will always be,” PSG president Nasser al Khelaifi said in a club statement.

“I will never forget the day he arrived at Paris Saint-Germain, nor what he has brought to our club and our project over the last six years.

“We’ve had some extraordinary moments and Neymar will always be part of our history. I would like to thank him and his family.”

Neymar has also played 124 times for Brazil, scoring 77 goals — a joint-record alongside three-time World Cup winner Pele. He was part of the Brazil team which won the Confederations Cup in 2013.

SAUDI TRANSFERS

The most successful club in Saudi Arabia and Asia, Al Hilal have won 66 trophies and hold the record for number of league and Asian Champions League titles with 18 and four respectively.

Strengthening the squad is a priority for the Riyadh-based club after the Saudi Public Investment Fund announced in June an investment and privatisation project for sports clubs involving league champions Al Ittihad, Al Ahli, Al Nassr and Al Hilal.

— **Reuters**

Alcaraz battles through rain, Stephens ousts holder Garcia

CINCINNATI: Carlos Alcaraz battled through a rain interruption to claim his 50th win of the season, defeating Jordan Thompson 7-5, 4-6, 6-3 on Wednesday at the Cincinnati Open.

The top-seeded Spaniard is bidding for his seventh trophy of 2023 as he prepares for a US Open title defence in less than a fortnight.

His victory took three hours, with the world number one breaking open the third set as he delivered two love games and moved through on a second match point. "I had never played him and the start/stop was not easy," Alcaraz said. "It was not easy to wait for the rain."

"He played aggressive, I'm glad to get through. It was a long day waiting to play and then find rain in the first set."

Alcaraz was tested by number 55 Thompson who now stands 2-16 against top-10 opponents.

The Spaniard had 32 winners and 41 unforced errors in the marathon.

Including a 15-minute pause for rain and subsequent warm-up, the first set took nearly 90 minutes, with Thompson saving 10 of a dozen break points only to lose on the first Alcaraz set point.

Alcaraz came back from a break down in the second set and ran away with the third as Thompson complained to the chair umpire about an incorrectly strung racquet which he only discovered at a late stage in the epic.

BRITISH EXODUS

In other games, an inspired Gael Monfils applied the finishing touches to a British exodus with



Carlos Alcaraz serves to Jordan Thompson during the Western & Southern Open in Cincinnati. — USA Today Sports

a 3-6, 6-4, 6-3 defeat of 13th seed Cameron Norrie.

The veteran French showman got his left knee wrapped in the opening set of the first-round match and took confidence from encouraging words from the physio to secure the win which left Britain 0-3 on the day here.

The rush to the exits began with the withdrawal of Andy Murray due to an existing abdominal injury dating to last week in Toronto.

Meanwhile on court, Lorenzo Musetti defeated Dan Evans 6-4, 6-3 before Monfils staged his comeback victory against British number one Norrie.

In other matches, Alexander Zverev defeated fellow former tournament champion Grigor Dimitrov 6-2, 6-2.

Germany's Zverev, the 16th seed, claimed the title at his last participation in 2021 while Dimitrov lifted the trophy in 2017. Zverev was joined in the second

round by former semi-finalist Stan Wawrinka, who polished off a win after rain called a halt to his match the night before.

Switzerland's three-time Grand Slam champion defeated American Brandon Nakashima 6-3, 6-7 (5/7), 6-3, requiring just two concluding games to reach the second round after the overnight pause. Borna Coric concluded unfinished business with Petra Korda, winning 7-6 (7/5), 6-4 while Ugo Humbert defeated fellow Frenchman Arthur Fils 6-4, 3-6, 6-2.

GARCIA OUT

In the WTA draw, the continuing career comeback of former number one Carolina Wozniacki failed to ignite as the Dane went down to French lucky loser Varvara Gracheva 6-4, 6-4 in 96 minutes.

Three-time Grand Slam runner-up Ons Jabeur, playing for the first time since losing last month's Wimbledon final, survived a struggle with Anhelina Kalinina of Ukraine to reach the third round 6-3, 6-7 (2/7), 7-6 (7/2).

Unseeded American Sloane Stephens, making her 12th tournament appearance, defeated holder Caroline Garcia 4-6, 6-4, 6-4 to reach the last 16 alongside Jabeur. All England Club title-winner Marketa Vondrousova beat Katerina Siniakova 7-5, 6-4.

Two-time Cincinnati winner Victoria Azarenka rallied from 1-4 down in the second set to overhaul Barbora Krejcikova 6-3, 7-5.

Azarenka's fellow double Grand Slam champion Petra Kvitova took down Anna Blinkova 7-6 (7/2), 6-0. — AFP

Stokes returns to ODIs ahead of World Cup

LONDON: Ben Stokes has reversed his decision to retire from one-day internationals ahead of England's defence of their 50-over men's World Cup title in India.

Test captain Stokes quit the ODI format 13 months ago due to a demanding workload as a multi-format player and amid concerns about a chronic left knee injury.

That fitness issue meant the all-rounder did not bowl at all during the last three Tests of the recently concluded drawn Ashes series at home to Australia. But Stokes, one of the stars of England's 2019 World Cup final win over New Zealand at Lord's, could now feature as a specialist batsman when England look to retain their title in India starting in October.

England are at home to New Zealand in four warm-up ODIs next month, with Stokes, 32, included Wednesday in a 15-man squad that could well resemble the touring party selected for the World Cup.

England men's national selector Luke Wright said: "Any series against New Zealand is closely



fought and will provide us with an ideal opportunity to test ourselves against one of the best teams in the world.

"The return of Ben Stokes only adds to that quality with his match-winning ability and leadership. I am certain that every fan will enjoy seeing him back in an England ODI shirt again."

Dawid Malan has retained his place ahead of Harry Brook, with the Yorkshire batsman appearing to be the player left out to accommodate Stokes's return.

England have also included uncapped Surrey fast bowler Gus Atkinson in their squad for the New Zealand ODI series. — AFP

Salalah School Beach Games 2023 conclude today



WALEED AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, AUG 16

The second edition of School Beach Games 2023 tournament will conclude on Thursday with the final matches of the beach volleyball and beach handball.

The tournament is being organised by the Oman School Sports Association (OSSA) on the sand courts of the Sultan Qaboos Youth Complex in Salalah from August 13 to 17, with participation of more than 102 students.

The conclusion ceremony is sponsored by Khalid bin Salim al Ghassani, Adviser of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, in presence of the officials from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and members of the Board of Directors of OSSA.

The final match of beach volleyball will bring together Al Batinah North Educational team against Al Batinah South Educational team, where Dhofar and Muscat will compete for third and fourth places.

