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FOURTH ROUND OF OAA LEAGUE CONCLUDES ON FRIDAY



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SMN BARKA POWER SECURES 9-YEAR WATER SUPPLY PACT IN OMAN



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THE ESSENCE, MEANING, AND SPIRITUAL VALUE OF RAMADHAN



MUSCAT

RARE SURGERY AT RUSTAQ HOSPITAL

CONDITION OF THE WORKERS NOT REPORTED TO OHRC

BBC REPORT DEALS WITH 50 MALAWIAN DOMESTIC WORKERS

MENTIONS THOSE WORKERS WHO HAD ALREADY LEFT OMAN

THE WORKERS WERE DECEIVED BY AGENTS IN THEIR HOME COUNTRY

OMAN HAS 24/7 MECHANISM TO RECEIVE COMPLAINTS

A medical team specialising in paediatric surgery at Al Rustaq Hospital in Al Batinah South Governorate performed a surgical emergency on a 3-year-old toddler. Dr Reda Abdulfattah, paediatric surgery consultant at Al Rustaq Hospital, said that the child was brought to the hospital after developing a painful tumour in the lower abdomen. Medical observation clearly showed that the child was suffering from a severe intestinal hernia which required urgent surgical intervention to prevent intestinal damage and the operation was performed successfully. **SEE ALSO P3**

MODERN WATERFRONT TO COME UP IN BARKA



A tender has been awarded for the development of a waterfront project in the Wilayat of Barka in Al Batinah South Governorate. The project aims to transform the waterfront to an exquisite tourist destination completed with an integrated recreational centre. The construction work is expected to be complete within 15 months. **DETAILS ON P2**

OMAN, GERMANY PACT ON ENERGY

Aiming to strengthen bilateral relations and cooperation in the field of energy, Eng Salim bin Nasser al Auli, Minister of Energy and Minerals, met Dr Robert Habeck, Vice Chancellor of Germany, Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, during his visit to the Federal Republic of Germany, to discuss the needs of the energy market in Germany, the importance of energy solutions, the role of hydrogen in energy transition, and other topics with mutual interest. During the visit, Omani and German companies signed several MoUs related to supplying green hydrogen to German refineries, in addition to a letter of intent for the supply of green hydrogen. **DETAILS ON P13**

OHRC refutes report on domestic workers

MUSCAT: The Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC) observed the documentary film and report broadcast by BBC Africa regarding female workers from the Republic of Malawi who were allegedly subjected to human trafficking according to the network's report. Consequently, the OHRC expressed concern about the condition of these workers who were allegedly harmed as a result, and without it being reported to the Oman Human Rights Commission nor to the national bodies for protecting workers' rights in the Sultanate of Oman.

As per the OHRC's mandates stipulated under Article (11), paragraph (3), of Royal Decree No 57/2022, to respond to any observations raised by government or non-government international organisations in the field of human rights within the

Sultanate of Oman, and to verify and respond to the information contained therein, Oman Human Rights Commission would like to clarify the following: The report dealt with 50 women domestic workers of Malawian nationality without sufficient details on those cases regardless of a few cases. Furthermore, the report mentioned that those workers had previously left the Sultanate of Oman. As per the report, female workers were deceived by recruitment agencies in their home country, therefore, the Malawian government should investigate and address the issue domestically.

The report further verified that the female workers had been in contact with international organisations and civil society located outside Oman through social media, demonstrating their capability to utilise such



The report contains inaccurate information that contradicts the actual situation in Oman, as highlighted by 'Do Bold,' and the NGO did not contact the OHRC about the incidents mentioned in the report

channels to reach out to national mechanisms in Oman dedicated to protecting workers' rights. Such national mechanisms have several means (social media) to receive communications and are available 24 hours, accordingly these workers may access various communication channels. Additionally, they could have informed airport authorities of their refusal to travel back to their home countries until their rights were settled if the recruitment agency insisted on their travel.

INACCURATE

The report contains inaccurate information that contradicts the actual situation in Oman, as highlighted by non-governmental international organisation 'Do Bold'. The organisation emphasised that workers in Oman are not able

to substitute their employers and are not permitted to leave the country under dire circumstances. On the other hand, according to the Oman Labour Law, employers are prohibited from subjecting workers to any form of forced or compulsory labour as stipulated under Article (5). Additionally, as per Article (6), employers are not allowed to confiscate workers' passports or personal documents.

The 'Do Bold' organisation did not contact the Oman Human Rights Commission about the incidents mentioned in the report. However, 'Do Bold' regularly interacts with the Commission concerning female workers from different nationalities, and OHRC promptly responds to assist, intervene and find solutions in such cases. **TURN TO P1**

OMAN OBSERVES EARTH HOUR



Lights were switched off as many citizens and residents took part in the 'Earth Hour' from 8.30 pm to 9.30 pm on Saturday as the world observed an hour reminding us of the need to conserve energy. The Environment Authority had issued a notice urging people to heed the call of 'Earth Hour', and to turn off unnecessary lights and electronic devices for the sake of the planet. Be part of the change and live an hour for the earth. **PHOTO BY HUSSAIN AL MUQBALI (DETAILS ON P2)**

Oman strongly condemns terrorist attack in Russia

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman expressed its strong condemnation of the armed terrorist attack that took place in the Crocus City Hall near the Russian capital, Moscow, which resulted in dozens of deaths and injuries.

The Foreign Ministry issued a statement on Saturday expressing its sincere condolences and sympathy to the families of the victims and the friendly government and people of the Russian Federation and wishing the injured a speedy recovery.

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin on Saturday vowed to punish those behind a "barbaric terrorist attack" on a Moscow concert hall that killed more than 130, saying Russia had arrested four gunmen who were trying to flee to Ukraine.

Kyiv has strongly denied any connection, and Putin made no reference to claims of responsibility by the IS in his first public remarks on the attack.

At least 133 people were killed when camouflaged gunmen stormed the Crocus City Hall, in Moscow's northern suburb of Krasnogorsk, and then set fire to the building on Friday evening.

The IS group has claimed the attack, writing on Saturday on a Telegram channel that it was "carried out by four IS fight-



A woman reacts in front of a makeshift memorial to the victims set up outside the Crocus City Hall concert venue in Moscow. – **Reuters**

ers armed with machine guns, a pistol, knives and firebombs," as part of "the raging war."

It is the deadliest attack in Russia for almost two decades and the deadliest in Europe to have been claimed by IS.

Russian officials expect the death toll to rise further, with more than 100 injured still undergoing treatment in hospital.

"Terrorists, murderers, non-humans... have only one unenviable fate: retribution and oblivion," Putin said in a televised address to the nation on Saturday. Calling the attack a "barbaric, terrorist act", he said "all four direct perpetrators... all those who shot and killed people, have been found and detained". **SEE ALSO P7**

Blocked aid for Gaza a moral outrage: UN chief



UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres speaks to the media outside the Rafah border with the Gaza Strip on the Egyptian side. – **AFP**

RAFAH: A long line of blocked relief trucks on Egypt's side of the border with the Gaza Strip where people face starvation is a moral outrage, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said during a visit to the Rafah crossing on Saturday. It was time for Israel to give an "ironclad commitment" for unfettered access to humanitarian goods throughout Gaza, said Guterres, who also called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire

and the release of Israeli captives held in Gaza.

CONTINUE TO WORK

The UN would continue to work with Egypt to "streamline" the flow of aid into Gaza, he said in comments made in front of the gate of the Rafah crossing, an entry point for aid.

"Here from this crossing, we see the heartbreak and heartlessness of it all. A long line of

blocked relief trucks on one side of the gates, the long shadow of starvation on the other," he said. "That is more than tragic. It is a moral outrage."

The visit by Guterres comes as Israel faces global pressure to allow more humanitarian aid into Gaza, which has been devastated by more than five months of war.

Israel has kept all but one of its land crossings into the enclave closed. — **AFP**





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AL BURAIMI PLANTING OVER 50,000 WILD TREES

MUSCAT: Al Buraimi Governorate is planting over 50,000 wild trees in the Jari Al Hawiyah area, marking a significant stride towards Oman's vision of a greener, more sustainable future.

The project is spearheaded by the Environment Authority. Nasser bin Hamoud al Yaqoubi, Director of the Environment Department in Al Buraimi Governorate, said the initiative seeks to foster biodiversity, restore environmental equilibrium, ensure long-term sustainability, safeguard natural resources and expand green spaces, all in alignment with Oman Vision 2040.

The chosen site, spanning over 1.2 million square metres, strategically bridges the Wilayat



By cultivating Ghaf, Sidr and Samar trees, which thrive in the area, the project aims to boost vegetation cover and mitigate climate change effects.

of Al Buraimi and Mahdha. Its selection was meticulous, considering factors like fertile clay soil, access to water sources from seasonal rainfall pools, and its potential as a natural attraction for tourists, especially during winter. The meticulous construction phase includes establishing an irrigation network, erecting protective fences to prevent overgrazing, creating drainage canals for rainwater and digging wells to meet water demands. The project is now 60 per cent complete and it is expected to be over by mid-2024.

This initiative isn't just about planting trees; it's about revitalising the ecosystem and enhancing the region's economic prospects. By cultivating Ghaf, Sidr and Samar

trees, which thrive in the area, the project aims to boost vegetation cover and mitigate climate change effects.

Furthermore, plans are in place to leverage the site for tourism and economic development, adding significant value to Al Buraimi Governorate in the years ahead.

This project is part of a larger national endeavour to plant 10 million wild trees across Oman. Al Buraimi Governorate's contributions include the 'Fenced Alive' project, which planted over 1,200 wild trees; 'Al Safa Walled,' which planted 3,000 trees; 'Emaar Mahdah Walled,' which planted 2,540 trees, and 'Al Kassara Al Buraimi National Walled,' which planted 1,090 trees, bringing the total planted trees to 9,200.

Red Cross praises Oman's humanitarian roles

NEW YORK: The permanent delegation of the Sultanate of Oman to the United Nations held an official consultation session with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

The session was presided over by Dr Mohammed bin Awad al Hassan, Permanent Representative of the Sultanate of Oman to the United Nations, and Mirjana Spoljaric Egger, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

The two sides discussed a number of current issues in the Middle East region stressing the importance of respecting



Dr Mohammed bin Awad al Hassan, Permanent Representative of the Oman to the UN, and Mirjana Spoljaric Egger, President of ICRC, in New York.

the rules and basis of the international humanitarian law by all parties especially in the occupied Palestinian territories and the Gaza Strip in particular. The president of the ICRC

praised the attitude adopted by the Sultanate of Oman in supporting international humanitarian efforts, expressing her happiness over the level of existing cooperation and coordination between the two sides and the continued support that the ICRC receives from the government of the Sultanate of Oman which is directed to support good efforts to achieve security, stability and peace in the Middle East region.

She expressed her hope to visit the Sultanate of Oman in the near future and to see a near end to the crises in the Middle East region. — ONA

OMAN OBSERVES EARTH HOUR

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Lights remained turned off with many of the citizens and expatriates taking part in the Earth Hour from 8.30 pm to 9:30 pm on Saturday as the world observed an hour reminding of the need to conserve energy.

The Environment Authority (EA) had issued a notice urging people to heed the call of Earth Hour, and to "Turn off unnecessary lights and electronic devices for the sake of the planet. Be part of the change and live an hour for the Earth".

Earth Hour is observed every year, usually on the last Saturday of March, where millions of people across the world join in raising awareness related to the issues facing the planet Earth.

Oman joined hands with approximately 160 countries around the world to celebrate Earth Hour, as part of the Sultanate of Oman's efforts to increase public awareness of climate change, energy conservation, global warming and protecting ecosystems from environmental degradation, as well as improving programmes and plans to rationalise energy and electricity consumption.

The EA, in a statement, said,

"The Sultanate of Oman exerts enormous efforts to preserve the ecological balance."

The EA had launched national plans to achieve zero neutrality to reach this stage by 2050. Earth Hour is also one step to preserving the earth and each year, Oman keenly participates in this drive along with other countries to celebrate the Hour. According to EA, "By celebrating Earth Hour, we give the earth 60 minutes which can do a lot to preserve nature and the ecosystem." Observing Earth Hour is all about making a daily commitment to care for one another and the one home we all share. This year's theme is "Give an Hour for Earth by spending 60 minutes doing something - anything - positive for our planet."

Over 84,530 people from 151 countries and territories have already pledged to to take care of the planet and find other ways to make an impact.

Some of the simple, yet impactful ways to shape a brighter future for people and the planet are to eat more sustainably, not to waste food, travel responsibly, eliminate plastic, save water, be energy-efficient, protect natural spaces, be a conscious consumer, spread the word and stay informed.

Tender awarded for waterfront project in Barka

SAIF AL SIYABI
BARKA, MARCH 23

A tender has been awarded for the development of the waterfront project in the Wilayat of Barka in Al Batinah South Governorate.

The project aims to transform the waterfront to an exquisite tourist destination completed with an integrated recreational centre. The construction work is expected to be completed within 15 months. Extending over 2 km in length and 70 metres in



width, the waterfront project involves a plethora of sporting and entertainment facilities including a 1.8-km seaside walkway, 13 shaded and open-air barbecue areas, a seating area at the centre of the waterfront, restaurants, kiosks as well as the main area situated at the heart of the waterfront with green spaces,

playgrounds for soccer and basketball and open spaces for beach sports, among others.

Once complete, the project would stir tourist and economic activities in the Wilayat of Barka and Al Batinah South Governorate in general. It targets all age groups as well as local and foreign tourists as it includes various facilities for sports, recreation and entertainment in addition to various tourism services and investment spaces that provide job opportunities for citizens of the governorate.



SQU STUDENTS SHINE AT WOODEN BRIDGE COMPETITION



The students from Sultan Qaboos University achieved first and second place in the 14th Annual Wooden Bridge Competition held at The American University in Dubai. The competition was organised by the AUD ASCE-ACI Student Chapter. The SQU team secured the first place in the best bridge design evaluation. This competition saw participation from various groups representing different countries and universities, converging in one place for assessment.

3-year-old treated for hernia in Rustaq

AL RUSTAQ: A medical team specialising in paediatric surgery at Al Rustaq Hospital in Al Batinah South Governorate, performed a surgical emergency on a 3-year-old toddler.

Dr Reda Abdulfattah, paediatric surgery consultant at Al Rustaq Hospital, said that the child was brought to the hospital after developing a painful tumour in the lower abdomen. Medical observation clearly showed that the child was suffering from a severe intestinal hernia which required urgent surgical intervention to prevent intestinal damage and the operation was performed successfully.

Dr Abdulfattah, stressed



that parents should consult a paediatrician in case that their kids cry continuously specially with infants under 1 year and

to pay attention and notice any tumour or pain in any part of the baby's body especially lower abdomen. — ONA

Largest mass Iftar held

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The Ruwi Clock Tower area witnessed on Friday the largest community Iftar hosting nearly 5,000 people, thanks to the Deccan Wing of Indian Social Club (ISC).

The annual Iftar saw a large number of people from different walks of life gathering at the historic clock tower area.

According to the organisers, the origin of this mega annual event traces back to two decades ago. The Hyderabad community in Oman initiated the event nearly 20 years back and the Deccani wing took over the organisation when it was established as a part of Indian Social Club in 2017. The latest such gathering saw 1,000 women and nearly 4,000 men and children attending with many visitors from Nizwa, Suhar and Salalah, making it probably the biggest such event held in Muscat this year.

Shaikh Emad bin Said al Rawahi Director at the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, was the guest of honour while the Indian Ambassador Amit Narang was the chief guest.



Iftar at the Ruwi clock tower on Friday.

The Indian Ambassador was taken around the venue by Suhail Khan chief Organiser, Dr Wasifuddin, Convener, and Mansoor Sabri Co-Convenor of Deccani Wing.

The attendees included distinguished Hyderabad Omanis like Colonel Dr Abid Ali, Dr Zaheer Aldin, Dr Sami and also office bearers of the ISC parent body.