While in the handball final, Muscat Educational team will play against Al Dakhiliyah Educational team, and Al Batinah North team will meet Al Batinah South to determine the third and fourth place.

In volleyball semifinals, Al Batinah North Education team defeated Dhofar Education team 2-0 and qualified for the final match. The qualification of Al Batinah South Education into the final came after a strong match with Muscat Education, which ended in a 2-1 score.

In handball, Al Dakhiliyah team reached the final after defeating Al Batinah South team with a 2-1 score in a strong match from both sides. And Muscat Educational team snatched the second final slot at the expense of Al Batinah North Education team with a score of 2-0.

Yaqoub bin Youssef al Muqbali, (pictured) coach of the Al Batinah North volleyball team, was confident of retaining the title in final. "We achieved the goal last edition and reached the podium, and now we are thinking of preserving the title. The tournament appeared to produce number of talented students in the beach games, and we hope that such tournaments will continue," Al Muqbali said after they qualified for the final.

"The tournaments aim to introduce the students of the Oman governorates, and highlighting the talent to represent the national teams", he added.

The tournament is being organised by the Oman School Sports Association with the support of the OQ Group, the LNG Company and the Port of Salalah.



OC initiative #Cricket4Her to be launched in Oct

MUSCAT: The national cricket governing body, Oman Cricket, is all set to launch a new initiative focusing on development of cricket among girls and women with #Cricket4Her programme.

Oman Cricket hopes to attract the girls in Oman to play the game and take it up at a competitive level. The start of the initiative will begin with the hosting of indoor and outdoor softball tournaments for girls and women in October. The indoor softball event begins on October 6 while the outdoor softball tournament will begin on October 19.

Oman Cricket's treasurer and one of the brainchild behind the new initiative, Alkesh Joshi, said: The #Cricket4Her is an exceptionally important programme for Oman Cricket. We hope to revitalise the approach towards women's cricket and the entire OC board and the cricket fraternity are behind this programme.

"The aim is to bring more girls and women to play cricket and we will start the #Cricket4Her programme with the hosting of indoor and outdoor softball cricket tournaments in October. We hope to introduce the girls to hardball cricket gradually as the aim is to have a big pool of cricket-establishing women and girls."

The top OC official revealed that the blueprint of the #Cricket4Her programme has received the approval from the International Cricket Council (ICC) and they "have appreciated the initiative and are delighted

with the progress made by Oman Cricket."

Joshi said: "We would like to have more and more girls and women embrace this lovely game. We have begun an exciting journey of women's cricket and we hope that women's cricket can flourish in the future in Oman. We believe that the women cricketers could carry the legacy forward of the men's national team that has reached great heights at international level."

Elaborating further, OC's chief development officer Duleep Mendis said that "the Cricket4Her programme will establish a pathway for women and girls in cricket across Oman."

He added, "By providing

dedicated tournaments, we aim to foster a supportive environment where women and girls can excel in cricket. This pathway will lead the way for talent development, skill enhancement, and the nurturing of a strong and empowered community of women cricketers."

Among the major highlights of the new initiative are the mantra of 4Cs — coaching, competition, commitment and community.

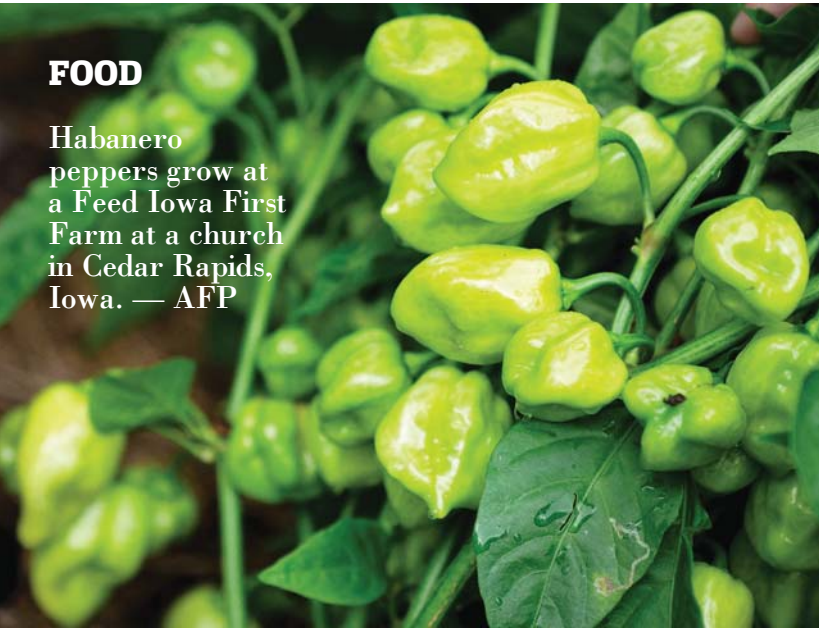
#Cricket4Her will focus on providing coaching and training to women and girls through qualified coaches. Participants could receive expert guidance and support to enhance their skills and performance. First-timers will be given special attention by OC coaching staff.





MUSIC

Members of the Waorani indigenous community play music as they demonstrate for peace for nature, in the Yasuni National Park, in the commercial area in northern Quito. — AFP



FOOD

Habanero peppers grow at a Feed Iowa First Farm at a church in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. — AFP



FILM

US screen writer and producer Charlie Kaufman receives and holds honorary “Heart of Sarajevo” award for exceptional life-time contribution to the art of film, during the award ceremony for the Sarajevo film festival. — AFP



OPERA

German tenor Sebastian Kohlhepp and Polish-German soprano Sara Jakubiak perform during a photo rehearsal for the opera “The Greek Passion” by Bohuslav Martinu. — AFP