An energetic team of volunteers headed by Suhail Khan included Mirza, Ghaffar,

Imran, Ilyas, Habeeb Salim, Kashif, Yusuf, Sayeed, Dawood and Ali made sure the event flowed smoothly with no concerns of shortage of any items distributed among the people from various backgrounds.

"Events of this nature are testimony to Islam's resilience and adaptability. We are glad to attend the event hosted by our Muslim fraternity which teaches us brotherhood, peace and harmony," Vishal Malhotra, an attendee, told the *Observer*.

TA'ARUF INTRODUCES ISLAM TO NON-MUSLIMS

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MoARA), represented by the Department of Islamic Information and Cultural Exchange at Ifta Office, held the 7th edition of the Ta'aruf event, giving insights to the religion to non-believers at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) on Friday.

"Ta'aruf" that translates as 'Know Islam', being held every year during the holy month, opens up doors

of wisdom about the religion and the belief to the new converts to Islam and people from other faiths. It hosts people who want to know more of the religion, its applicability in the modern world, and its stance in events that affect humans as well as other creatures globally. The idea behind the evening of believers and non-believers is to shed more light on the principles of Islam at a time when misunderstanding and Islamophobia persist among some segments of the society.

"Ta'aruf, an exclusive event to let

the non-Muslims and new Muslims know Islam more is held under the auspices of the Department of Introduction to Islam and Cultural Exchange at the ministry and will be a window to those who want to know about Islam with all its true instructions to mankind," Hamed al Badi, representative of the ministry told the *Observer*.

Over 600 people above the age of 15 years made use of the session by asking questions and clarifying their doubts pertaining to their faiths.

OHRC ensures protection of domesitc workers' rights

FROM PI

The report addressed the death of Aida Chiwalo, a domestic worker who tragically died in Oman in 2023. The reason for her death remains unknown, and the report suggests that she was neglected by the employment office in Oman.

ACTION INITIATED

Based on the published report, Oman Human Rights Commission confirms that it received two complaints only from Malawian female domestic workers in 2023, regarding breach of their employment contracts by the recruitment agency. In collaboration with the Ministry of Labour, legal action was initiated against the agency owner, which bore all financial costs, and the two workers were repatriated to their home countries.

Regarding the correspondence received by OHRC from 'Do Bold', only one communication was received concerning a Malawian domestic worker. The organisation was asked for further information about the worker. However, the organisation later informed the Commission's working group that the issue had been resolved with the employer through alternative means resulting in the worker's repatriation, without requiring any intervention from the Oman Human Rights Commission.

At the end of February 2024, there were 626 Malawian women workers in the country. Malawian women domestic workers represent around 0.3 per cent of the 202,368 total female domestic workforce of all nationalities in Oman

No further details about the worker were shared with the Commission.

202,368 DOMESTIC MAIDS

The national official statistics indicated that by the end of February 2024, there were 626 Malawian women workers in the country. The statistics also reflected that Malawian women domestic workers represent around 0.3 per cent of the 202,368 total female domestic workforce of all nationalities in Oman.

While the cases highlighted in the press report are extremely limited in number, consequently, the Commission expresses concern over cases where female domestic workers or international non-governmental organisations fail to contact the Oman Human Rights Commission or relevant official authorities responsible

for protecting workers' rights in Oman assuming the information presented is accurate.

RIGHTS PROTECTED

The Commission emphasises that Omani laws and legislations protect the rights of workers, including domestic workers. Furthermore, these laws ensure that workers are paid their (agreed-upon) monthly wages within seven days of each month's end, provided with sufficient food and accommodation, and receive medical care from their employer throughout their contract.

In addition, the law also mandates that domestic workers have break-time during the day, as well as a weekly rest day, and are entitled to leave after the agreed-upon period in their employment contract. The law emphasises the importance of providing decent and humane treatment that upholds the worker's dignity.

Furthermore, domestic workers are provided with a return ticket to their home country, which is covered by the recruitment agency within 180 days of their arrival if it is determined that their job is different from the one specified in the recruitment permit, if they are mentally ill or contagious, or if they have a disability that prevents them from performing

their duties. Domestic workers may also be given a return ticket at the employer's expense after the contract period expires or due to the employer's violation of the contract.

Oman enforces a legal framework that ensures the rights of workers in alignment with international labour norms, the Basic Statute of State, the Omani Labour Law, ministerial resolutions, Convention No 105 on the Abolition of Forced Labour, ILO Convention No 29 on Forced Labour, and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

NATURAL DEATH

In relation to the domestic worker case named "Aida Chiwalo", who passed away in Oman in 2023, the OHRC confirms, based on investigations, that her death was natural, attributed to a decrease in blood circulation, with no criminal suspicion reported by official authorities in Oman. Following her demise, the Omani authorities contacted the deceased worker's family, who initially agreed to have her buried in Oman in exchange for financial compensation instead of repatriation. However, the Government of Malawi declined this arrangement. Consequently,

the body was repatriated on June 12, 2023. Upon investigation, the Commission found that the recruitment agency had arranged for all necessary procedures for transporting and preserving the body for repatriation, contingent on the Malawian Embassy providing a repatriation ticket as requested. The employer also ensured that the worker's family received compensation for the ticket and all financial entitlements. Support was extended to the worker's family, including assistance in purchasing a house in Malawi. The Commission affirms that its investigations were in-depth and transparent, and involved reviewing relevant documents with both Omani authorities as well as the recruitment agency and employer.

CHANNELS FOR COMPLAINT

In terms of national mechanisms for protecting workers' rights, workers can report complaints through various channels such as the Ministry of Labour, the Royal Oman Police, the Public Prosecution, the National Committee against Trafficking in Persons, and the Oman Human Rights Commission.

In situations where domestic workers fall victim to human

trafficking and are subjected to exploitation beyond the bounds of their employment contract or coerced into illicit labour, they may report to the National Committee for Combating Human Trafficking.

LEGAL AID

Additionally, they collaborate with the Ministry of Social Development, which has established a shelter for human trafficking victims known as the "Dar Al Wifaq" which aims to provide legal aid, healthcare, psychological support and accommodation for the victims, to alleviate the repercussions of any exploitation. In addition, the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking created a quick response team in 2019 to address any reports of human trafficking cases.

Finally, the Oman Human Rights Commission confirms its collaboration with international governmental and non-governmental organisations on matters concerning the promotion and protection of human rights in Oman, particularly, with the 'Do Bold' organisation in addressing the protection of workers' rights, investigating and resolving cases referred by the organisation in cooperation with the relevant authorities in Oman.



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UNIQUE OMANI RAMADHAN CUSTOMS

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 23

R amadhan customs differ from one governorate to another, but they all contribute to strengthening the bond and fostering affection between members of society. Some ancient Ramadhan customs are still practiced to this day, while others have become obsolete and are only remembered by old timers.

Athoon, Thawab, Istibshar are some of the unique customs of Al Sharqiyah South Governorate.

After Taraweeh prayers, worshipers repeat the prayer “Farewell, farewell, Ramadhan” at the end of the holy month.

Historian Hamoud al Ghailani said, “The Wilayat of Sur is distinguished by many Ramadhan customs. During the holy month, families in Sur distribute food among relatives and friends. It is also shared among the poor people. The idea is to instil Islamic values of solidarity and cooperation.”

Families in the Wilayat of Sur also send iftar to the mosques for travellers, commuters, the poor, and those present in the mosque, regardless of their social and economic status. “By sharing food, these families aim to foster Islamic values of sharing, helping the needy among children. It aims to cultivate respect for guests, neighbours and relatives, and a love of helping the poor.”

Another unique Ramadhan custom in Sur is Athoon where families prepare iftar and arrange it on several plates for children to carry it around. The children from the neighbourhood gather together and sing “break your fast... break your fast... oh you who are fasting... early you will be asleep” until the moment the call to Magrib prayers. This practice fosters love by sharing the food.

At the end of Shaaban, men of Sur gather in mosques to sing songs to welcome Ramadhan and read the Holy Quran. Women and girls also welcome the holy month with songs.

In the Wilayat of Sur, as soon as the moon is sighted, men fire rifles to the air to celebrate the advent of

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MONTH WITH
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Ramadhan. Cannons are also fired from Hillat Al Souq to announce the arrival of the holy month so that the news reaches all villages far and near.

In Al Musannah, Misharati is one of the Ramadhan customs that disappeared a decade ago with the death of the last Misaharati or town crier in the wilayat.

Jaafar bin Abdullah al Balushi, a former member of the municipal council in Al Musannah, says, “There used to be a town crier with drums who wakes up people for morning prayers and suhoor before sunrise during the holy month of Ramadhan. At the end of the 10 days of Ramadhan, he will sing with his drum beating the same words and adding to it, ‘Farewell, O Ramadhan, Farewell, O Ramadhan.’ It was a beautiful time in which we lived in the atmosphere of the holy Ramadhan.”

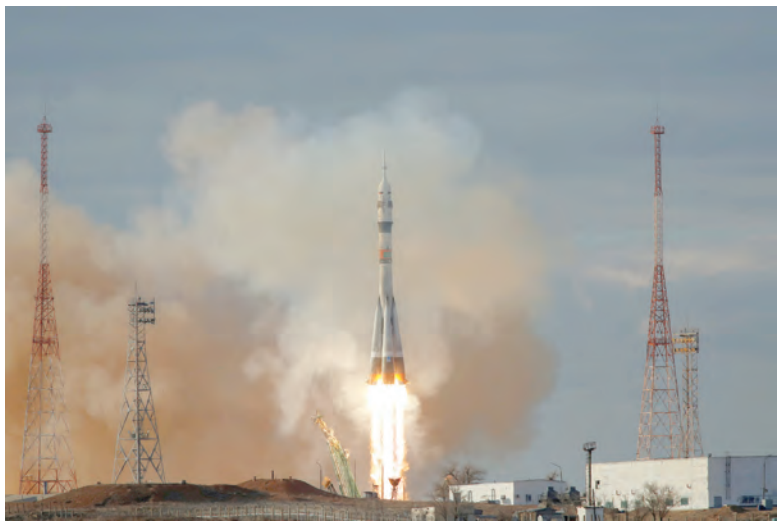
Customs differ for farewell to Ramadhan in various governorates. It is held in the last three days of the month of Ramadhan immediately after performing Taraweeh prayers, and one of those present recites a supplication known as bidding farewell to Ramadhan. It consists of poetic verses that show the virtues of this month, and show sadness at its end. After finishing reading the supplication, all those present recite Al Fatihah and then leave. This custom is widespread in some parts of the Sultanate of Oman, especially in the north.

In Dhofar, the holy month is marked by Qatl Al Hanash, which is practiced by generations. But it actually has nothing to do with killing snakes. Families prepare a big spread of delicious food at the end of Shaaban until the first suhoor. According to Hanan al Shanfari, a member of Omani Women’s Association in Salalah, “Just before the Ramadhan, families and friends gather to eat dinner. The name ‘killing of snake’ suggests family members and friends must end quarrels and disagreements and clear mind of any grudges before entering the holy month.”

Omani people still practice these Ramadhan customs along with family gatherings, which strengthens society and increases affection between individuals.



■ A ROCKET SLAMS INTO SPACE



The Soyuz MS-25 spacecraft carrying the crew formed of NASA astronaut Tracy Dyson, Roscosmos cosmonaut Oleg Novitskiy and spaceflight participant Marina Vasilevskaya of Belarus, blasts off to the International Space Station (ISS) from the launchpad at the Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhstan, March 23. – Reuters

Powerful storm leaves at least nine dead in Brazil

RIO DE JANEIRO: A powerful storm has claimed at least nine lives in southeastern Brazil, particularly in the mountainous part of Rio de Janeiro state, where authorities on Saturday deployed rescue teams to deal with a “critical” situation.

Three people died in a house collapse in the city of Petropolis, 70 kilometres from the capital, according to a bulletin from an emergency committee comprising Rio government and civil defence officials.

In addition, a reporters team confirmed the discovery on Saturday of another body in the rubble. Earlier, a girl who had been buried overnight was pulled out alive.

Other deaths were reported earlier in Santa Cruz da Serra, where a man drowned when his truck plunged into a river; in Teresopolis, where a person died in a house collapse; and in Arraial do Cabo, where a person was struck by lightning.

Residents contacted by media said armed criminals had attacked a base of the Departmental Operation and Intervention Brigade (BOID)

In addition, two children, aged three and nine, died on Friday in separate storm-related events in Sao Paolo state, officials said.

Late on Friday, Rio Governor Claudio Castro said the situation in Petropolis was “critical” due to “intense rains and the overflowing of the Quitandinha River.” Dozens of soldiers with dogs were deployed to the scene, while schools opened their doors to the displaced, the governor said.

As of Saturday morning, some 90 people had been rescued alive, the bulletin said. — AFP



Partial view of the municipal cemetery of Petropolis, where several niches were damaged when they collapsed due to the heavy rains in Petropolis, Brazil. – AFP

British princess Kate praised for ‘extraordinary dignity’

LONDON: Kate, Britain’s Princess of Wales, was praised on Saturday for her “extraordinary dignity”, as the shock announcement of her cancer diagnosis triggered an outpouring of support from well wishers.

The news dominated British newspaper front pages on Saturday, with supportive messages combined with criticism of those who had speculated about her health in recent weeks.

Kate said on Friday she was undergoing preventative chemotherapy after tests done after she had major abdominal surgery in January revealed that cancer had been present.

The 42-year-old wife of heir to the throne Prince William, called the cancer discovery a “huge shock”. The news comes as

The news dominated British newspaper front pages on Saturday, with supportive messages combined with criticism of those who had speculated about her health in recent weeks

a fresh health blow to the British royal family: King Charles is also undergoing treatment for cancer.

“Seeing the extraordinary dignity which Kate has shown, and her trying to hold together the royal family, I hope that now what the media will do is to give her and her family the privacy and respect that they deserve,” solicitor Simon Davis, 64, said outside Kensington Palace park. “It’s good that she said what’s

going on because I think it helps a lot of people that experience that,” said Sarah Macdonald-Brown, a 50-year old art gallery owner.

Tourist Karen Ferguson, 42, also showed her admiration for the princess, who is still popularly known by her maiden name Kate Middleton.

“It’s great that she came out and made a public statement so that people know she’s doing okay, and what’s going on. And I think we’re all just sending well wishes, especially for her young children.”

One of the most personal messages of support came from Kate’s brother, James Middleton.

He posted a childhood photo of him and his sister on Instagram and wrote: “Over the years, we have climbed many mountains together. As a family

we will climb this one with you too.”

On Friday, messages of support poured in for Kate, including from King Charles, Prince Harry, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby and US President Joe Biden.

Sunak said Kate had “shown tremendous bravery” with her statement, adding she “has been unfairly treated by certain sections of the media around the world and on social media”.

Kate’s diagnosis was also big news internationally.

“Catherine’s Cancer Diagnosis Puts UK Royals on Even More Uncertain Terrain,” said the New York Times, noting that the grave health concerns of both the king and Kate are stretching an already slimmed down monarchy.

— Reuters



Broadcasting equipment is set up outside of Buckingham Palace, in London, Britain. – Reuters

Gunfire hits Haiti capital as locals await progress of talks

PORT-AU-PRINCEL: Heavy gunfire erupted early on Saturday in the Haitian capital as residents, already enduring chaotic violence and grave food shortages, faced mounting frustration over delays in announcing a transitional government meant to restore stability.

Residents contacted by media said armed criminals had attacked a base of the Departmental Operation and Intervention Brigade (BOID), a rapid-reaction force, in the Fort Nationale Neighborhood of Port-au-Prince.

Another specialised unit in the capital area, the Motorised Intervention Brigade (BIM), was also attacked, locals said. There

were no immediate details of casualties.

The scenes of chaos played out as the impoverished Caribbean country continued a tense wait for the establishment of a transitional government — part of a deal that brought the promised resignation of unpopular Prime Minister Ariel Henry.

Henry agreed on March 11 to step down, but negotiations on forming a transitional government have been slow despite pressure from neighbouring Caribbean countries and the United States.