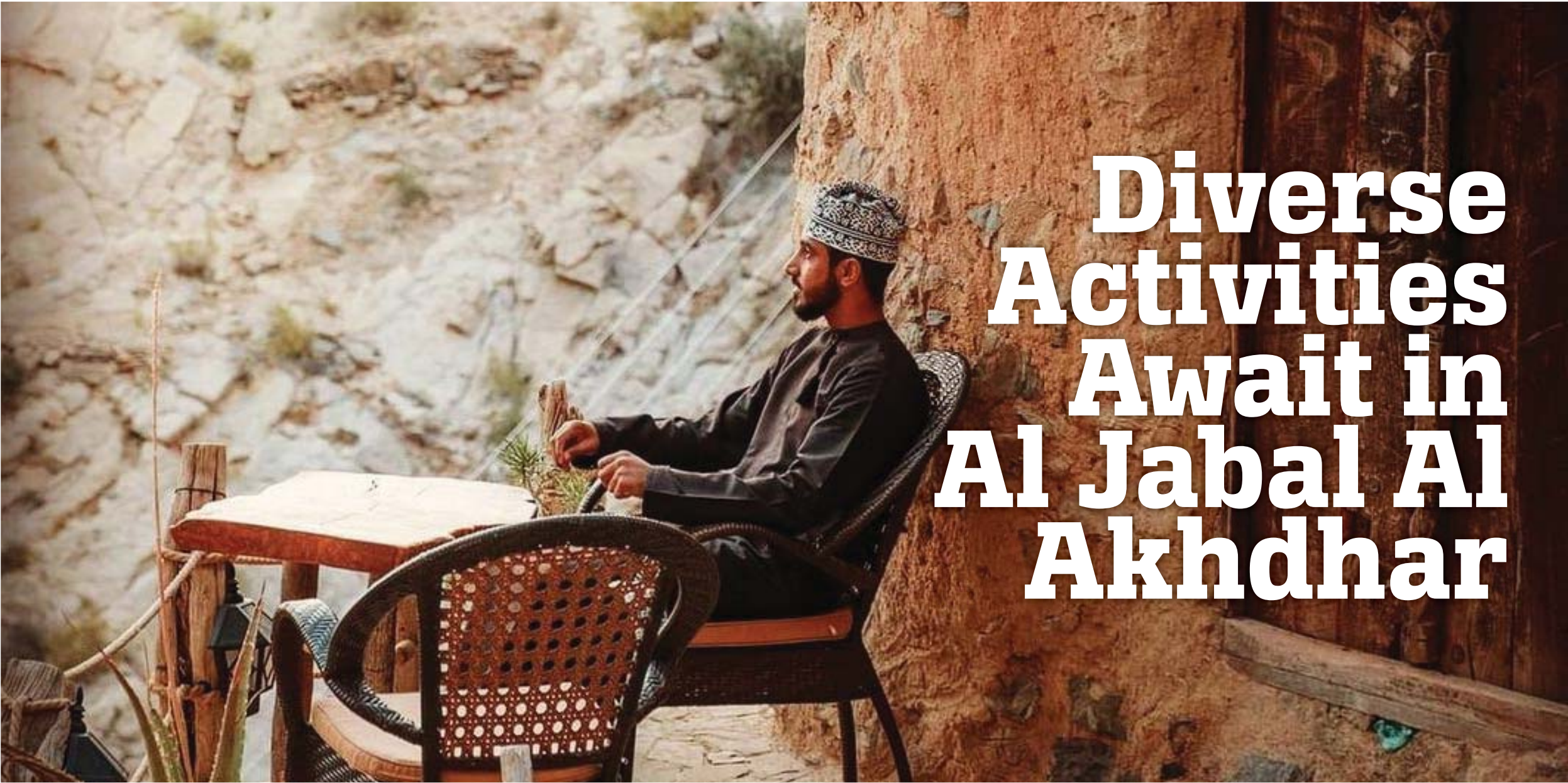
HOLLYWOOD

A wreath of flowers courtesy of the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce is placed the late Clarence Avant’s Walk of Fame Star in Hollywood, California. — AFP

art & life

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Diverse Activities Await in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar

BY YERU EBUEN
INSTAGRAM: @YRU_HERE

While all eyes are on misty Dhofar and its foggy mountains at this time of the year, those that have limited time can look at the festivities of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar as an option.

It has been a very eventful few weeks for Al Jabal Al Akhdhar as it celebrated the Al Jabal Al Akhdhar Festival, but other than this main event, multiple pocket celebrations are happening in different areas that make a trip to the mountain even more entertaining.

The one we didn't miss visiting is the Rummana pop-up event organised by the founders of Teepee Oman. The team, in collaboration with farm owners in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar and some private organisations, transformed some parts of the pomegranate gardens into a beautiful afternoon escape filled with food stalls, an artisanal crafts section, and access to the pomegranate trails and trees.

Accessible to the public until September, Rummana is a beautiful celebration of the pomegranate trees, which also serves as a more educational way of understanding the importance of these trees. From the pomegranate-infused food and drinks to interacting with the farmers and sharing knowledge about the life cycle of the trees, it proved to be a hit among families, especially the kids.



During our visit, the sporadic rain and the cooler Al Jabal Al Akhdhar weather offered an insight into why these trees thrive in the mountains. Furthermore, the setup is well-designed so that there are plenty of photo opportunities across the event's area. While we enjoyed our visit, we would have loved to harvest and buy some of the fruits. According to some locals, it will take a few more days before the pomegranates are ready for harvest, so by the time you visit, this might already be a feasible option. Just imagine being able to handpick your own pomegranate.

COFFEE WITH A VIEW

Beyond the pomegranate gardens, about 20 minutes drive towards Alila Jabal Akhdhar, the road forks to the right, which leads to the beautiful Al Suwgara Village. Usually remote and peaceful, The Suwgara village continues to widen its offerings, partnering with different groups to bring something new to its guests.

Al Suwgara is a village perched on top of a cliff in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, offering a stunning view of the wadi below and the panoramic mountain on the other side. The Al Shuraiqi family used to call these buildings home, but since they moved to the opposite cliff, rather than let the old homes fall into ruin, they've renovated the old village and now offer guests a unique look at what it means to live in the mountains.

Over the last few days, they also had a partnership with a cafe to offer an amazing coffee experience

overlooking the beautiful scenes of their part of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar.

If you are ready for a short hike, head out to the Suwgara and give them a visit to understand why we think the future of this inn is bright as an alternative place to stay.

DIVERSE ACTIVITIES

Al Jabal Al Akhdhar's number one reason for being an amazing destination during the summer is its weather. The mountains also offer plenty of open spaces where families can enjoy a fun night of camping.

Other than the fun offerings of the festival, dusat d2 Naseem Resort is also becoming a big draw for visitors because of the hotel's family-centric activities. Other than biking and scootering within the resort property, the Adventure Park right at the heart of the property allows families to have a different kind of fun suited for kids with adventurous spirits. Whether it's wall climbing, zip lining, or walking on elevated platforms, it's definitely a must-try.

For adults, of course, the two main luxury hotels in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, Alila and Anantara, both offer their own version of a Via Ferrata. If you don't know what it is, it's walking or hanging on steel cables to get from one point to another, and it allows you a different kind of adventure but with all the safety precautions. If you are planning a weekend getaway but cannot travel to Dhofar at this time, Al Jabal Al Akhdhar is definitely a great option. Go check it out if you can this weekend.



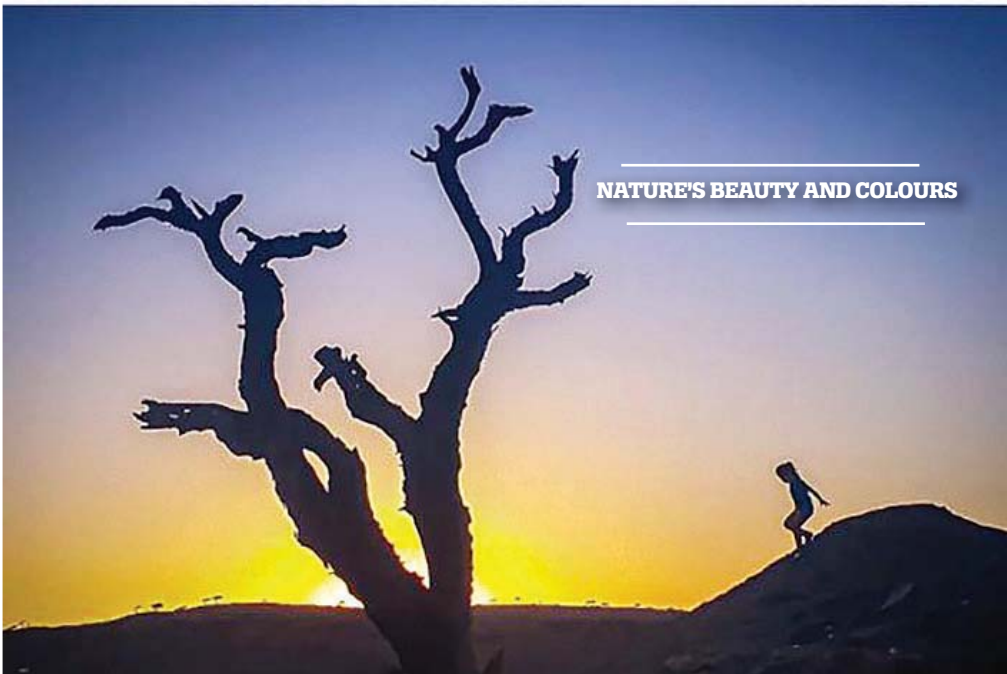
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Reimagined Georgia O'Keeffe Museum Will Triple Its Gallery Space

For nearly 25 years, American modernist painter Georgia O'Keeffe has been honoured in a museum that is not much bigger than two tennis courts. Now, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is planning a relocation that will cost between \$60 million and \$65 million, and will nearly triple the gallery space, from about 5,000 square feet to 13,000 square feet. "Our collection has grown, and the new, substantially larger facility will allow us to show more of it," Cody Hartley, the museum's director since 2019, said on Friday. The current location, which opened in 1997, originally housed 40 O'Keeffe paintings. The museum had always hoped to expand, Hartley said, but as the years went on and its permanent collection grew to more than 3,000 works — the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation donated 981 items in 2006, the year it dissolved — it became clear relocation would be the better option. In 2018, museum officials identified a 54,000-square-foot building, only 500 or so feet from its present location, as the new site. The large space, which used to be a Safeway grocery store, is now the museum's education centre. Eighty per cent of the estimated cost has already been committed, Hartley said. The lead donor is Anne Burnett Windfohr Marion, a prominent Texas rancher, oil heiress and patron of the arts who died last year. She had helped found the museum. Gluckman Tang Architects of New York — which designed the original muse-

um as well as the renovation and expansion of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in Manhattan — will oversee the project. The new space is expected to open in 2024. O'Keeffe, who died in 1986, worked in New Mexico throughout her career and lived in Santa Fe during her final years. The museum is the largest publicly accessible collection of her work and one of the few museums in the country dedicated to a female artist. — NYT



THE CHANGING WORLD OF MEN



Shaddad al Musalmy

Back-to-school shopping is a costly affair

Whether you are ready or not, school reopening is right around the corner, and this means parents are once again starting to shop for new school supplies and clothing.

Thousands of students across Oman will be heading back to classes at the end of this month, when the new academic year in public and private schools begins.

As a father, back-to-school shopping stresses me out, and money is one of my biggest worries while shops and supermarkets selling school supplies and uniforms have begun seeing increased footfall of parents and schoolchildren.

As a trend, most students prefer a new set of school supplies like bags and stationery when the new classes begin, and this means good business for retailers and costly shopping trips for parents.

This is the time of year when we break deep into our pockets just to make sure our children go back to school happily. It is not easy to manage to buy whatever they want, but it is our responsibility as parents.

Even though many feel the prices of such items have not gone up, I, as a father, am looking for the best bargains. I am not sure of the quality of the items, but I feel the quality we get in the market is good enough as long as it is on par with the prices offered.

For me, shopping has yet to pick up because I am one of those people who waits until the last minute. But people nowadays are cautious about what to buy. Spending power has come down.

Indeed, since the world was hit by Covid-19 that brought about the economic slowdown, I am one of many in the country who have adopted personal austerity measures.

During this time, we have to prepare ourselves by shopping, but we also have to keep in mind the economic crisis and reduce expenses. In fact, I have tried to cut down on my shopping to buy the most necessary items. I used to buy five dishdashas for my boys, but now I go with three.

I am glad that I am in a country where continuous supervision of markets by authorities helps reduce the greed of traders who are always keen to make money in such times.

The Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) and the formation of working teams consisting of judicial control officers to inspect various centres and shops in general, and libraries and stores selling fabrics and shoes in particular, have been carrying out intensive inspection campaigns.

CPA has been following up on the prices of the stationary tools, clothes and school requirements and has made sure to assure the provision of all the requirements needed by customers in sufficient quantities to give multiple alternatives to consumers. This article is dedicated to all the fathers out there. Enjoy back-to-school shopping.

Shaddad al Musalmy is a seasoned Omani journalist who worked for top newspapers in the country. He's currently one of Oman Observer's senior editors and contributes across different beats. His commentaries about life in general paints a vivid picture of the changing landscape in Oman.

FOR FEEDBACK, EMAIL THE AUTHOR AT shadadm75@gmail.com



FILM

SOLO MARIDUENA QUICKLY learned that he and his character in the latest DC Studios film "Blue Beetle" have one big thing in common — they cannot hide anything from their families. The "Cobra Kai" actor plays college graduate-turned-

superhero Jaime Reyes, the first Latino superhero in a DC movie, who finds it impossible to keep his alter-ego a secret. "There's no hiding from mom and dad that I'm Blue Beetle. As a Latino, I know that there's no secrets in my family,

DC superhero 'Blue Beetle' brings Latino family team to big screen

so I felt it resonated with me and the fact that the superhero in this movie is really the family," Mariduena said last month before film promotion was halted by the Screen Actors Guild strike.

In the film, Jaime returns to his hometown of Palmera City after graduating from college and has his life turned upside down when he is chosen by a blue scarab from an alien planet to become the Blue Beetle.