The political chaos and street violence are taking place against a backdrop of increasingly



Armed police officers monitor a street after gang violence in the Neighborhood, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. – AFP

desperate hunger.

Farhan Haq, a spokesman for the UN secretary-general, said roughly half the Haitian population face “crisis or worse levels of acute food insecurity.”

Haiti has been rocked by violence for weeks, starting with the coordinated gang offensive to release thousands of prison inmates.

Amid the sharply worsening conditions, more than 33,000 people have fled the capital area in the past two weeks, according to the UN International Organization for Migration.

Many foreigners have fled the country, and the US Embassy has been evacuating any American citizens hoping to leave.

The State Department said on Friday evening that it had helped 230 citizens to leave since March 17. And it renewed a blunt warning to US citizens: “Do not travel to Haiti.”

On Friday, there was an uneasy calm in the capital after a day marked by several gang attacks and a police operation which led to the death of a gang leader, Ernst Julme alias “Ti Greg.”

He had escaped from prison during a mass breakout organised by gangs at the beginning of March.

Some roads were still barricaded and most businesses, schools and government offices were closed. — AFP



Egyptian Red Crescent trucks loaded with aid queue outside the Rafah border crossing with the Palestinian Gaza Strip. – AFP

UN chief calls blocked aid a moral outrage

RAFAH: A long line of blocked relief trucks on Egypt's side of the border with the Gaza Strip where people face starvation is a moral outrage, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said during a visit to the Rafah crossing on Saturday.

It was time for Israel to give an “ironclad commitment” for unfettered access to humanitarian goods throughout Gaza, said Guterres, who also called for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and the release of Israeli hostages held in Gaza.

The UN would continue to work with Egypt to “streamline” the flow of aid into Gaza, he told reporters in front of the gate of the Rafah crossing, an entry point for aid.

“Here from this crossing, we see the heartbreak and heartlessness



UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres visits the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. – Reuters

of it all. A long line of blocked relief trucks on one side of the gates, the long shadow of starvation on the other,” he said. “That is more than tragic. It is a moral outrage.”

The visit by Guterres comes as Israel faces global pressure to

allow more humanitarian aid into Gaza, which has been devastated by more than five months of war.

Israel is threatening to launch a major military operation in the southern Gaza city of Rafah despite international appeals

Here from this crossing, we see the heartbreak and heartlessness of it all. A long line of blocked relief trucks on one side of the gates, the long shadow of starvation on the other

ANTONIO GUTERRES
UN Secretary-General

against such an attack.

A majority of Gaza's 2.3 million residents are sheltering around Rafah. Though conditions are worse in the north of the strip, the plight of civilians across the territory has deteriorated sharply as the conflict has ground on.

Before his stop at the border, where he met UN humanitarian workers, Guterres landed in Al

Arish in Egypt's northern Sinai, where much of the international relief for Gaza is delivered and stockpiled.

Receiving him, regional governor Mohammed Shusha said some 7,000 trucks were waiting in North Sinai to deliver aid to Gaza, but that inspection procedures demanded by Israel had held up the flow of relief.

Guterres also visited a hospital in Al Arish where Palestinians evacuated from Gaza are receiving treatment.

As hopes for a truce in Gaza during the Muslim holy month of Ramadhan have faded and the humanitarian situation in Gaza has become more desperate, the United States and other countries have sought to use air drops and ships to deliver aid.

But humanitarians say only about one-fifth of the required amount of supplies has been entering Gaza, and that the only way to meet needs is to rapidly accelerate deliveries by road.

More than 32,000 people have been killed by Israel's military campaign in Gaza, many of them women and children, according to local health authorities.

— Reuters

Palestinian patients die at Al Shifa Hospital besieged by Israeli forces

GAZA: Five of the wounded Palestinians at the Gaza Strip's Al Shifa Hospital, which is being besieged by Israeli forces, have died, the enclave's health ministry said in a statement on Saturday.

The medical facility is under siege for the sixth day in a row with no water, food nor health services, the ministry added.

Israeli forces have killed more than 170 during their days-long raid at the Palestinian enclave's main hospital.

Israeli troops entered Al Shifa Hospital in Gaza City in the early hours of Monday morning and have been combing through the sprawling complex.

Al Shifa, the Gaza Strip's biggest hospital before the war, is now one of the few healthcare facilities even partially operational in the north of the territory, and had also been housing displaced civilians.

More than 350 Palestinians have so far been detained at the hospital, the largest number captured at the same time since the war began in October, the Israeli military said.



Palestinians assess the destruction of a house hit by Israeli bombardment in the northern part of Rafah. – AFP

Medical staff deny that the hospital is used for military purposes or to shelter fighters.

In recent days, Palestinian Hamas spokespeople have said that the dead announced in previous Israeli statements were not fighters but patients

and displaced people and have accused Israel of war crimes.

The Israeli military, which has lost two soldiers in combat at the hospital, says it is preventing harm to civilians, patients and medical staff there.

Israel faced heavy criticism

last November when troops first raided the hospital.

Near Al Shifa, residents said that the army had blown up houses close by as buildings in the hospital complex burned.

Rabah, a father of five, said the area was a war zone, with people trapped inside their houses amid clashes in the streets.

“Israel sent tanks back into the heart of Gaza City to destroy what is left of its homes and roads,” he said.

Israel's offensive focused on the Al Shifa Hospital, the only partially working medical facility in the north of the Strip, for a fourth day, and local residents said they had seen buildings inside the complex in flames.

At least 32,142 Palestinians have been killed and 74,412 injured in Israel's military offensive on Gaza since October 7, the Gaza health ministry said on Saturday.

Some 72 Palestinians were killed and 144 injured in the past 24 hours, the ministry added in a statement. — Reuters

Security Council vote on new ceasefire text postponed

UNITED NATIONS: A vote at the UN Security Council on a new text calling for an “immediate” ceasefire in the Mideast war was postponed to Monday, diplomatic sources said, after a separate, US-lead draft resolution was vetoed.

The United States, Israel's main ally and military backer, had put forward a resolution mentioning “the imperative of an immediate and sustained ceasefire” and condemning the October 7 attack on Israel.

Russia and China vetoed that resolution, which was also opposed by Arab states for stopping short of explicitly demanding Israel immediately end its campaign in Gaza.

The new ceasefire text was meant to go to a vote on Saturday, but was pushed back to allow further discussions, the diplomatic sources said.

The new, tougher draft resolution, seen by reporters, “demands an immediate ceasefire”

for the ongoing Muslim holy month of Ramadhan that leads “to a permanent sustainable ceasefire” respected by all sides.

Eight of the council's 10 non-permanent members have been working on the draft, which also calls for the “immediate and unconditional” release of captives seized by Palestinian groups and the lifting of “all barriers” to humanitarian aid flowing into the besieged Gaza Strip.

“We as (the) Arab Group unanimously endorse and support the draft resolution,” said Palestinian Ambassador to the UN Riyad Mansour, who had denounced the US-led text as biased. But US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield indicated opposition, saying the resolution would jeopardise ongoing diplomatic efforts to secure the release of captives — the same reason the United States gave before vetoing previous ceasefire resolutions. — AFP



The UN Security Council votes on a motion for a Gaza ceasefire and captives deal vote at UN headquarters in New York, on March 22. – AFP



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In brief

■ MUMBAI



35 SOMALIS ARRIVE IN INDIA TO FACE TRIAL OVER SHIP HIJACKING

India brought 35 accused Somali pirates to Mumbai on Saturday, days after they were apprehended when naval commandos recaptured a hijacked bulk carrier and rescued several hostages.

Indian commandos boarded and took control of the vessel on March 17 some 480 kilometres off the coast of Somalia.

The destroyer INS Kolkata arrived in Mumbai early on Saturday carrying all 35 men accused of the hijacking.

A navy statement said the operation “upheld the principles of international law and commitment to ensuring safe seas and maritime security in the region”. — **AFP**

■ ABUJA



NIGERIAN TROOPS RESCUE 16 KIDNAPPED STUDENTS: ARMY

Nigeria's army said on Saturday it had rescued 16 students kidnapped in the northwest of the country which has been rocked by large-scale abductions.

Gunmen seized the students just days after the separate kidnapping of around 280 children in the region, where criminal gangs target schools to extract ransom payments.

The army said it had freed 16 pupils and a woman on Thursday. The group were abducted in Sokoto state on March 9. “The rescued hostages have been handed over to the Sokoto state government for further action,” said Major General Edward Buba. — **AFP**

■ TOKYO



JAPAN PM PLEDGES TO BOOST DEFENCE, DIPLOMATIC CAPABILITIES

Japan will work to strengthen its defence and diplomatic capabilities to maintain peace, Prime Minister Kishida Fumio said on Saturday.

“Military buildup, including nuclear and missile development, has been accelerating in areas surrounding Japan and attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force are growing,” Kishida told a graduation ceremony at the National Defence Academy in Yokosuka.

The government will strengthen its defence and diplomatic capabilities to maintain peace and to prevent security emergencies. — **Reuters**

Russia arrests suspected concert gunmen

MOSCOW: Russia has arrested 11 people including four suspected gunmen in connection with a shooting rampage that killed at least 143 people in a concert hall near Moscow, the Kremlin said on Saturday.

IS group claimed responsibility for Friday's attack, the deadliest in Russia for 20 years. But there were indications that Russia was pursuing a Ukrainian link, despite a statement from Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak that Kyiv had nothing to do with it.

The FSB security service said that “all four terrorists” had been arrested while heading to the Ukrainian border, and that they had contacts in Ukraine. It said they were being transferred to Moscow. “Now we know in which country these bloody bastards planned to hide from pursuit - Ukraine,” Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

Russia's Investigative Committee earlier said at least 115 had died in the attack, in which camouflage-clad gunmen opened fire with automatic weapons at concertgoers in the Crocus City Hall near the capital.

It said some died from gunshot wounds and others in a huge fire that broke out in the complex. Reports said the gunmen had lit the blaze using petrol from canisters they carried in rucksacks.

People fled in panic. Baza, a news outlet with good contacts in Russian security and law enforcement, said 28 bodies were found in a toilet and 14 on a staircase.



People lay flowers at a makeshift memorial to the victims of a shooting incident at a concert hall outside Moscow, in central Saint Petersburg. — **Reuters**

The FSB security service said that “all four terrorists” had been arrested while heading to the Ukrainian border, and that they had contacts in Ukraine

The Kremlin said FSB chief Alexander Bortnikov had reported to President Vladimir Putin that those detained included “four terrorists” and that the service was working to identify their accomplices.

Putin said on Saturday that the four men who attacked a concert near Moscow were heading towards Ukraine when they were detained, and that they hoped to cross the border.

Putin, addressing the nation, said that some people on the Ukrainian side had prepared to let them cross the border from Russia. Ukraine has denied any involvement in the attack.

“They tried to hide and moved towards Ukraine, where, according to preliminary data, a window was prepared for them from the Ukrainian side to cross the state border,” Putin said.

Putin cast the enemy as

“international terrorism” and said that he was ready to work with any state which wanted to defeat it.

“All the perpetrators, organisers and those who ordered this crime will be justly and inevitably punished. Whoever they are, whoever is guiding them,” Putin said. “We will identify and punish everyone who stands behind the terrorists, who prepared this atrocity, this strike against Russia, against our people.” — **Reuters**

US Senate passes govt bill averting shutdown

WASHINGTON: The US Congress approved a funding bill on Saturday in a rare show of cross-party unity, keeping federal agencies running through September and averting a damaging partial government shutdown.

Senators missed a midnight deadline to pass the \$1.2 trillion package to keep the lights on in several key government agencies but voted in the early hours to pass a resolution that had already advanced from the House.

“It wasn't easy, but tonight our persistence has been worth it,” Democratic Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on the Senate floor after hours of tense negotiation.

“It is good for the American people that we have reached a bipartisan agreement to finish the job,” he added before the bill received final approval.

A day of high-stakes drama began on Capitol Hill when the House of Representatives passed a \$1.2-trillion, six-bill package on Friday at lunchtime, representing the largest and most contentious section of federal funding.

With cash running out at midnight for three-quarters of the government, including defence and homeland security, the Senate was thrust into a race against the clock to advance the legislation to President Joe Biden's desk.

But the budget negotiations looked like they were breaking down, with both sides pushing



US Senator Mike Crapo (R-ID) speaks during a Senate Finance Committee hearing on the 2025 budget on Capitol Hill in Washington. — **Reuters file photo**

to tweak the legislation to reflect their campaign messaging and priorities ahead of November's presidential election.

A day of high-stakes drama began on Capitol Hill when the House of Representatives passed a \$1.2-trillion, six-bill package, representing the largest and most contentious section of federal funding

Senators were preparing to adjourn with no deal on holding a vote, which would have prompted the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to begin scaling back operations in key federal agencies on Saturday morning.

But a deal came together just as the midnight deadline arrived

and the Senate voted to pass the resolution after 2:00 am local time in Washington.

Hours earlier, Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson had angered his own right flank by relying on Democratic votes to advance the package to the Senate.

Marjorie Taylor Greene told reporters she had filed a “motion to vacate” the speaker's chair over Johnson's endorsement of the funding package, thrashed out over weeks of tense negotiations between the parties.

The resolution, a rare manoeuvre that requires a simple majority to pass, comes after the same move led to the removal of previous speaker Kevin McCarthy last fall — and weeks of infighting as Republicans rejected several potential replacements before settling on Johnson.

The timeline for next steps on Greene's resolution was not immediately clear. — **AFP**

Slovaks vote in presidential election that might bolster PM Fico

BRATISLAVA: Slovaks vote in a presidential election on Saturday that could strengthen Prime Minister Robert Fico's grip on power as he seeks more control over public media, softer anti-corruption laws and a dissenting voice to EU support for Ukraine.

Polls are open in the first round of voting until 10:00 pm. A likely run-off between the top two candidates is due on April 6, if no one wins a majority this weekend.

Fico's ally Peter Pellegrini, 48, has been a frontrunner in the race to replace President Zuzana Caputova, 50, who is a fierce opponent to Fico, although she is not seeking a new term.

Pellegrini, a former prime minister and ex-member of Fico's leftist SMER party and who is now the head of junior coalition partner HLAS, is hoping to duplicate Fico's success.

He said on Saturday the direction of the country was at stake with the ballot, with voters deciding on a president for the next five years “who will either cooperate with the government or put a brake on steps that are

not in favour of the people.”

Among the nine candidates competing, Pellegrini is facing close rival Ivan Korcok, 59, a pro-EU former foreign minister who wants to prevent the government from gaining the president's seat.

While Slovak presidents do not wield many executive powers, they have a role in government and judicial appointments, can veto laws and shape public debate as the liberal Caputova has often done.

Voters have become polarised in Slovakia in recent years amid a global pandemic, war in Ukraine and high inflation denting household budgets.

Fico, a four-time prime minister, has shifted policy quickly, ending state military supplies to Ukraine — while still allowing commercial supply deals.

Fico's coalition government has also pushed through criminal law changes that critics say weaken the fight against corruption. Caputova, as president, has challenged the changes at the Constitutional Court. — **Reuters**



Slovakia's presidential candidate Peter Pellegrini talks to the media during the country's presidential election, in Bratislava. — **Reuters**

Being assertive has several advantages



Dr Hamed al Sinawi
@alsinawi

The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

I recently attended a talk about assertiveness and its impact on our mental well-being. The presenter started by listing the five types of interpersonal communication styles; the passive, the aggressive, the assertive, and the passive-aggressive explaining the difference between each style.

She then demonstrated an example of a situation where a manager asked a worker to stay longer in the office after the end of the working hours to cover for a colleague while the worker wanted to get home on time. The speaker asked the audience “What should the worker do?” the majority felt it would be appropriate to stay longer at the office as it would be rude to refuse the request of the boss.

The discussion continued and I could sense that some of the audience were feeling uneasy about the concept of being assertive and it became clear that they were people pleasers who felt unable to say no. As a people pleaser, you tend to put other needs first instead of yours which some times leads to anger and frustration. Take the example of a worker

who is always asked to cover for his colleagues because he is single or his family lives far away so the manager thinks it’s OK to ask this worker to stay behind and finish work while others rush to their families.