Jaime bonds with the scarab, which transforms into protective armour for him. He

must ensure the scarab does not fall into the wrong hands while also trying to protect his family.

"Blue Beetle" arrives in theatres on Friday and also features comedian George Lopez as Uncle Rudy and Susan Sarandon as the main villain.

Focusing on the importance of a Latino family was always a top priority for the Puerto Rican director of the Warner Bros film, Angel Manuel Soto.

"The resilience of our people is represented in each of those characters, from the dad to the

mom to the sister and when it comes to the uncle, for example, Uncle Rudy is inspired 100 per cent on the uncle of the writer (Gareth Dunnet-Alcocer) who passed away last year," Soto said.

"He wanted to immortalise him in this film and bring this dark brown energy to the family."

For Soto, making the film would not have been possible without emerging equity in entertainment. As the most underrepresented group in the industry, Latino talent is keen to change their narrative.

Last week, Variety reported that 27 Latino Hollywood organisations signed an open letter calling on the community to amplify Latino work, especially "Blue Beetle."

Mariduena believes that "Blue Beetle" is "just the first step" to hopefully open the door for other Latino superheroes to reach the big screen. — Reuters



Dhofar Governors’
Forum advances strategic
collaboration and
economic advancement



QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, AUG 16

Dhofar is hosting a high-profile assembly of governors for discussions on strategic collaboration and economic advancement across the governorates of the Sultanate of Oman. The symposium, named ‘Collaboration and Progress’, has been organised by the Office of the Governor of Dhofar.

The Dhofar Governors’ Forum is part of the broader Oman government initiative to foster economic development and prosperity in the governorates. Aligned with Oman’s Vision 2040, which strives to transform Oman into a diversified and knowledge-centric economy, the forum garners significance.

Governors from across Oman, along with representatives from governmental and private sectors, are anticipated to partake in this event.

The symposium presents a valuable juncture for participants to exchange ideas, share best practices, and forge cooperative strategies.

In his inaugural address, His Highness Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, underscored the significance of cross-governorate cooperation in achieving economic growth and prosperity. He stressed the important role of digital

THE DHOFAR GOVERNORS’ FORUM IS PART OF THE BROADER OMAN GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE TO FOSTER ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND PROSPERITY IN THE GOVERNORATES

transformation in driving economic development.

The two-day symposium encompasses an array of presentations and dialogues and is expected to yield an array of recommendations fostering collaboration among governorates and government entities.

“This forum provides an avenue to dissect shared challenges and opportunities, and to shape strategies for collaboration,” said HH Sayyid Marwan.

“The influence of digital transformation on driving economic expansion cannot be overstated.”

“I’m optimistic that this symposium will yield recommendations to propel us toward economic growth and prosperity in Dhofar and across Oman,” he further added.

Mansour al Alawi, hospital director within the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, presented a developmental plan that leverages investment land for the benefit of conservation.

This initiative also includes enhancing services through digital transformation.

HYDROGEN CARRIER

Milestone visit affirms Oman’s
global green energy standing



MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman received on Wednesday, August 16, 2023, at Sultan Qaboos Port, the first liquefied hydrogen tanker in the world, the Japanese ship ‘Suiso Frontier’, which is currently touring a number of countries in the Middle East.

Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, and a number of officials in the hydrogen, transport and logistics sectors were briefed on the ship’s public facilities represented in the hydrogen transport control room using augmented reality technology, which reviewed a vision about the transportation of liquefied hydrogen on a commercial scale and the economic feasibility of transportation projects.

Al Aufi said: “The visit serves to spread awareness about the possibility of transporting hydrogen and the challenges that the ship faced during the transportation and construction process, in addition to the company’s future plans to build



large hydrogen tankers to keep pace with the growing global demand for hydrogen during the next stage, looking forward to more cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and Japan in the process of hydrogen production and liquefaction.”

In a statement to Oman News Agency (ONA), the Minister said the Sultanate of Oman has made great and rapid strides in the field of hydrogen and seeks to be among the first countries to export green hydrogen, especially to various countries of the world, and to use it in local

industries as an alternative to the gas currently used.

Commenting on the visit, Jota Yamamoto, Ambassador of Japan to the Sultanate of Oman, said the hydrogen vessel’s visit will contribute to the strengthening of growing bilateral relations between the two friendly countries in all fields, especially in the energy and hydrogen sectors.

It also affirms the strategic direction adopted by the Sultanate of Oman to exploit this promising sector, he noted, while stressing the importance

of having hydrogen carriers in linking producers with the global market.

Japan is a strategic partner of the Sultanate of Oman in the field of energy and is linked to a memorandum of cooperation signed in early January 2023 in the fields of hydrogen, ammonia fuel, carbon recycling and modern methods of methane production.

Oman has strengthened its position in green hydrogen projects by signing a number of projects to produce 750,000 tonnes per year of green hydrogen, with an investment value estimated at \$30 billion, in the first bidding phase, with the offering of 3 auction blocks in Dhofar Governorate, according to the second and expected bidding phase.

The blocks will be awarded towards the end of Q1 202, contributing to Oman’s ambitions to produce more than one million tonnes of green hydrogen or its derivatives by 2030, rising to 8 million tonnes in 2050. — ONA

Oman Flour Mills presses ahead with multiple food projects

Expanding portfolio: Plan
for industrial food cluster
progressing

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, AUG 16

Oman Flour Mills (OFM), the largest integrated food company of the Sultanate of Oman, is advancing a number of strategic food-related ventures that will add to its already sizable project portfolio.

“Multiple projects are being evaluated across the group,” said Ahmed bin Ali al Bulushi, Chairman, Board of Directors – OFM Group. “The projects focus on integration across the value chain as well diversification into

new ventures,” he stated in the Group’s Directors’ Report for H1 2023.

Atyab Investments, the Group’s investment flagship, is exploring the opportunity to expand its thriving industrial bakery business into Saudi Arabia, notably by setting up a bakery in the kingdom.

To this end, it has already identified potential partners while also working on an initial feasibility report, the Chairman said. Also making headway is the Group’s plan to establish an industrial food cluster comprising a variety of small-scale manufacturing units that will meet the requirements of the Sultanate of Oman.

“Initial shortlisting of factories for the integrated food cluster



project were suggested by the consultant,” said Al Bulushi, adding that a detailed feasibility study is underway as well. As reported by the company last week, the Group’s feed mill expansion is progressing

as well. The expansion will boost the plant’s milling capacity to 20 tonnes per hour, while the capacity of the pre-mix unit will be raised to 6 tonnes per hour. Both projects are slated for completion before the

end of this year.