The worker may feel obliged to agree because he does not want to upset others even if feels abused by them.

Assertiveness can be defined as a social skill that relies heavily on communicating your feelings and needs while respecting the thoughts and wishes of others. For the above example, an assertive worker would be able to explain that he feels it is unfair to ask to stay behind when everyone has left the workplace, he may suggest a system where people take turns to work extra hours. This way he was able to express his thoughts, suggest a solution, and respectfully set boundaries.

According to psychologists, being assertive has several advantages such as strengthening relationships, preventing negative conflicts and arguments, and enabling people to feel in control

ASSERTIVENESS IS AN INTERESTING CONCEPT THAT CAN BE DEFINED AS A SOCIAL SKILL THAT RELIES HEAVILY ON COMMUNICATING YOUR FEELINGS AND NEEDS WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY RESPECTING THE THOUGHTS AND WISHES OF OTHERS

of their own lives. Assertive people tend to be more confident, have high self-esteem and are less likely to experience burnout.

Here are a few tips to help you become more assertive: start by assessing your communication style.

Do you voice your opinions or remain silent? Use ‘I’ statements. For instance, say, “I disagree,” rather than, “You’re wrong.” If you have a request, say, “I would like you to help with this” rather than, “You need to do this.” Keep your requests simple, specific, and clear.

Practice saying No, rehearse what you want to say if you have difficulties expressing your thoughts. Act confident even if you aren’t feeling it. Keep an upright posture and make regular eye contact. Maintain a neutral or positive facial expression while remaining calm, breathing slowly, and keeping your voice even and firm.

Remember that it may take some time to develop an assertive style and some people around you may not like it but it is worth the time and the effort.

Brunhoff, heir of the ‘Babar’ saga, dies aged 98

French author and illustrator Laurent de Brunhoff, who died on Friday at the age of 98 according to US media, successfully continued the adventures of the affable elephant “Babar” — first imagined as a bedtime story by his mother, before being turned into a beloved children’s character.

Cecile de Brunhoff used to tell her two sons Laurent and Mathieu the story of a little elephant who fled to Paris after its mother was killed, learned to live among humans, and then returned to the forest to marry and become king.

His father Jean de Brunhoff, a painter, was enraptured by Cecile’s story and turned it into a children’s book first published in 1931.

“In the big forest, a little elephant was born. His name is Babar,” he wrote under a drawing, unaware of the incredible destiny that awaited the elephant in a green suit.

The books — around twenty written by Laurent and seven by his father — have since sold millions of copies, especially in the United States, and have been translated into more than a dozen languages.

“There were very few books for children then. My father’s imagination and poetry were (new) as was his way of drawing, neither stylised nor realistic”, Laurent explained 40 years later.

He was 12 years old when Jean died of tuberculosis in 1937, with his uncle Michel, who directed the French edition of Vogue, taking over the “Babar” enterprise.

At 21, he began to pen the life of his childhood elephant, starting with “Babar’s cousin: that rascal Arthur”.

“Continuing Babar was prolonging my father’s life,” he said.

His mother lived till the age of 99.

Born on August 30, 1925, in Paris, Laurent studied painting. He had always been drawn to his father’s paintings of Babar at their family home in the Chessy neighbourhood.

He stayed faithful to his father’s depictions, favouring the explosions of colour and large format. Children’s books had until then been printed in a smaller format.

His work on “Babar” saw the elephant adorn over 500 different objects, from bedsheets to backpacks to wallpaper.

The character became a favourite for an entire generation of children, and was the focus of several exhibitions.

Today, Babar’s saga continues, with the introduction of Badou, the elephant’s grandson.

Laurent settled in the United States and married the American author Phyllis Rose.

She had posted on Instagram on Wednesday that he had recently suffered a stroke and was in hospice care at home in Key West, Florida.

— AFP



Brian X. Chen

The author consumer technology writer for The New York Times and author of Tech Fix, a weekly column.

Why tech firms are not your friends

This month, many of the 80 million owners of Roku devices, including streaming sticks, set-top boxes and internet-connected TVs running the company’s streaming software, turned on their Rokus to see a block of text. I, the owner of a cheap Roku TV in my bedroom, was among those who got stuck with the screen.

The message gave updated terms of service that made it harder for customers to take legal action against the company. Unless they agreed, users were blocked from access to the Roku menu and apps, essentially bricking their devices. The only way to opt out was to mail a letter to the company.

To Isaac Phillips, a software engineer in Tampa, Florida, this felt unfair. So he came up with a workaround to disconnect his Roku TV from the internet and use it as a normal TV without Roku’s apps, which include Netflix, Hulu and other streaming services.

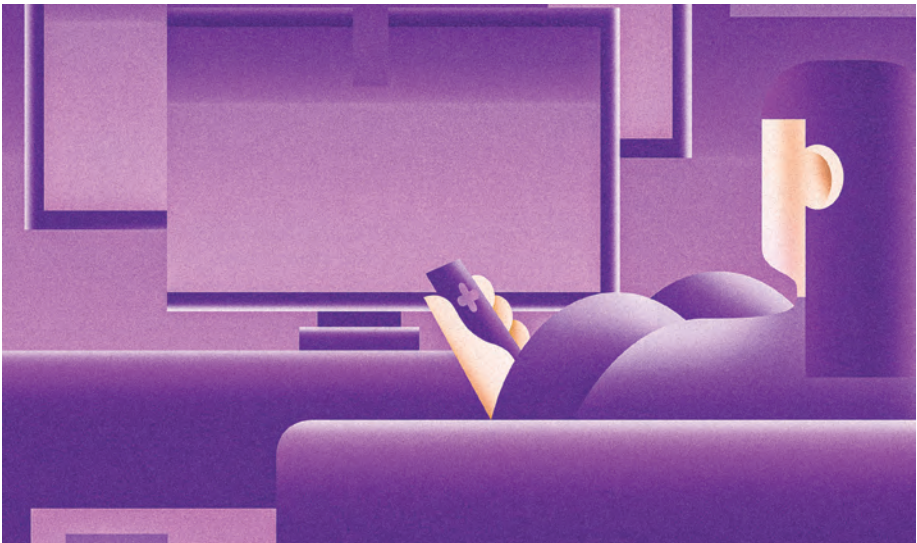
“It should belong to whoever paid for it,” Phillips said. “To lock somebody out of it completely just doesn’t seem right. It’s pretty unacceptable.”

Also this month, Roku announced a security breach involving about 15,000 user accounts. The victims’ login credentials had been illegally obtained through a breach of another company’s servers and were used to get into Roku accounts to buy streaming subscriptions, according to Roku.

“Like many companies, Roku updates its terms of service from time to time,” the company said in a statement, adding that the change was unrelated to the breach.

Roku’s no-good month stirred discussions in online forums about what it means when a company can essentially deactivate the device you paid for. That’s similar to how companies such as Apple, Google and Microsoft can decide to stop issuing software updates for older devices, which gradually degrades their performance.

It’s a lesson we have to learn and relearn. Companies, even those that say they strive to delight us and make our lives better, cater to their own interests. In reality, the tech products we buy can evolve to keep protecting those interests — and the hoops we have to jump through to gain some



Roku recently changed its policy to make it even harder for customers to take legal action. Its a reminder of how we need to protect ourselves. – NYT

COMPANIES, EVEN THOSE THAT SAY THEY STRIVE TO DELIGHT US AND MAKE OUR LIVES BETTER, CATER TO THEIR OWN INTERESTS. IN REALITY, THE TECH PRODUCTS WE BUY CAN EVOLVE TO KEEP PROTECTING THOSE INTERESTS — AND THE HOOPS WE HAVE TO JUMP THROUGH TO GAIN SOME CONTROL ARE OFTEN IMPRACTICAL.

control are often impractical. Here’s a reminder of what to remember.

More than a decade ago, when we bought a TV it was just that — a big screen that let you plug into it whatever you wanted.

Nowadays, the vast majority of TVs connect to the internet and run the manufacturer’s operating system and apps. Even though you bought the TV, the software component, a major part of what makes the product work, remains controlled by the company.

Changes to the product’s software interface and data collection practices can happen at any moment. In extreme examples, a device can stop working. In 2020, for instance, Amazon deactivated the Echo Look, a camera that helped people organise their wardrobes. It issued a promotional credit for owners to buy a different Amazon gadget that lacked similar features.

The less extreme, more common situation is when companies stop supporting older products because they need to sell new gadgets.

Apple’s original Apple Watch from 2015, for example, no longer gets software updates and now barely works.

This issue is not new but has grown more problematic as more of our devices rely on apps and internet connections, said Nathan Proctor, a director for the US Public Interest Research Group, a consumer advocacy organisation.

With computers, consumers could modify their machines by installing a different operating system.

But with many other types of electronics with locked-down software systems, from streaming devices to e-book readers, those modifications are typically not possible.

“When you get to the core of it, do you even own it anymore?” he said.

In a nutshell, Roku’s terms of service have long required customers to agree to resolve any legal disputes through a private forum, the process known as mandatory arbitration, which can prevent consumers who share the same complaints from banding together to file lawsuits.

The updated terms added language that shields the company from so-called mass arbitrations, where lawyers could file hundreds of thousands of individual arbitration claims, a tactic to fight back against arbitration clauses.

Mandatory arbitration clauses have become an industry standard. The terms of service for companies including Sony PlayStation, Vizio and Hulu include similar language about arbitration, and those companies also require consumers to mail a letter to opt out of those terms. — NYT

Opportunity is a ticket, not a prize...

Professor Damon Salesa, Vice-Chancellor of the Auckland University of Technology, said what many think within the educational community, last year, in identifying a previously unseen consequence of the global pandemic on higher and tertiary education.

He spoke of institutions closing their doors because of Covid, with students consequently being 'behind' in terms of the most basic subjects of Maths and English, particularly reading, which means that the latest cohorts are 'playing catch-up,' and 'under-prepared for the intellectual rigours of university.' I guess, being practical, it's not so terribly difficult to understand, as societies, communities, families and individuals were all negatively affected in terms of interaction with others, and we all became somewhat introverted for a time, with our focus on our laptop and computer screens, our relationships in hiatus, as we were remorselessly dragged back into an earlier age.

What Salesa has done however, has pointed out a failing of global education authorities to make allowances for the impact of the pandemic. It's almost as if the system was so fearful of losing income, no surprise there, that they chose to ignore a cascade, not of ignorance, but of unsupported learning, which meant that challenges were neither set, nor met, with the rigour of the classroom.

There is a part of me that can understand that perspective, as few students, and probably a great deal more parents, would have agreed to a 'nil progress' academic year to allow students at all levels to make up the leeway.

So how do we deal with the consequences? 'The challenge,' always, says Salesa, 'is to meet the needs of the children of working parents,' the blue collar population. Disadvantaged economically, they face the scholarly challenge of a more adversely challenged learning experience through their economic situations, as fewer possible students meet scholarship and bursary requirements. Again, this is entirely understandable, as both are predicated upon industry or sector



Ray Petersen
r.j.petersen52@gmail.com

The writer is a media consultant

knowledge imperatives. Personally, I see this issue as a conundrum beyond resolution, and I'm ashamed to say that I don't have any answers that adequately resolve it. Like thousands of university and college administrators, maybe just sitting on their hands, closing their eyes, pretending Salesa's 'long-tailed education crisis,' will just go away.

Salesa has also, as the first in his family to be university educated, and a Rhodes Scholar to boot, achieved prominence as an example of how much can be achieved by a disadvantaged student, with his parents being a factory worker and a nurse, and his own transformative education experience one he is keen to replicate in others. He points to a key factor that I feel the Sultanate of Oman must embrace, that of being a small country, Oman cannot afford to neglect, or waste, one single talented individual, that it must maximise opportunities so the latent Nobel prize-winner or rocket scientist isn't lost to academia or science, simply because of a lack of opportunity.

We can take the hint too, that from a recruitment perspective, the sociological benefit of enabling the eldest child in a family to utilise university or college study offers in establishing the possibility to their siblings of also pursuing higher education. So many families appear to prioritise their eldest 'following in father's footsteps,' as the primary option that university study falls by the wayside.

However, research has demonstrated that when the eldest child is exposed to higher education, their siblings are also more likely to do the same. There is a wee bit of guilt comes into it of course, as human nature and empathy conspire to ensure parents do the same for the others as their first, where possible.

What we parents must all be aware of, having bitten the bullet, and responded to the economic challenge, is to ensure that any offspring we push forward educationally, are fully aware of the demands of higher study, their being super demanding in terms of note-taking, out-of-class study, interpretation, and writing, none of which are simple or easy, and that they are capable of responding to them. An opportunity is one thing, making it work... another.

OMAN CANNOT AFFORD TO NEGLECT, OR WASTE, ONE SINGLE TALENTED INDIVIDUAL, THAT IT MUST MAXIMISE OPPORTUNITIES

CARE FOR THE EARTH!



A combination photo of the Sydney Opera House before (top) and after lights were switched off for the Earth Hour in Sydney, Australia, on Saturday. – Reuters

AI could help eliminate Tuberculosis

Groundbreaking new technologies seem to be emerging with increasing frequency nowadays. Since its launch in November 2022, OpenAI's generative artificial intelligence chatbot, ChatGPT, has become a global sensation, attracting more than 100 million users and inspiring numerous imitators. The technology's fast-evolving capabilities have also commanded the attention of world leaders, dominating discussions at both the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Dubai (COP28) and the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos.

It is not difficult to understand why. By harnessing AI tools developed by private companies like OpenAI, governments and civil-society organisations could make significant strides towards tackling global challenges like climate change and economic inequality. Similarly, they could revolutionise how we fight infectious diseases, ensuring that life-saving care reaches those who need it most.

Tuberculosis is a prime example. TB, a preventable and curable disease, claims an average of more than 3,000 lives per day. Although the mechanisms of TB transmission are well understood, and highly effective treatment regimens — including new and improved medications — are



Mohammed Yassin

The writer is a public-health physician and infectious disease epidemiologist with over 25 years of experience in treating and researching tuberculosis, is Senior TB Adviser at the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis, and Malaria

available worldwide, TB still led to 1.3 million deaths globally in 2022.

AI tools could play a major role in the global effort to end TB. To this end, the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis, and Malaria is pursuing public-private partnerships with the goal of developing and deploying innovative digital public-health tools. During a recent trip to Bangladesh, for example, I encountered a team of health-care providers from the public and private sectors, along with local community partners, who are using digital X-rays, AI, and telemedicine to facilitate rapid TB screening. Patients whose X-ray results show signs of TB could immediately submit sputum samples for analysis and receive treatment at the community level, free of charge.

Similar initiatives are being launched around the world. In Pakistan's Punjab province, the humanitarian aid organisation Mercy Corps uses AI tools to identify "hot spots" — remote or rural areas where TB cases might go undetected — and set up mobile health camps to deliver diagnostic and treatment services directly to local residents. In the Padre de la Vega prison in Paraguay, healthcare workers use Fujifilm ultralight portable X-ray

machines and AI technology to provide rapid and precise TB screening.

Likewise, physicians at Cambodia's National Center for Tuberculosis and Leprosy Control in Phnom Penh bring portable Delft X-ray machines to nearby provinces to screen individuals unable to travel to the capital. And in Indonesia, a new partnership between the Global Fund, Siemens Healthineers, and the country's national TB programme aims to scale up early detection efforts by combining deep-learning AI technology and X-ray analysis to

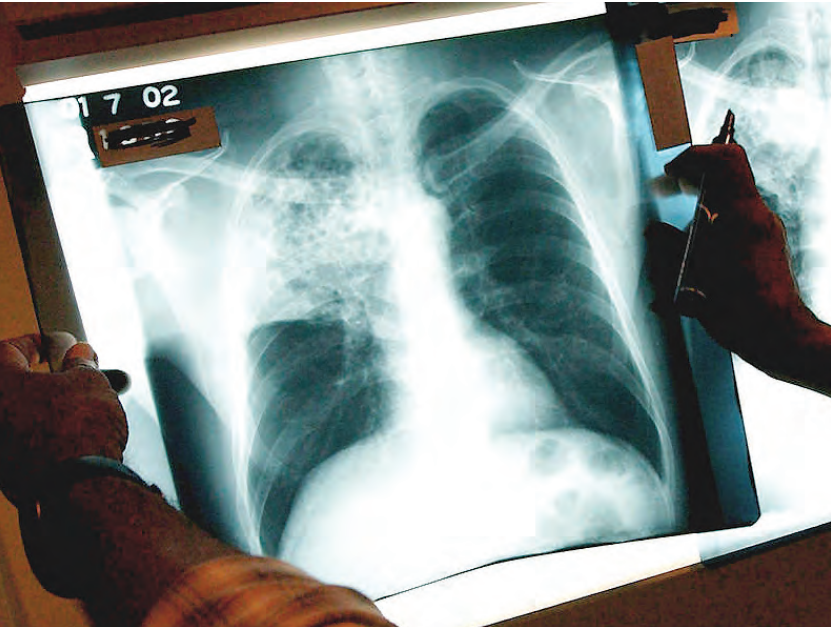
enable radiologists to read scans remotely. Targeted, innovative projects such as these are crucial to overcoming persistent inequities that fuel the spread of infectious diseases: poverty, conflict- and weather-related displacement, overcrowding, and limited access to health facilities. Moreover, they are laying the groundwork for resilient health systems capable of meeting every person's needs. For example, in addition to TB screenings, Pakistan's mobile health camps offer essential services focusing on women and young children.

These examples underscore the importance of fostering collaboration among companies, industry leaders, governments, and local health providers to devise innovative ways to address solvable problems like TB. That is why the Global Fund, which contributes 76 per cent of all international financing to end TB, also allocates more than \$150 million annually to develop digital tools aimed at promoting equity and helping remote communities access critical healthcare services.

But much more is needed. Devising targeted, effective, and sustainable solutions requires active engagement with local communities to mitigate a wide range of other public-health threats, such as pandemics and antimicrobial resistance. This is why it is crucial to have committed partners who can envision and develop cutting-edge digital tools.

By leveraging AI to augment local medical expertise, we have an opportunity to overcome TB once and for all. In a world brimming with innovative ideas and emerging technologies that until recently were beyond our imagination, ending this global scourge, and perhaps others, is finally within reach.

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AI tools could play a major role in the global effort to end TB.

Sport

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FOURTH ROUND OF OAA LEAGUE CONCLUDES ON FRIDAY

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 23

The Oman Athletics Association (OAA) organised the fourth round of the OAA league on Friday at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex. As many as 230 athletes including the national and expatriates players took part in different competition categories. The OAA league featured many events including 110m hurdles, long jump, shot put (4kg), javelin throw, 2,000m steeplechase and hammer throw (5kg).

In the 100m event for the seniors, Mohammed al Saadi finished first within 10.43 seconds while Khalid Salah finished second in 10.47 seconds. The national sprinter Barakat al Harthi came in third place with a timing of 10.49 seconds.

In the 110m hurdles, Faisal al Azki won first place while Nawaf

al Azki finished second.

In the triple jump final, the national team's Salim al Yarabi won the first place award as he cleared 15.30 (NWI) while Salim al Rawahi registered 15.14 (NWI).

In the hammer throw (7.26 kg), Mubeen al Kindi came first after he recorded a personal best of 62.59m. In the hammer throw (4kg) for senior women, Doha al Sanawi came first followed by Kaltham al Jabri.

In the 400m for senior men, Mohammed al Mabsali finished first in 48.14 seconds followed by Wail al Shandoudi in 48.59 seconds.

Maryam al Shibli came first in 400m senior women after she clocked 1:15.78 minutes while Kazeema al Ansari came second with a timing of 1:22.22 minutes.

The purpose of the OAA league event is to select athletes for the forthcoming competitions.



Argentina down El Salvador 3-0 in friendly without Messi



#13 Cristian Romero (C) celebrates scoring a goal with #11 Angel Di Maria (R). – AFP

NEW YORK: The absence of captain Lionel Messi didn't slow Argentina on Friday as the world champions warmed up for their Copa America title defence with a 3-0 friendly victory over El Salvador in Philadelphia.

Defender Cristian Romero opened the scoring in the 16th minute with Enzo Fernández in the 42nd and Giovani Lo Celso in the 52nd completing the victory at Lincoln Financial Field, home of the NFL's Philadelphia Eagles.

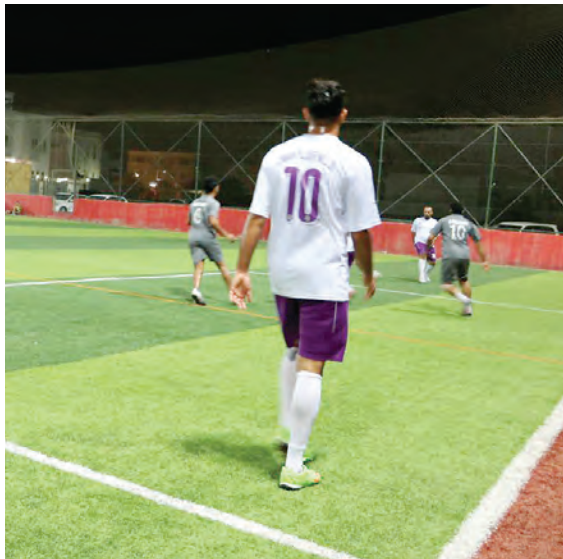
Messi, the eight-time Ballon d'Or winner now starring for Major League Soccer's Inter Miami, was ruled out of Friday's match and Argentina's friendly against Costa Rica in Los Angeles next week after tweaking a hamstring in Miami's 3-1 victory over Nashville in the CONCACAF Champions Cup this month.

On a chilly night in Philadelphia, Argentina didn't need him to comfortably win their first friendly of the year against a team that has now gone 21 matches without a win.

Romero was the first to break through against the team coached by Spain's David Doniga, rising to head home a corner kick taken by Angel Di Maria.

Minutes before halftime, Di Maria received the ball on the right flank and set up Rodrigo de Paul, whose back pass was headed by Lo Celso to Fernandez who slotted home from in front of the goal.

After the break, it was Lo Celso's turn as he finished off another brilliant connection between Di Maria and Lautaro Martinez with a left-footed shot. The match saw Argentina manager Lionel Scaloni take the opportunity to give minutes to youngsters Alejandro Garnacho and Valentin Barco — the 19-year-old left-back signed by Brighton in January who stood out for the U-23 team in qualifying for the Paris Olympics. — AFP



OFM organises Ramadhan Football Tournament

MUSCAT: The Ramadhan football tournaments for the employees of Oman Flour Mills Company (OFM) kicked off at Hilal Sports Stadium, in the Governorate of Muscat, with participation of 72 employees, forming to 6 teams.

The OFM's Ramadhan football tournament aims to strengthen the staff relationships among the company's employees, providing them with an opportunity to get – together and compete friendly away from the workplace, as well as enhancing their physical aspect, showing their talents and improving their skills in football.

The tournament is considered as a part of the belief of the Oman Flour Mills Company in the importance of highlighting the capabilities and talents of its employees and developing their interests.

This event also comes in line with the OFM's strategy of paying attention to human resources as an integral part of its identity, while the company keens to enhance communication between its employees and creating a work environment that stimulates creativity, and setting programmes that contributes to strengthen the moral and physical aspects, that based on the concept of a healthy mind in a healthy body.

PSM Ramadhan Cricket continues



MUSCAT: The Pakistan School Muscat (PSM) Ramadhan softball cricket tournament competitions continue from March 9. More matches were played in on going Ramadhan cricket tournament at PSM ground Being holiday with huge crowd watch with families.

In the 1st match Imran X1 with Hala Cosmos, Imran X1 batted first and scored 96 runs for 8 wickets, with Imran leading with 29 runs with a 4 and 3x6. Shanu got 2 wickets for 16 runs

Batting Hala Cosmos won by 8 wickets with Shanu once again with the bat scored 30 runs in 9 balls with 2x6.

The second match was played between Pakistan Embassy & Gully Boys. Pakistan embassy was asked to bat first and they score a poor 61 runs only. Ravi of gully boys got 3 wickets for 7 runs, only Nadeem from embassy scored 11 runs. Gully Boys chased the target in just 5.3 overs with after remain not out with 30 runs.

After the match as part of Pakistan national day of 23rd March, a cake cutting ceremony was held with HE Ali Imran Chawdhry along with Dr Tauqir Rizvi.



VERSTAPPEN CONTINUES POLE PERFECTION IN AUSTRALIA



Max Verstappen poses with the pole position award with Dude Perfect. – Reuters



Max Verstappen after qualifying in pole position with second placed Ferrari's Carlos Sainz Jr. and third Red Bull's Sergio Perez. – Reuters

MELBOURNE: Red Bull's Formula One world champion Max Verstappen took pole position for the Australian Grand Prix on Saturday with Carlos Sainz qualifying alongside on the front row for Ferrari two weeks after undergoing surgery for appendicitis.

Verstappen's team mate Sergio Perez qualified third but will start sixth after stewards imposed a three-place grid penalty for impeding Haas's Nico Hulkenberg in the first session of qualifying.

That promoted both McLaren drivers, with Lando Norris to start third and Oscar Piastri fifth behind Ferrari's Charles Leclerc.

Verstappen had bemoaned handling problems through practice but put together a sizzling lap of one minute, 15.915 seconds on a glorious afternoon at Albert Park to be 0.27 seconds clear of Sainz.

It was the irrepressible Dutchman's third pole for the Formula One season and fourth in succession.

"It was a bit unexpected today in qualifying, but very happy with Q3," said the triple world champion, who won the race last year after his maiden pole at Albert Park.

"It was a bit of a tricky weekend so far but we managed to be there at the end, so very happy with that.

"(Ferrari) seem very quick, also in the long runs. So a bit of a question mark tomorrow but that makes it exciting."

Sainz, who missed the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix while recovering from surgery, said he was happy with Ferrari's pace and to be challenging



Max Verstappen celebrates after qualifying in pole position. – Reuters

the Red Bulls.

"To make it to this weekend and then obviously to put it on the front row after leading through qualifying, I was almost not believing it, especially after how tough it's been," he added.

'DIFFICULT TO SWALLOW'

It was a tough afternoon for Mercedes,

with seven-times world champion Lewis Hamilton suffering his worst qualifying at Albert Park in over a decade.

Hamilton failed to make the third session of qualifying (Q3) and will start 11th on the grid, his worst result at Albert Park since qualifying 11th in the 2010 race.

The Briton was 0.77 seconds off Sainz's best (1:16.189) in Q2, and he has been outqualified in every race this season by team mate George Russell, who will start seventh on Sunday.

"It felt great in P3, and it was strange because we were right there with these guys and we didn't really understand why," said Hamilton, who was fourth quickest in the final practice earlier on Saturday.

"And then going to qualifying and just the inconsistency within the car is ... it really messes with the mind."

Fernando Alonso had to abort his first lap in Q3 after a skid through gravel at turn six and qualified 10th, behind Aston Martin team mate Lance Stroll.

Only one Williams car featured in qualifying and will race on Sunday, with Alex Albon swapping into Logan Sargeant's car after wrecking his own during Friday practice.

The England-born Thai will start 12th on the grid.

Home racer Daniel Ricciardo of RB was eliminated in Q1 in a massive blow and will start 18th after his fastest lap was deleted for going off-track at turn five.

Yuki Tsunoda, his less experienced team mate, will start from eighth on the grid and has outqualified Ricciardo in every race this season.

"It's very difficult to swallow but that's the way it is," said RB team boss Laurent Mekies.

"Daniel was doing a very good job, it was probably his best lap so far of the weekend." — Reuters

Paris becomes first woman to complete 100-mile Barkley Marathons

BRITAIN: British ultrarunner Jasmin Paris became the first woman ever to finish the Barkley Marathons 100-mile race on Friday, completing one of the most challenging ultramarathons in the world with 99 seconds to spare in the 60-hour cut-off.

Paris was one of five ultrarunners to complete the annual race held in Frozen Head State Park, Tennessee that has seen no finishers in more than half the races in its nearly four-decade history.

Paris, who finished the race in 59:58:21, had completed the race's 60-mile "fun run" version in 2022. She ran last year as well, but could not finish the race in time.

The 40-year-old ultrarunner, a veterinarian scientist in Edinburgh and a mother of two, previously broke the course record for the Montane Spine Race in Northern England by 12 hours in 2019.



British ultrarunner Jasmin Paris

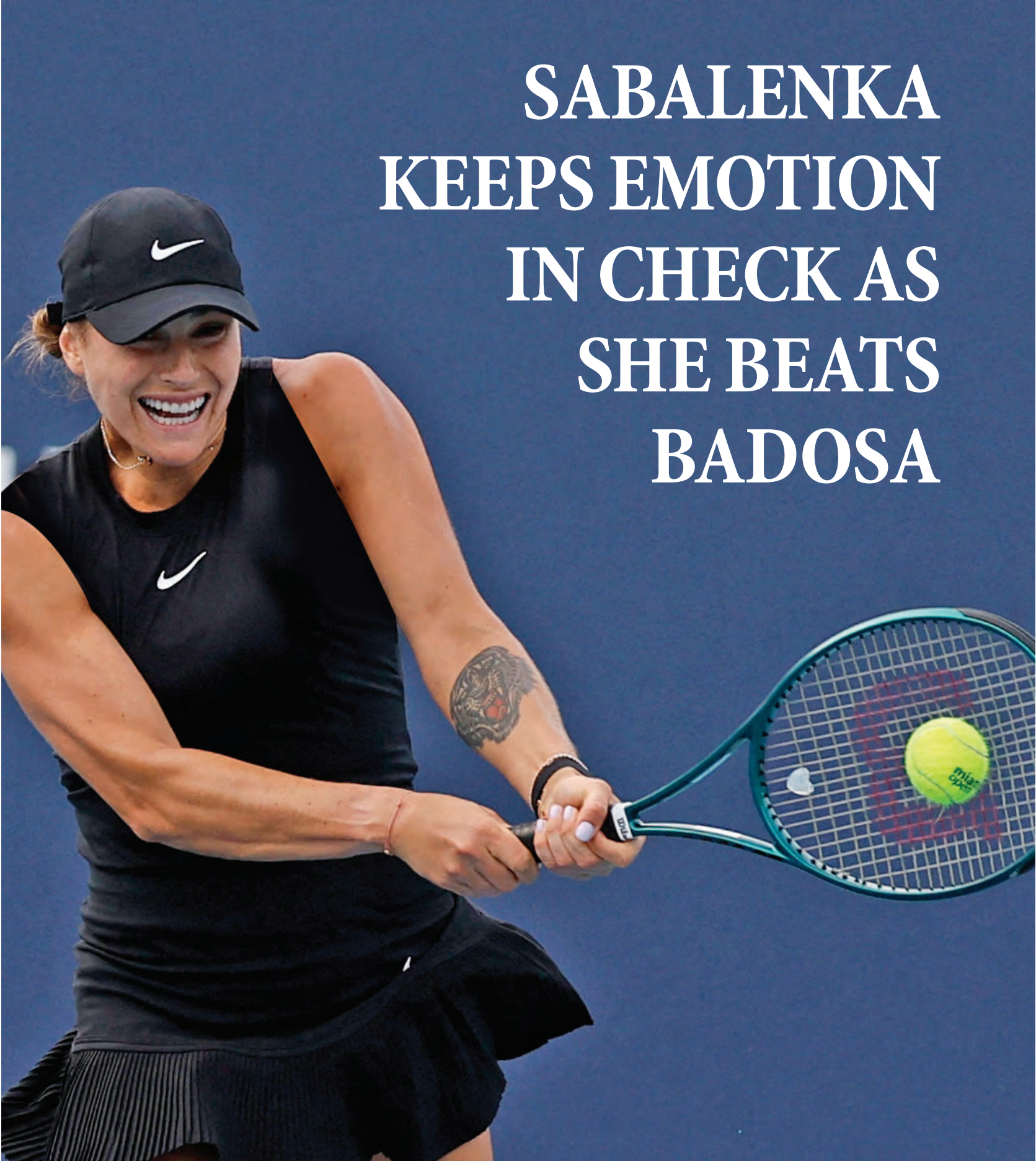
The Barkley Marathons, created by Gary Cantrell and Karl Henn in 1986, was inspired by the escape of James Earl Ray, the assassin of Martin Luther King, who ran about 12 miles in 54.5 hours from a nearby prison in 1977.