For the six months ended June 30, 2023, OFM Group garnered revenues of RO 65.05 million, representing a 13 per cent uptick from revenues of RO 57.58 million recorded a year earlier

“All sectors achieved increase in the revenues, notably in feed by 11 per cent, flour by 21 per cent and bakery by 14 per cent,” said the Chairman, noting that Group expenses were also up 9 per cent, buoyed in part by increases in raw material costs. However, net profit after tax slumped to RO 751k, down from RO 855k in H1 2022.

Parent company Oman Flour Mills SAOG (OFM) recorded a pre-tax profit of RO 1.38 million, which was down from RO 1.43

million a year earlier. Revenues were up 15 per cent, boosted by a 10 per cent uptick in sales volumes and a 5 per cent increase in the sales price.

Significantly, raw material costs grew by RO 5.13 million during H1 2023, representing a 12 per cent rise over H1 2022.

However, this will be offset by a credit of RO 2.59 million received from the government as subsidy towards wheat consumption, in addition to RO 412K as subsidy towards feed raw materials, Al Bulushi stated.

OFM is a subsidiary of Oman Food Investment Holding Company (Nitaj), the food sector investment arm of Oman Investment Authority (OIA).

Harnessing OIA’s capabilities to support Omani SMEs



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

Sovereign funds play an important role in providing financial resources towards the annual budgets of their host governments. There are several Arab funds that occupy advanced ranks in this regard, but the Norwegian government pension fund comes first as the largest sovereign fund in the world, with assets amounting to \$1,340 billion.

As for the Omani sovereign fund, it operates under the name of Oman Investment Authority (OIA). It is a modest fund with assets of RO 18 billion (\$46.5 billion) in 2022, comparable in size with some well-known sovereign funds, both in the region and the world.

The latest annual report of Oman Investment Authority notes that it provided RO 5.6 billion to the state general budget over the past seven years (2016-2022), which averages to around RO 800 million (\$2.1 billion) annually.

Return on investment averaged 8.8 per cent during the past year. In support of its localisation efforts, the Authority also awarded contracts and tenders to small and medium enterprises totalling RO 190 million in value. This is a boon to small businesses, which had

suffered many challenges and hardships during the past years, many enduring closures and losses due to the coronavirus pandemic. Many Omanis were laid off.

Foreign investments made by Oman Investment Authority are now distributed across 50 countries as part of its strategy to diversify them across multiple geographies and economic sectors.

Not all investments have been profitable though. Some interested parties have been calling for the Authority to boost its investments at home across viable economic sectors, with the goal of creating more job opportunities for Omanis on the one hand, and increasing the added value of these projects, on the other hand.

Since SMEs need flexible financing with minimal interest, it is advisable to explore the establishment of a national bank owned 60 per cent by the OIA and the remainder offered to individuals and institutions in a public offering. This bank will be a new financing entity for SMEs offering a competitive interest rate.

This initiative will help spur the growth of SMEs who no longer need to depend on commercial lenders.

It must be stressed however that the Authority has done commendable work in establishing projects at home.

But due consideration may be given to financing the operations of young Omanis and their small enterprises within the targeted sectors.

This will impart due impetus to the growth of this key sector, its integration with the private sector, support job creation for the youth, and open up business opportunities for SMEs.

Oman positioned as global hydrogen energy port hub

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, AUG 16

In a significant development for the renewable energy sector, Shigeru Yamamoto, the Deputy General Manager of the Hydrogen Strategy Division at Kawasaki, has highlighted Oman’s immense potential as a global hydrogen energy port hub. Yamamoto’s statement was made during a media briefing on the sidelines of the visit of the *Suiso Frontier*, the world’s first liquefied hydrogen carrier vessel, to the Sultanate of Oman.

The visit of the *Suiso Frontier*, manned by Captain Abhishek Sharma, to Oman signifies the growing interest in utilising hydrogen as a clean and sustainable energy source worldwide. With its strategic location and abundant renewable resources, Oman is well-positioned to become a major player in the hydrogen energy sector.

Yamamoto said, “Oman boasts several key advantages that make it an ideal candidate for establishing itself as a hydrogen energy port hub. First and foremost, the country benefits from an abundance of renewable energy sources, including solar and wind power.

“These resources can be harnessed to produce green hydrogen through electrolysis, a process that splits water into hydrogen and oxygen using renewable electricity.”

“Furthermore, Oman’s geographical location offers a strategic advantage. Located at the crossroads of Asia, Europe and Africa, the country serves as a gateway for international hydrogen trade,” he added.

Its proximity to major shipping routes and existing infrastructure, including ports and pipelines, provides a solid foundation for the establishment of a hydrogen export network.

During his visit, Yamamoto praised Oman’s commitment to developing a hydrogen economy and expressed confidence in the



THE VISIT OF THE SUISO FRONTIER, MANNED BY CAPTAIN ABHISHEK SHARMA, TO OMAN SIGNIFIES THE GROWING INTEREST IN UTILISING HYDROGEN AS A CLEAN AND SUSTAINABLE ENERGY SOURCE WORLDWIDE.

country’s ability to become a global hydrogen energy hub. He emphasised the importance of international collaboration and technology transfer to accelerate the growth of the hydrogen sector in Oman.

Also, Yamamoto explained the Kawasaki Hydrogen Road project which involves the construction of a large-scale liquefied hydrogen carrier.

The vessel is expected to be 300 metres long and will be equipped with four 40,000 cubic metres of liquefied hydrogen tanks in the front section.

This design allows for the transportation of massive quantities of up to 160,000 cubic metres of liquefied hydrogen per voyage. The project aims to further enhance the capacity and efficiency of hydrogen transportation.

Meanwhile, Takashi

Yoshiyama also from Kawasaki Heavy Industries, highlighted the features of *Suiso Frontier*.

According to him, *Suiso Frontier* (‘suiso’ is a Japanese term for hydrogen), showcases the potential of hydrogen carriers in transporting clean energy over long distances.

The *Suiso Frontier* is designed to maintain a temperature of -253 degrees Celsius, which is the boiling point of hydrogen, during its journey on Earth.

This ensures that the hydrogen remains in a liquid state throughout transportation. The vessel features a new cargo containment system that can handle the cryogenic temperatures and accumulated pressures associated with liquefied hydrogen.

The primary objective of the *Suiso Frontier* is to enable the safe and efficient transportation of large volumes of hydrogen.

With an overall length of 116.0 metres, an overall width of 19.0 metres, and a depth of 10.6 metres, it has a substantial size.

The vessel has a gross tonnage of 8,000 tonnes and can achieve a speed of 13 knots.

It has a draft of 4.5 metres and can accommodate a crew of up to

25 persons. The tank capacity of the *Suiso Frontier* is 1,250 cubic metres, indicating its ability to store substantial volumes of liquefied hydrogen.