The ultramarathon was extended from 55 to 100 miles in 1989. Its current course consists of five loops of 20 miles each around the park with a climb and descent of 54,200 feet.

There are no aid stations in the course, except water at two places.

Mark Williams became the first runner to finish the race within its 60-hour cut-off time in 1995. A total of 20 people have finished the race, with Jared Campbell, who was third this year, doing it a record four times.

Brett Maune holds the record for the fastest finish with a time of in 52:03:08 in 2012. This year's winner, Canada-based Ukrainian Ihor Varys, clocked 58:44:59. — Reuters



Aryna Sabalenka hits a backhand against Paula Badosa. – USA TODAY Sports

SABALENKA KEEPS EMOTION IN CHECK AS SHE BEATS BADOSA

MIAMI: World number two Aryna Sabalenka returned to the court for the first time since the death of her former boyfriend earlier this week and kept her emotions in check as she beat Spain's Paula Badosa 6-4 6-3 on Friday.

After six hours of rain delays, Sabalenka walked onto the court wearing an all-black outfit, a choice matched by her close friend Badosa.

Two-times Australian Open winner Sabalenka on Wednesday said she was "heartbroken" by the death of former boyfriend Konstantin Koltsov in a statement on Wednesday, where she revealed they had not been a couple at the time of his death.

Koltsov died on Monday with Miami police saying he had jumped from the balcony of a room at an resort in an "apparent suicide."

The former NHL ice hockey player and coach, was 42-years-old.

Sabalenka made a slow start to the match but broke to go 4-3 up in the first set and never looked back from that point on.

The Belarusian then broke in the third game of the second set with a superb cross court forehand winner and showed too much power for her Spanish opponent as she wrapped up the win in one hour 22 minutes.

The two players embraced at the net before leaving the court without an on-court interview. Sabalenka has asked the WTA to be excused media duties at the tournament.

Badosa said she was not surprised by the way Sabalenka was able to maintain her focus and deliver a solid performance.

"She is a very, very strong woman, strong personality. You can see it on the court...I know her off court so it doesn't

surprise me at all," she said.

"I knew she was going to play very well or like normal. I told her I wish her the best and let's see if she can go deep in this tournament," added the Spaniard.

Badosa had said before the match that she expected it to be "uncomfortable" playing against Sabalenka given her friendship with the Belarusian.

- Mental strength -

But she said their professionalism and mental strength had shown itself.

"Honestly, both of us are pretty strong mentally. We're strong women and she proved it and I proved it," she said.

"We knew how to disconnect in that two hours for the match. She played really well and I played really well given from where I am coming from (with injuries)," she added.

"All that comes from knowing that we've been through a lot in our lives and we're strong women. We knew how to separate (things) in that moment," she said.

American Coco Gauff, the third seed, had little trouble in her test against Argentine Nadia Podoroska winning 6-1 6-2 in one hour 16.

In the ATP event, 60th ranked Czech Tomas Machac came out after the long delay to claim his first Top 10 victim, upsetting fifth seeded Russian Andrey Rublev 6-4, 6-4.

The rain returned later in the evening forcing the ATP to cancel all the remaining men's matches while the bulk of the remaining WTA games were also cancelled.

Men's world number three Jannik Sinner of Italy was 3-2 up against compatriot Andrea Vavassori when the rain came down and the match will be continued on Saturday. — AFP

Celtics take down Pistons for eighth straight win, Lakers claw past 76ers

LOS ANGELES: The league-leading Boston Celtics, fueled by 33 points from Jaylen Brown, beat the depleted Detroit Pistons 129-102 to push their NBA winning streak to eight games on Friday.

With teammates Jayson Tatum, Al Horford and Jrue Holiday all out, Brown ably filled the void connecting on 13 of 19 shots from the field.

"(I) just tried to be aggressive coming out," Brown — who notched his sixth game since the All-Star break of 30 or more points — told NBC Sports Boston. "I know we had some guys out."

Brown said he tried to keep his teammates involved, and even though he ended up with zero assists Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla said he was doing all the right things.

"He's getting the shots he wants, both for himself and his teammates," Mazzulla said. "He's playing very well-rounded basketball and it has been fun to watch."

Payton Pritchard added 20 points and Derrick White and Kristaps Porzingis scored 19 apiece for Boston, who improved their league-best record to 56-14.

Tatum sat out the first game of a six-game road trip to rest a troublesome ankle. Horford was sidelined by a toe injury and Holiday by an arm injury.

But against last-placed Detroit — who were without half a dozen players after Jalen Duren was ruled out shortly before tipoff with back spasms — the Celtics were still too strong.

James Wiseman got his first start of the season for the Pistons and scored a team-high 24 points.

The Celtics held Detroit scoring leader Cade Cunningham to 15 points on six of 17 shooting as they extended the league's longest active winning streak.

The Oklahoma City Thunder edged back ahead of the defending champion Denver Nuggets for the Western Conference lead with a 123-103 victory over the Raptors in Toronto.

Oklahoma City's Canadian point guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 23 points, grabbed seven rebounds and handed out eight assists, and rookie center Chet Holmgren scored 18 points with 10 rebounds, two steals and a blocked shot.

RUSSELL IN THE RECORD BOOK

In Los Angeles, the Lakers clamped down defensively in the second half to beat the Philadelphia 76ers 101-94. Anthony Davis scored 23 points and grabbed 19 rebounds and LeBron James scored 11 of his 20 points in the fourth quarter as the Lakers overcame 21 turnovers that led to 27 Sixers points.

"The second half we did a great job (defensively), despite some of our offensive mistakes — turning the ball over, missing point blank shots," Lakers coach Darvin Ham said. "We were able to still sustain our defensive effort."

D'Angelo Russell drilled four three-pointers on the way to 14 points, setting a Lakers franchise record for most three-pointers in a season along the way.

Russell's first trey of the night was his 184th of the season, surpassing the record of 183 set by Nick Van Exel in the 1994-95 campaign.

In San Francisco, Indiana's Tyrese Haliburton scored 26 points and handed out 11 assists as the Pacers beat the Golden State Warriors 123-111. — AFP



Boston Celtics forward Jayson Tatum (0) goes to the basket. – USA TODAY Sports



OMAN AND GERMANY INK PACT TO EXPLORE GREEN HYDROGEN VALUE CHAIN

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 23

Aiming to strengthen bilateral relations and cooperation in the field of energy, Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufo, Minister of Energy and Minerals, met Dr Robert Habeck, Vice Chancellor of Germany, Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, during his visit to the Federal Republic of Germany, to discuss the needs of the energy market in Germany, the importance of energy solutions, the role of hydrogen in energy transition, and other topics with mutual interest.

During the visit, Omani and German companies signed several MoUs related to supplying green hydrogen to German refineries, in addition to a letter of intent for the supply of green hydrogen.

A key agreement was signed between Hydrom and German VNG AG to evaluate the economic potential of building an Omani-German green hydrogen and ammonia value chain.

The agreement also entailed exploring a long-term offtake agreement for green hydrogen and ammonia produced in the Sultanate of Oman. Oman LNG also signed an agreement with Securing Energy for Europe for LNG sales and purchase.

Al Aufo was accompanied by Pankaj Khimji, Advisor for Foreign Trade and International Cooperation at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry & Investment Promotion; Maitha bint Saif al Mahrouqiyah, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Federal Republic of Germany; Dr Firas al Abduwani, Director-General of Renewable Energy and Hydrogen at Ministry of Energy and Minerals, Eng Abdulaziz al Shithani, Managing Director of Hydrom Oman (Hydrom), and Najla al Jamali, CEO of OQ Alternative Energy).

The visit aimed at enhancing cooperation between the Omani and German sides in the field of energy.

This includes sharing experiences in the field of green ammonia and other energy modern technologies in the field of energy, connecting suppliers with end consumers, and discussing current challenges in the energy market.

Al Aufo emphasised the importance of international cooperation in the field of energy



Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufo, Minister of Energy and Minerals, is seen with the Omani delegation, as well as officials representing a number of German energy companies.

AL AUFO SHARED OMAN'S VISION AND POLICY FOR THE ENERGY SECTOR AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF GREEN HYDROGEN PROJECTS IN OMAN. HE ALSO HIGHLIGHTED THE IMPORTANCE OF ALIGNING STANDARDS AND CERTIFICATES FOR ENERGY AND GREEN PRODUCTS TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE VISIONS OF EXPORTERS AND IMPORTERS, LINKING SUPPLIERS TO END USERS, AND FOCUSING ON LOCAL CONTENT IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROJECTS.

transition during a speech at Berlin Energy Transition Dialogue.

He shared Oman's vision and policy for the energy sector, and the development of green hydrogen projects in Oman and highlighted the importance of aligning standards and certificates for energy and green products taking into account the visions of exporters and importers, linking suppliers to end users, and focusing on local content in the implementation of projects.

Dr Firas al Abduwani, Director-General of Renewable Energy and Hydrogen, said that the visit is an opportunity to enhance cooperation and exchange experiences in the energy sector.

The aim is to find new markets for low-emission hydrogen and its supportive policies from exporting and importing countries. This step enhances Oman's position as a major player in the global energy sector.

During the visit, we met with government bodies, energy companies, and heavy industries to view their latest policies, technologies, and innovations in this field which will contribute significantly to our efforts and developing the energy sector in the Sultanate of Oman.

Highlighting the importance of this latest milestone in achieving Oman's national energy transition goals, Eng Abdulaziz al Shithani, Managing Director of Hydrom said, "The agreement will enable the development of a competitive infrastructure for production and export of hydrogen by building a state-of-the-art integrated value chain that will not only support the sustainable growth of the sector but the rise of adjacent industries as well."

Oman sees \$40 – 60 bn commitment towards new hydrogen industry

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 23

Underscoring the magnitude of Oman's new green hydrogen industry, investments in the first wave of giga-scale energy projects underpinned by support utilities collectively referred to as 'common infrastructure', are expected to total between \$40 – 60 billion by 2030, according to Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufo, Minister of Energy Minerals.

The revised projections, up from previous estimates of \$30 – 40 billion for the green hydrogen projects alone, point to the sizable investment that will go into the development of the common-use infrastructure, encompassing new hydrogen pipelines, transmission networks, water desalination and pipeline networks, and specialised storage capacity as well.

Addressing the 10th Berlin Energy Transition Dialogue 2024 (BETD), which took place in the German capital last week, Al Aufo said the sizable investment Oman is making towards the common-use infrastructure affirms its commitment to meeting the stringent standards set by key blocs, notably the European Union, for the import of renewable hydrogen.

"We want to build a completely new infrastructure so that we can



Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufo is pictured during the BETD 2024 proceedings in Berlin.

meet all the potential standards that will come our way," said Al Aufo.

"In terms of investment, we are estimating that we probably will be investing between 40 to 60 billion dollars over the next five years in order to meet (our green hydrogen production target around 1 million tonnes per annum by 2030)."

To date, six gigawatt-scale green hydrogen projects have been signed with a number of multinational consortiums that have been allocated land blocks in Al Wusta and Dhofar governorates.

Hydrom Oman, the orchestrator of the green hydrogen industry, has also launched a new entity, provisionally named 'InfraCo', to oversee the development of the

common-use infrastructure.

Given the element of "uncertainty" surrounding the multiplicity of standard-setting regulatory regimes likely to materialise from different markets, the Sultanate of Oman has decided to design and roll-out entirely new common infrastructure to be able to "take on the most stringent standards" set by importers, said Al Aufo.

"So we are not going to use the existing infrastructure; we are building completely new infrastructure, which will be completely ring-fenced from any grey power generation, grey water generation, grey ammonia generation, and so on.

So it's all going to be a 100 per cent green."

This commitment to building out greenfield infrastructure spans not only the hydrogen pipelines, but also the renewable energy systems, power cables, desalination plants and other utilities, he said.

"All of that is to make sure that there are no standards that we cannot meet", he said, while adding in lighter vein, "If we are unable to meet the European standards, then those standards must be wrong!"

Part of the objective behind the plan to finance the common-use infrastructure is to mitigate the cost burden on developers investing in green hydrogen projects, said the Minister.

At the same time, Oman is working with partners to explore cost-competitive and viable options for shipping renewable hydrogen, whether in the form of ammonia, liquid organic hydrogen carrier, or in some chemical form.

"In addition, we are also working at options for storage so that we can increase the efficiency of the electrolyzers and make sure that we bring the cost down, which makes our landing price as competitive as possible to Europe."

The 3-day Berlin Energy Transition Dialogue was attended by ministers and high-ranking delegations from over 75 countries.

SMN Barka Power secures 9-year water supply pact in Oman

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, MARCH 23

In a move that strengthens Oman's water security, SMN Barka Power Company SAOC, a subsidiary of SMN Power Holding SAOG, has entered into a new Water Purchase Agreement (WPA) with Nama Power and Water Procurement Company (Nama PWP).

The agreement, with a term of nine years, ensures the continued production of desalinated water by



The water supply agreement will bolster potable water availability in Muscat and Al Batinah South governorates.

SMN Barka Power's desalination plant. This strategic partnership reinforces

SMN Barka Power's role as a significant contributor to Oman's water sector.

The company's desalination plant possesses a production capacity of 26.4 million imperial gallons per day (MIGD), playing a vital role in fulfilling the nation's water requirements. "The successful execution of this long-term WPA with Nama PWP represents a significant achievement for SMN Power," the company said in a statement.

"This agreement guarantees the ongoing operation of our Barka

desalination plant, thereby bolstering Oman's water production capacity.

We extend our sincere appreciation to the Authority of Public Services Regulation (APSR), Nama PWP, our shareholders, Board of Directors, and all stakeholders for their unwavering support and collaboration throughout the Barka Water 2024 tendering process."

SMN Power Holding SAOG (SMN Power), a key player in Oman's power and water infrastructure, recently secured long-term agreements for its subsidiaries.

In February 2024, SMN Power announced that its subsidiaries, Al Rusail Power Company SAOC and SMN Barka Power Company SAOC, received Letters of Award from Nama Power and Water Procurement Company (Nama PWP) for extended Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) and a Water Purchase Agreement (WPA) respectively.

The two-month extension for Al Rusail Power and the nine-year WPA for SMN Barka Power solidify their roles in Oman's energy landscape.

Bank Muscat Oryx Fund distributes highest ever dividend of 72 baizas per unit to its investors for FY 2023

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat Oryx Fund continues to reward its investors with a growing stream of dividend distributions and capital growth. The Fund's management body, in its meeting held on February 18, 2024, approved a dividend distribution of 72 Baiza per unit to be paid to the unitholders for FY 2023.

This is the highest cash dividend paid so far by the Fund, which highlights the investor-focused approach followed by the Fund.

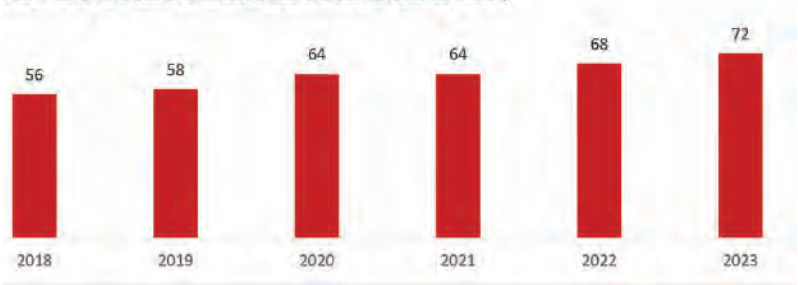
The Fund rewards its investors with consistent dividend distributions and it has maintained its track record of growing dividend every year.

In addition to the regular income distributions (through dividends), the Fund has also been rewarding its investors with attractive capital appreciation. Oryx Fund has delivered a return of 29.2% for the one-year period ended December 31, 2023 against a return of 6.2% by its benchmark i.e. S&P GCC index.

The Fund has been delivering



1: Dividend distribution track record of Oryx Fund (Baiza per unit)



consistent performance across all periods.

Bank Muscat Oryx Fund primarily invests in stock markets in the GCC region and has a consistent and proven track record of generating attractive returns for 29 years.

The Fund is one of largest funds

in GCC region within its category and it is regulated by the Capital Market Authority as per the applicable laws and regulations in Oman.

The Fund clearly stands out as an attractive investment choice for prospective investors with a medium to long term view.

Bank Muscat Oryx Fund offers daily liquidity with no minimum holding period. Investors may choose to sell their investments anytime and receive cash funds in their bank accounts within 3 days.

The Fund's NAV is published on a daily basis on Bank Muscat's website and on Muscat Stock Exchange's website, so that investors can track the value of their investments on a daily basis.

Investors can invest and redeem their investments in Bank Muscat Oryx Fund through Bank Muscat's Mobile Banking and Internet Banking platforms.

The investors can subscribe for the Fund with a minimum subscription amount of RO 50.

Investors may also choose to invest every month by subscribing to the Systematic Investment Plan (SIP) option by filling in the application form and submitting it to Bank Muscat's Asset Management team. Interested investors may contact the team of the Fund through email at assetmanagement@bankmuscat.com.

Double your rewards with NBO retail credit card this Ramadhan

MUSCAT: In its commitment to deliver rewarding experiences for customers, National Bank of Oman (NBO) has announced the launch of its exciting double rewards offer for retail credit cardholders during the Holy Month of Ramadhan and Eid Al Fitr. This special promotion encompasses a variety of transaction types including those at restaurants, groceries, and apparel stores and on all Easy Payment Plan (EPP) transactions.

Furthermore, NBO has introduced a 20% cashback in the form of rewards while using NBO credit cards at beauty spas, salons, and barber shops. These exclusive offers are designed to enhance the joy of shopping for its valued customers, encouraging them to indulge in delightful experiences while providing tangible benefits such as enhanced savings, added convenience, and increased rewards.

Maha al Raisi, Assistant General Manager and Head of Retail Products at NBO, said: "At National Bank of Oman, we believe in enriching the lives of our customers. Ramadhan is a time of generosity and reflection, and we are delighted to extend our double rewards bonanza offer to both our customers and staff.

With this offer, we prioritise our customers' diverse needs, providing convenience, flexibility, and significant rewards during their Ramadhan shopping journey. We encourage everyone to seize this superb opportunity to enhance the value we bring to our community during this special time of the year.

It's our way of saying 'thank



you' for choosing NBO and allowing us to be part of your Ramadhan celebrations."

Exclusively available on Visa retail credit cards, this unique promotion is applicable for both POS and e-commerce transactions throughout the holy month.

From the first day of Ramadhan until the conclusion of the Eid, NBO's double rewards initiative will apply to all transactions made at restaurants, groceries, and apparel stores, as well as to all EPP transactions conducted at merchant outlets and through the NBO App. Any credit card transaction exceeding RO 100 can be converted to easy monthly instalment directly from the NBO App.

During the promotional period, customers using Infinite, Signature, and Platinum credit cards will enjoy 2% cashback, comprising of 1% product feature rewards and 1% in additional rewards for an even more rewarding experience. Meanwhile, Gold credit cardholders will receive a 1% cashback, consisting of 0.5% product feature rewards and 0.5% additional rewards.

Khimji's Watches expands its presence at Mall of Oman

MUSCAT: Khimji's Watches, the purveyor of luxury timepieces in the Sultanate of Oman, is pleased to announce the inauguration of its new location at Mall of Oman, Level 3, Zone B.

The inauguration day's ceremonial ribbon-cutting was presided over by distinguished guests Yann Du Pasquier, Deputy Director and Larry Lacroix, Area Sales Manager from Rolex; Maud Rinaldi, Commercial Manager of Partner Boutiques; Matteo Nava, Area Sales Manager from Cartier Middle East; alongside Anil Khimji, Nailesh Khimji, and Mihir Khimji, Directors of Khimji Ramdas.

The opening of Khimji's Watches' outlet at Mall of Oman signifies a new era of luxury retail, where patrons can indulge in a world of timeless elegance and sophistication. The new showroom provides the exclusive opportunity to acquire luxury watches from renowned Swiss brands: Rolex, Cartier, and Tudor.

This expansion marks a significant milestone in Khimji's Watches' journey to offer the best brand experiences to its discerning clientele through an exciting new showroom that offers exceptional craftsmanship and unparalleled service.

Reflecting on the inauguration, Nailesh Khimji, Director, Khimji Ramdas stated, "We are thrilled to introduce our patrons to our new location. This expansion marks our enduring relationship with



our partners, and continued passion to providing an unparalleled luxury shopping experience while bringing the finest Swiss timepieces closer to our clientele in Oman."

Known for its excellent customer service, unparalleled after-sales care and professional staff, Khimji's Watches has always been a haven for connoisseurs, collectors and first-time buyers alike.

The showroom at Mall of Oman has been created with bespoke architectural and design components, custom-designed to reflect the brand image and hallmark colours, materials and architectural features that are signature to each brand.

First look at Neue Klasse as SAV: The BMW Vision Neue Klasse X

MUSCAT: A new BMW Group Vision Vehicle provides a first glimpse of the Neue Klasse as an SAV: The BMW Vision Neue Klasse X brings the aesthetics, technology, sustainability, and philosophy of the Neue Klasse to the Sports Activity Vehicles sector. The first fully-electric raised derivative on the new architecture will go into series production at Plant Debrecen (Hungary) in 2025.

"Together with the BMW Vision Neue Klasse, the BMW Vision Neue Klasse X showcases the breadth of our future BMW model line-up. The Neue Klasse reflects the variety of all the models that customers want today and, in the future, – from sporty sedan, with all its derivatives, to modern SAV family," says Oliver



Zipse, Chairman of the Board of Management of BMW AG.

"In this way, we are underlining that the Neue Klasse is much more than just a car or a specific concept; it is redefining the BMW brand – and, at the same time, will be more BMW than ever."

The company presented a clear

picture of the brand's future as a sedan with the BMW Vision Neue Klasse at IAA 2023. The latest Vision Vehicle now illustrates how BMW sees the future of its X models. The BMW Vision Neue Klasse X stands for an active lifestyle, efficient dynamics and a confident stance.

Own a Kia K5 and enjoy mega rewards & 9 chances to win a car

MUSCAT: The Kia K5 is now available with a fantastic offer. Customers can buy a K5 and get 9 chances to win a car in raffle. Apart from that they can avail Service 10 years / 100,000 kms. (Conditions apply. For details please visit any Kia showroom.)

Kia's popular K5 sedan makes a fine impression with its instantly recognisable design and sleek profile. The K5 with its advanced features, safety technology and more, is the perfect vehicle for those who desire exciting moments on every drive.

Sporting an impressive design language the K5 showcases the brand's new chapter in boldness and passion. Adding to this is the K5's low-slung and fastback silhouette from the side,

highlighted by a chrome garnish that spans the roofline and wraps around the rear glass.

Enhancing the K5's design appeal are a number of exterior design features that include LED headlamps, LED daytime running lights, LED front fog lamps, LED rear fog lamps, LED rear combination lamps, 18" alloy wheels, solar glass, panoramic sunroof and dual LED headlamps.

The K5 is equipped with a powerful 2.5L GDI engine that offers 191 HP and 25.1 KG.M. Torque. This is paired to an 8-speed automatic transmission.

In the K5 a range of features enhance every experience. They include drive mode select, auto cruise control, power driver seat, auto AC, power passenger seat,



navigation with 10.25" display, premium music system, red leather seats, ventilated front seats, paddle shifter, aluminium pedals, mood lamp, android auto

& car play and more.

Making every journey comfortable and memorable is the impressive interior enhanced with a newly designed infotainment

display that seamlessly stretches into the instrument panel, creating a futuristic, three-dimensional layout and driver-centric space.

Creating an inviting and comfortable interior are a range of features that include tinted glass, tilt & telescopic steering, radio with USB, audio remote control, driver's seat height adjuster, rear AC vents, leather AT knob and more.

On the safety front, the K5 is equipped with a range of advanced safety features. The features include driver and front passenger airbags, side and curtain airbags, electro chromic inside mirror, blind spot collision warning, blind spot view monitor, around view monitor, anti-lock braking system, electronic stability programme,

tyre pressure monitoring system, front and rear parking assist system and electric parking brake with auto hold and more.

Reliable International Automotive (RIA), the distributor for Kia in Oman provides a rewarding ownership experience for customers. Excellent product attributes and unmatched facilities easily ensure their absolute satisfaction, every mile of the way.

No wonder then that Reliable International Automotive has been ranked amongst the top Kia distributors worldwide and has been honoured with prestigious accolades including the 'Good Partnership award', 'Family Like Care' Service award, and 'Kia 'Distributor of Distinction' award.



Oman banks' total credit balance and investments increase

MUSCAT: An analysis of the activities of traditional commercial banks during the period from January 2023 to January 2024 indicated continued credit growth in the Sultanate of Oman, as the total credit balance granted by banks recorded an increase of 1.8 per cent.

As for credit granted to the private sector, it increased by 2.6 per cent to reach RO 20.1 billion by the end of January 2024. With regard to the investment item, the total investments of traditional commercial banks in securities witnessed an increase of 28.1 per cent to reach about RO 5.7 billion by the end of January 2024.

Within this item, investment in government development bonds recorded a 15 per cent decrease compared to the same period last year, reaching RO 1.8 billion.

As for their investments in

foreign securities, it witnessed an increase of 156.3 per cent to reach RO 2.4 billion by the end of January 2024.

On the other side of the budget — liabilities — total deposits with traditional commercial banks recorded an increase of 12.3 per cent to reach RO 24.1 billion by the end of January 2024.

Among the total deposits, government deposits with commercial banks recorded an increase of 0.3 per cent to reach about RO 5.2 billion, as well as for deposits of public sector institutions, which increased by 60 per cent to reach about RO 2.3 billion during the same period.

Private sector deposits recorded an increase of 10.5 per cent to reach RO 15.9 billion in January 2024, constituting 66 per cent of the total deposits with traditional commercial banks. — **ONA**

OETC to sign pacts on Rabt Phase 2 and Dhofar Governorate projects

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, MARCH 23

The Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) today, March 24, will sign the agreements of the strategic "Rabt – Phase 2" project and the Dhofar Governorate's electricity network expansion projects with a total cost exceeding RO 322 million.

The event will be held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre under the auspices of Dr Mansour bin Talib al Hinai, Chairman of the Authority for Public Services Regulation.

The project aims to connect the main integrated network with the Dhofar's electricity network, through establishing transmission lines between 400/132 kV Duqm Grid Station and 400/132 kV Dhofar Grid Station which will be constructed as part of the project in Salalah.

Furthermore, a main 400 kV Switching Station will be established in Shaleem area. The



Eng Saleh al Rumhi, OETC CEO

project will contribute to upgrading the electricity sector's system, reducing the costs, besides contributing to achieving the Sultanate of Oman's plans in connecting the renewable energy stations and the Net-Zero

Carbon Neutrality Goal by 2050. Additionally, the project involves the construction of electricity transmission lines spanning across 590 kilometres.

The electricity transmission network expansion projects in Dhofar Governorate, which has a total cost of RO 65 million, the establishment of 132 kV electricity transmission lines over 269 kilometres.

These transmission lines will be connecting Wilayat of Al Mazyouna and Shahab Aseeb passing by Mudhi. Moreover, this

project includes the construction of 3 grid stations operating at 132 kV.

Eng Saleh al Rumhi, OETC CEO, affirmed the company's continuous efforts and dedication to enhancement and development in its different operations. Besides, ensuring the undergoing expansion in the electricity transmission network through the establishment of new grid stations or developing previous projects, and the construction of high-voltage electricity transmission lines. All these efforts aim to empower the transmission network, levelling up its efficiency, and ensuring its reliability, sustainability and security.

He added that OETC works through various projects to enhance and develop the network's performance, in line with the increasing demand in the electricity sector, and to serve the development journey across the Sultanate of Oman.

Consumer goods prices in Oman remain stable

MUSCAT: The prices of consumer goods in the Sultanate of Oman stabilised during February 2024 compared to the same month in 2023, according to consumer price index data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The data indicated a decrease in the prices of major groups such as the transportation group by 2.6 per cent, the restaurants and hotels group by 0.1 per cent, the clothing and footwear group by 0.2 per cent, communications by 0.3 per cent, and education by 0.4 per cent.

In contrast, there is an increase in the prices of food and non-alcoholic beverages by 1.1 per cent, and miscellaneous goods and services by 3.1 per cent, culture and entertainment at 0.6



Muscat Governorate recorded the lowest percentage of decrease in inflation.

per cent and tobacco at 2.4 per cent. The prices of the remaining groups remained stable.

In the food and non-alcoholic beverages group, the prices of fruits increased by 3.1 per cent, milk, cheese, and eggs by 4.2 per cent, sugar, jam, honey, and

sweets by 2.8 per cent, oils and fats by 2 per cent, bread and cereals by 0.9 per cent, foodstuffs by 1.1 per cent, vegetables by 5.2 per cent, and meat by 1.7 per cent. Fish prices fell by 9.9 per cent.

The Muscat Governorate recorded the lowest percentage of

decrease in inflation at the end of February 2024 compared to the same period of the previous year, as the index decreased by 0.3 per cent.

Meanwhile there was a decrease of 0.2 per cent in the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, compared to an increase of 0.9 per cent in the Al Sharqiyah North Governorate.

The rate increased by 0.5 per cent in the Al Wusta Governorate, by 0.4 per cent in both the Dhofar and Al Buraimi governorates, by 0.3 per cent in both the Al Dhahirah Governorate and the Musandam Governorate, by 0.2 per cent in each of the Al Batinah South and Al Batinah North governorates, and by 0.1 per cent in the Al Sharqiyah South Governorate. — **ONA**

Oman's natural gas production and import reach 4.190 bn cubic metres



MUSCAT: Oman's total domestic production and import of natural gas reached more than 4.190 billion cubic metres until end of January 2024, a decrease of 7.7 per cent compared to the same period in 2023 with 4.538 billion cubic metres.

Statistics showed that industrial projects accounted for 66.3 per cent of natural gas uses in the Sultanate of Oman until the end of January, amounting to 2.777 billion cubic metres.

The total use of natural gas for each of the oil fields reached 835.400 million cubic metres, power generation stations 555.500 million cubic metres, and industrial areas 21.800 million cubic metres.

The non-associated production of natural gas, including imports, amounted to 3.468 billion cubic metres, while the associated production amounted to 721.500 million cubic metres. — **ONA**

India extends ban on onion exports indefinitely

MUMBAI: India has extended its ban on onion exports indefinitely — a surprise move that comes ahead of a general election and is set to exacerbate high prices in some overseas markets.

Imposed by India — the world's biggest exporter of the vegetable — in December, the ban was due to expire on March 31.

Traders had anticipated it would be lifted as local prices have more than halved since the export restrictions were implemented and this season's crop is yielding fresh supplies.

However, the government issued an order late on Friday that the ban will remain in place until further notice.

"The extension is surprising and completely unnecessary, considering the falling prices with rising supplies from the new season crop," said an executive at a Mumbai-based export firm, who declined to be identified.

Onion prices in some wholesale markets in Maharashtra, the biggest onion-producing state, have fallen to 1,200 rupees (\$14)



A woman spreads onions for sorting at a wholesale vegetable market in the northern Indian city of Chandigarh. — **Reuters**

per 100 kg from 4,500 rupees in December, the executive said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

is seeking a record-equalling third straight term in upcoming elections that will be held over almost seven weeks from April 19.