He added that in February 2022, the *Suiso Frontier* completed the world’s first voyage of a liquefied hydrogen vessel between Australia and Japan. The vessel is designed to maintain a temperature of -253 degrees Celsius, ensuring that the hydrogen remains in a liquid state.

The liquefied hydrogen takes up only 1/800th of the volume of hydrogen gas, allowing for efficient storage and transportation. The *Suiso Frontier* utilises a double-shelled/vacuum insulated tank for long-term storage, similar to LNG carriers.

According to him, there are plans to scale up the liquefied hydrogen supply chain, which can lead to a reduction in transportation costs by more than 50 per cent in the long run. The *Suiso Frontier* is a zero-emission vessel that aims to recycle hydrogen for its fuel engine.

This means that the vessel utilises hydrogen as a clean fuel source, reducing emissions during its operations.

Bank Muscat continues the extra working hours for opening children’s saving accounts

MUSCAT: In emphasis of its customer-centric vision and commitment to enhancing its products and services to be delivered to customers through simplified processes, Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the Sultanate of Oman, continues the extra working hours at selected branches across the Sultanate of Oman, until August 31, from 3 pm until 6 pm, from Sunday to Thursday, to allow customers to open saving accounts for children seamlessly.

Therefore, in consideration of the fact that Bank Muscat is always committed to providing the best banking solutions and services catering to the diverse needs of its customers, the announcement of extra working hours came to emphasise the importance of encouraging children to embark on saving habits at an early age



and prepare themselves for a financially secure future.

Bank Muscat’s announcement of extra working hours covers 39 branches across the Sultanate of Oman’s various governorates.

These branches are in Al Mahaj Al Amerat, Madinat Al Nahda, Al Khoudh, Muscat City Centre, Qurum, Maabela, Maabela Industrial, Oman Avenues Mall, Jibroo, Seeb, Athaiba roundabout,

Al Wadi Al Kabir, Al Hail, Markaz Al Bahja, Bausher, Qurayat, Al Kamil, Jaalan Bani Bu Ali, Sur, Sinaw, Bidiya, Ibra, Al Musannah, Al Washil - Al Rustaq, Barka Souq, Al Bidaya, Bat’ha Hilal - Al Suwaiq, Tharmad, Saham Corniche, Shinas, Falaj Al Qabail, Suhar, Al Khabourah, Dereez, Izki, Firq, Samayil, Bahla Souq, Ibri, Jubail, Salalah 23rd July Street, Taqah, and Al Buraimi -

Main Road.

Children’s saving accounts are characterised with features including no fee on the minimum balance, life insurance cover, and parents’ ability to access their children’s accounts through the Bank’s mBanking App.

Customers who would like to open children’s saving accounts may visit the nearest Bank Muscat branch and request for opening saving accounts, and complete a simplified account opening form along with other required documents.

Customers can submit all of these requirements without their children’s availability at the branch.

Alternatively, customers may send an e-mail to MinorAO@bankmuscat.com, attaching a copy of the filled and signed form as well as copies of the other required documents.



Ooredoo partners with Tech Mahindra and Google Cloud

MUSCAT: Ooredoo Group, leading ICT provider and techco, has announced new partnerships with Tech Mahindra — a leading provider of digital transformation, consulting and business re-engineering services and solutions — and Google Cloud technologies — global tech giant — that will see the company accelerate its digital transformation journey in six operating companies across its global footprint.

Powered by Google Cloud’s API Management Platform (Apigee), with Tech Mahindra as implementation partner, Ooredoo’s IT operations will be modernised by deploying a digital platform-based approach, which will greatly enhance performance and the digital offering, resulting in a significant upgrade in customer experience.

Shaikh Mohammed bin Abdullah al Thani, Deputy Group CEO, Ooredoo, said: “As a part of our corporate strategy, we actively seek out and foster partnerships with like-minded entities that share our dedication to innovation and technology.

Through these collaborations, we aim to elevate our offerings and unleash the full potential of our APIs, enabling us to provide unparalleled digital services to our customers.

“We are thrilled to join forces with Google Cloud and Tech Mahindra for this transformative project, as it will accelerate our digital transformation, elevate the customer experience, and strengthen our digital ecosystem across our operating companies.” The integral role of API in the development of open innovation, ecosystem expansion, mobile app development, Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence and data-driven insights will vastly expand opportunities for growth across the Group’s global footprint.

Ram Ramachandran, Head Middle East and Africa at Tech Mahindra, said: “A seismic shift has taken place in the telecom industry, moving it from the hardware to the software arena, mostly driven by API. Businesses are using APIs to deliver digital capabilities and data in a consumable manner.

Maui tourism, an economic mainstay, sparks anger amid fire ruin

HAWAII: The incongruous sight of tourists enjoying Maui's tropical beaches while search-and-rescue teams trawl building ruins and waters for victims of the deadliest US wildfire in more than a century has outraged some residents.

They have vented on social media, posting video of tourists enjoying holiday activities like snorkeling while the death toll in the historic resort town of Lahaina passes 100 and is rising every day.

"Our community needs time to heal, grieve, and restore," Hawaiian actor Jason Momoa said on Instagram, urging tourists to cancel their trips.

Authorities and businesses have welcomed the trickle of travellers, saying it will lessen the blow to the island's economy, which relies heavily on tourism. The industry is Maui's "economic engine," generating 80 per cent of its wealth, according to the island's economic development board.

As Maui embarks on a long, painful recovery from the fires, officials are wrestling with how to balance residents' immediate needs for housing and resources against the island's long-term financial health.

Hawaii Governor Josh Green recalled at a weekend press conference how the Covid-19



Fire damage is shown in the Wahikuli Terrace neighbourhood in the fire ravaged town of Lahaina on the island of Maui in Hawaii. — Reuters

pandemic similarly forced the state to weigh the risks of allowing tourists in during a public health crisis against the harm Hawaii's economy would suffer from

barring them.

"All of our people will need to survive, and we can't afford to have no jobs or no future for our children," Green said.

"When you restrict any travel to a region, you really devastate its own local residents in many ways more than anyone else."

Tourism has taken a hit in the week since the wildfire devastated Lahaina, a popular vacation destination that was also home to historic sites significant to Hawaiian residents.

The number of airline passengers to Maui on Sunday was down nearly 81 per cent compared to the same time last year, according to the Hawaii Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism.

In 2022, 2.9 million tourists visited Maui, which has a year-

round population of 165,000, according to the latest numbers from the US Census Bureau. The state tourism department reported in February that visitors spent \$5.69 billion on Maui in 2022.

The Hawaii Tourism Authority now is asking visitors to avoid all non-essential travel to West Maui, the part of the island affected by the fires, so resources can be used to help locals recover.

"It is likely that a big chunk of the people who are affected, losing family members, losing family homes, it's likely a lot of them were employed by the visitor industry," tourism authority spokesperson Ilihia Gionson said. — Reuters

UK annual inflation drops to 15-month low



An employee arranges produce inside a Sainsbury's supermarket in Richmond, west London. — Reuters

LONDON: Britain's annual inflation rate dropped sharply in July to a 15-month low, official data revealed on Wednesday, off the back of lower energy prices and in line with economists' expectations.

The Consumer Prices Index (CPI) rose by an annual rate of 6.8 per cent, down from 7.9 per cent in June, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said.

July's price growth met the predictions of analysts, including the Bank of England, which had forecast the 6.8-per cent rate.

It follows a bigger-than-expected drop in June, when the CPI fell 0.8 per cent.

However, UK inflation has for months been the highest among G7 nations, despite the Bank of England hiking its key interest rate more than a dozen times in succession to try to tame it.

Although there was a fall in gas and electricity prices in July, food prices continued to rise, but less quickly than in the same month last year. — AFP

China's economic woes mount as trust firm misses payments, home prices fall

BEIJING: Missed payments on investment products by a leading Chinese trust firm and a fall in home prices have added to worries that China's deepening property sector crisis is stifling what little momentum the economy has left.

Zhongrong International Trust Co, which traditionally had sizable real estate exposure, missed payments on dozens of investment products since late last month, a senior official told angry investors.

China's \$3 trillion shadow banking sector is roughly the size of Britain's economy, and concerns about its outsized exposure to property and risks to the wider economy have grown over the past year.

A string of defaults in the shadow banking sector could have a wide ranging chilling effect as many individual investors are exposed to the high-yielding trust products. Missed payments could weigh on already fragile consumer confidence in the absence of stronger support measures from Beijing.

Barclays was among a number of global banks to cut its forecasts for China's 2023 growth after weak data on Tuesday, citing a faster-than-expected deterioration in the housing market. It lowered its growth forecast to 4.5 per cent from 4.9 per cent.

The central bank's surprise interest rate cuts on the same



Staff set up model apartments as they prepare a real estate exhibition in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, China. — Reuters

day will not be enough to arrest the economy's downward spiral, several analysts said.

Some economists say many consumers and small businesses may already feel economic pain as deep as during a recession, given youth unemployment at record rates above 21 per cent and deflationary price pressures squeezing companies' profit margins.

New bank loans fell to a 14-year

low in July.

So far, China has largely managed to avoid a spillover of a debt squeeze in the property sector to the country's \$57 trillion financial industry despite a rising number of developers defaulting on repayment obligations.

Even after widespread reforms over the past decades, Beijing retains a strong grip over the banking sector and domestic financial markets. But news of fresh defaults

has triggered contagion fears. Adding to the gloom, China's new home prices fell in July for the first time this year, the latest in a string of downbeat data that underlines the urgency for bolder policy support.

Prices fell 0.2 per cent month-on-month on a nationwide basis and 0.1 per cent year-on-year, according to calculations based on National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) data.

But the picture is far worse outside of the country's megacities like Shanghai and Beijing. Average new home prices in the 35 smallest cities surveyed by NBS fell for the 17th straight month in June on a year-on-year basis.

The worsening debt crisis at major developers including Country Garden, the country's No 1 private developer, has scared away many home buyers, with property investment, home sales and new construction contracting for more than a year.

Country Garden promised "five-star living" to the masses in less popular, smaller cities but focusing on those areas has come back to haunt it. Its plight has raised fears that its debt problems will ripple through the stalling economy.

Given the property market has traditionally accounted for about a quarter of China's economy, some analysts say the slump, combined with the shock from three years of strict Covid measures, has had an unprecedented impact on activity.

Most analysts expect further falls in home prices and sales over coming months.

Global stocks slipped on Wednesday for the third time in four sessions as the disappointing Chinese data and the absence of meaningful stimulus from Beijing continued to weigh on investor sentiment. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

AMSTERDAM

Dutch economy enters recession as inflation bites

The Dutch economy has entered a recession as it shrank 0.3 per cent on a quarterly basis in the second quarter, a first estimate published by Statistics Netherlands on Wednesday showed.

The euro zone's fifth largest economy shrank for the second consecutive quarter, after a 0.4-per cent contraction in the first three months of the year.

Economic growth in the Netherlands had been almost 5 per cent per year in 2021 and 2022 in a quick recovery from a Covid-19 slump.

The first recession since the pandemic was driven by a drop in consumer spending and exports, as surging inflation drove up



food prices and energy bills in the Netherlands and its trading partners.

Consumer spending fell 1.6 per cent, while exports were 0.7 per cent lower than in the first three months of the year. Inflation in the Netherlands has dropped since hitting a peak of 14.5 per cent in September last year, but was still relatively high at around 6 per cent Q2 of 2023. — Reuters

NAIROBI

Kenya's debt rises to historic high: Treasury

Kenya's debt level has reached record highs despite President William Ruto's vow to tame the country's appetite for loans, treasury figures show.

Total public debt rose by a record \$10.8 billion in the financial year ended on June 30 to \$70.75 billion, breaching a debt ceiling of 10 trillion shillings, according to the data.

"The increase in the public debt is attributed to external loan disbursements, exchange rate fluctuations and the uptake of domestic and external debt," the treasury said.

Loan repayment costs, mainly to China, have shot up as the local currency trades at record lows



of around 144 shillings to the dollar. The cost of debt servicing in the year was \$2.7 billion, of which the highest payment of \$743 million went to China.

The debt load has prompted warnings from global credit ratings agencies including Fitch Ratings which last month downgraded Kenya's ability to repay international lenders from "stable to negative." — AFP

RIYADH

Saudi Arabia oil exports hit 21-month low in June

Saudi Arabia's crude oil exports fell for a third straight month in June to their lowest since September 2021, data from the Joint Organizations Data Initiative (JODI) showed on Wednesday, with big Asian buyers favouring cheaper Russian oil.

The kingdom's crude exports totalled 6.8 million barrels per day (bpd) in June, down about 1.8 per cent from May's 6.93 million bpd.

Monthly export figures are provided by Riyadh and other members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) to the JODI, which publishes them on its



website.

Saudi crude output in June was little changed from the previous month at 9.96 million bpd while inventories rose by 1.45 million barrels to 149.69 million.

Domestic refineries processed 28,000 bpd less crude in June than in May at 2.56 million bpd while direct crude burn rose by 65,000 barrels per day to 543,000 barrels per day. — Reuters