Countries such as Bangladesh, Malaysia, Nepal and the United Arab Emirates rely on imports from India to fill domestic gaps in

TRADERS HAD ANTICIPATED THE BAN WOULD BE LIFTED ON MARCH 31 AS LOCAL PRICES HAVE MORE THAN HALVED SINCE THE EXPORT RESTRICTIONS WERE IMPLEMENTED AND THIS SEASON'S CROP IS YIELDING FRESH SUPPLIES

onion supply and many of those nations have struggled with high prices since the ban.

"India's move is allowing rival exporters to quote much higher prices since buyers have no choice," said another executive at an export company based in Mumbai.

Traders estimate that India, which has shorter shipment times than rivals such as China or Egypt for many markets, accounts for more than half of all onion imports by Asian countries.

India exported a record 2.5 million metric tonnes of onions in the financial year that ended on March 31, 2023. — **Reuters**

Foreign investment flows into China shrink 19.9 per cent



Staff work on a construction site in Dalian, China. — **Reuters**

BEIJING: Foreign investment flows into China shrank 19.9% in January-February from a year earlier to 215.1 billion yuan (\$30 billion), data from the commerce ministry showed on Friday, even as the government gears up to woo foreign firms.

China's cabinet on Tuesday unveiled new steps to arrest a slowdown in foreign investment, including expanding market access and relaxing some rules.

Overseas firms have turned sour on China since it enacted ultra-strict Covid curbs during the pandemic then suddenly abandoned them in late 2022, with concerns over the business environment, a shaky economic recovery and rising geopolitical tensions with the West weighing on confidence. — **Reuters**

Despite the immense potential of AI, a crucial challenge remains — the digital divide



QASIM AL MAASHANI

The author is head of the business section at *Oman Daily Observer*

The traditional methods of education and training are undergoing a significant transformation driven by the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI). This transformation represents a strategic shift, not a disruptive one, with profound implications for businesses of all sizes. As a generation accustomed to instant information and constant connectivity enters the workforce, AI presents a unique opportunity to personalise training programmes, optimise learning experiences, and equip employees with the skillsets necessary to excel in the digital age. Businesses today grapple with

a continuously evolving skills gap, struggling to keep pace with rapid technological advancements. AI-powered learning platforms offer a solution by providing customised learning paths tailored to each employee's individual needs and skill sets. Imagine a scenario where a sales representative receives targeted modules on the latest customer relationship management (CRM) software, or a data analyst hones their Python programming skills through interactive simulations. This data-driven approach fosters efficient learning and ensures employees acquire the specific competencies required for their roles. Traditional training

programmes can be resource-intensive and time-consuming. AI offers a cost-effective alternative, allowing businesses to automate repetitive tasks such as onboarding and compliance training. Additionally, AI-powered analytics can track employee progress and identify areas requiring further training, maximising the return on investment (ROI) for training initiatives. AI dismantles geographical barriers to education and training. Businesses can leverage these platforms to source and develop talent from a global pool, irrespective of location. This expands hiring options and allows companies to tap

into diverse skill sets, fostering innovation and a competitive edge. Despite the immense potential of AI, a crucial challenge remains – the digital divide. Not all employees possess equal access to reliable internet connectivity and the latest technology. To ensure everyone benefits from AI-powered training, businesses must invest in providing the necessary infrastructure and upskilling their workforce to navigate these new learning platforms. The integration of AI into training programmes necessitates a responsible approach. Algorithmic bias can pose a threat, potentially reinforcing existing inequalities. Data privacy and security

concerns also demand attention. Transparency in AI development and responsible implementation are crucial for building trust and ensuring an equitable learning environment. AI is not a replacement for human expertise. The future of training lies in a collaborative model, where AI personalises learning experiences and human trainers offer mentorship, guidance, and foster a positive learning environment. By harnessing the power of AI while retaining the human touch, businesses can empower their employees to not only adapt to the ever-changing business landscape but also become drivers of innovation and growth.

Mixed signals in a crypto week that saw \$620m in liquidations



STEFANO VIRGILLI

The author is a member of the International Press Association

The cryptocurrency market continues to be a rollercoaster of emotions, showcasing dramatic volatility and starkly contrasting signals which are leaving retail traders puzzled. After a significant downturn leading to over \$620 million in liquidations, the market is now showing signs of a rebound. On Thursday Bitcoin (BTC) has surged back, reclaiming the \$67,000 mark. Other major cryptocurrencies like Ethereum (ETH) went up by nearly +10%, BNB over 7%, and memecoins like Dogecoin spiked nearly 14%. This recent surge, however, comes following a week of substantial losses across all tokens. Bitcoin (BTC) dipped below \$64,000 earlier in the week, triggering a wave of liquidations that predominantly impacted long positions. Ethereum (ETH) and Solana (SOL) also suffered dips. Despite the market recovery, Bitcoin (BTC) remains below its all-time high of over \$73,000 achieved just a week ago, highlighting the unpredictable nature of cryptocurrency price movements. In contrast to this volatility, institutional interest in Bitcoin exchange-traded funds (ETFs) soared to unprecedented heights. Standard Chartered Bank dramatically revised its Bitcoin (BTC) price forecast upwards to \$150,000, fuelled by strong inflows into spot Bitcoin ETFs in the US. Even amidst the market turmoil, US Bitcoin ETFs

witnessed record-breaking activity, with net inflows reaching \$2.57 billion and trading volume surging to \$35.1 billion. Solana (SOL) emerged as a notable outlier, defying the broader downturn. Its price surpassed \$200 last week before crashing, a milestone unseen since December 2021. Daily transaction fees on the Solana network have skyrocketed 1,000% since January, increasing from \$361,000 to \$3.2 million. This surge is partly attributed to the memecoin frenzy, with decentralised exchanges on the network experiencing record usage. The memecoin craze on Solana, fuelled by tokens like DogWifHat and BOME, has played a significant role in driving fees, revenues, and a market capitalisation reaching \$81 billion. Meanwhile, on the institutional spectrum, El Salvador's continued investment in Bitcoin further highlights the contrasting forces within the crypto space. The nation made global headlines in 2021 by embracing Bitcoin as legal tender, and President Nayib Bukele recently announced the transfer of over 5,600 BTC, valued at approximately \$406 million, into cold wallets. This revelation implies that El Salvador's actual bitcoin holdings may be nearly double the previously estimated amount, reinforcing the nation's unwavering commitment to the cryptocurrency. The evolving regulatory landscape also significantly impacts the cryptocurrency market. Leading crypto exchange OKX is ending services in India due to local rules requiring digital asset service providers to register with the Financial Intelligence Unit India (FIU IND) and comply with anti-money laundering regulations. Indian customers have until April 30 to close their OKX positions and withdraw funds. This move highlights the challenges crypto exchanges face in navigating a complex and rapidly changing global regulatory environment.



KAREN KWOK

The author is a journalist and columnist of Reuters Breakingviews in London. She covers technology companies for the news agency with a focus on the food delivery and fintech sectors.

Yasir al Rumayyan is dreaming about artificial intelligence. The governor of Saudi Arabia's \$925 billion Public Investment Fund says the country is "fairly well positioned" to be an AI hub. Unlike some of the more outlandish ideas embraced by senior Saudis there's a way to turn these visions into reality – but that depends on attracting the necessary brainpower, and the support of AI bigwigs like OpenAI's Sam Altman and SoftBank Group's Masayoshi Son. Imagine AI Rumayyan wanted to create an AI hub from scratch. He would need semiconductors, implying an ability to produce chips. He would also need data centres to store and process the huge amounts of information that go into AI large language models. Then there's the intellectual property for the design of advanced chips, and the know-how that underpins the actual models themselves. Gulf states may not have to do all these things themselves, though. Take the data centres required to train and run AI models. Energy represents 60% of their operating costs, and the UAE and Saudi Arabia not only have copious supplies of low-cost energy from fossil fuels, but also plentiful scope to expand solar power. Yet there isn't currently a lack



WHERE SAUDI ARABIA AND THE UAE DO HAVE A PROBLEM, THOUGH, IS CHIP DESIGN. THE GULF IS CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF AN AI ARMS RACE BETWEEN CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES.

of investment in this area — in fact, Western asset managers like Blackstone and Brookfield are desperate to pile in. Hence Gulf states could probably find others willing to invest in their infrastructure, as Amazon did on March 4 in committing \$5 billion to Saudi data centres. Similarly, there's no need for these countries to develop the capacity to physically manufacture semiconductors. True, chip plants consume lots of energy. But they also require a plentiful supply of water, which the Gulf region lacks: annual water demand in Saudi, for example, is nine times higher than its water supply, according to World Bank data. More importantly, the production of chips globally is dominated by Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co (TSMC), which has a near 60% share of the global market. There's little point in building domestic foundries when Saudi Arabia could just outsource production, like most other burgeoning AI markets do. Where Saudi Arabia and the UAE do have a problem, though, is chip design. The Gulf is caught in the middle of an AI arms race between China and the United

States. In August the US restricted the shipping to the Middle East of thousands of high-performance chips that TSMC makes in Taiwan for \$2.2 trillion AI star Nvidia. Officials in Washington want to stop Chinese firms from using Middle Eastern countries as a backdoor to access the newest chip technology. These sorts of curbs threaten the Gulf states' ambitions. The best chips are crucial for building AI software at speed. They helped a UAE research institute create Falcon, an Arabic-based open-source AI model which trained, using 384 Nvidia A100 chips over two months last year. Falcon performed tasks better than Meta's Llama 2 and on a par with Google's PaLM 2. To stand a chance of maintaining this lead and to compete with the likes of France's Mistral and OpenAI, the region needs continuous access to the most advanced chips. As such, the best use for the \$200 billion that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have committed to spend on AI-related development is to create homegrown AI chip design capabilities. If the intellectual property

originates in the Gulf, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi would be able to send designs to TSMC without restrictions from the United States. The catch here is that designing chips requires deep knowledge of the industry to avoid missteps, like violating existing intellectual property. But the Gulf lacks homegrown talent. Instead, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi will have to persuade the global AI elite to move from desirable areas like Japan and California to the Middle East. Even with golden visas and generous tax rebates in the UAE – and Saudi Arabia recently easing rules on alcohol consumption – that's a big ask. That's where the likes of Son and Altman come in. The SoftBank boss knows all about chip design given his investments in \$130 billion UK player Arm. He is helping 50 SoftBank-backed startups set up offices in Saudi Arabia. The Japanese entrepreneur wants to raise \$70 billion from Middle East sources to invest in AI chip-design ventures, Bloomberg revealed citing people familiar with the matter. Meanwhile, Altman envisages as much as \$7 trillion from investors including the UAE government, the Wall Street Journal reported, without disclosing its sources. — **Reuters**

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HADITH
GUIDE FOR THE FAITHFUL



Ubayy ibn Ka`b, may Allah be pleased with him, reported the Prophet, may Allah’s peace and blessings be upon him, said:

“Do not curse the wind. If you see what you dislike thereof, then say: ‘O Allah, we ask You for the good of this wind, the good of what it contains, and the good of what it is ordered to do. We seek refuge with You from the evil of this wind, the evil of what it contains, and the evil of what it is ordered to do’”.



HIS EMINENCE
SHAIKH AHMED BIN
HAMAD AL KHALILI
GRAND MUFTI OF OMAN

FATWA

A person didn’t fast during Ramadhan for almost 10 years without any reason, what should he do?

He must compensate for those missed 10 years and make amends by fasting for two consecutive months or by feeding 60 people.

QURAN
VERSE OF THE DAY

On the Day when the Spirit and the angels stand in row. They will not speak, unless it be one permitted by the Most Merciful, and he will say what is right.

(Al Naba’)

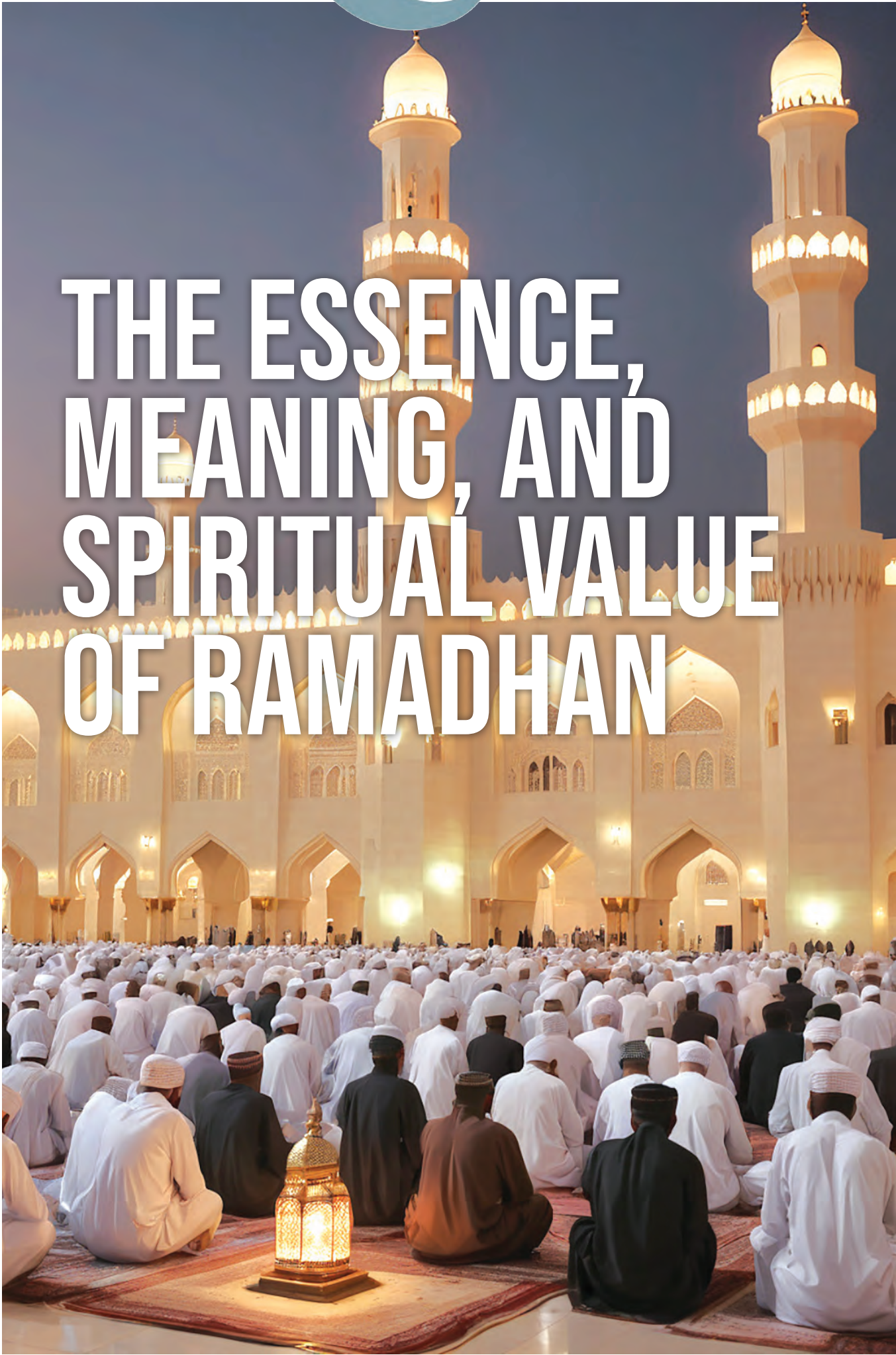


Ramadhan

SUNDAY | MARCH 24, 2024 | RAMADHAN 13, 1445 AH

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THE ESSENCE,
MEANING, AND
SPIRITUAL VALUE
OF RAMADHAN



BY RUQAYA AL KINDI

Ramadhan stands as a sacred and significant month observed by Muslims globally. It marks the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar and bears immense spiritual significance for adherents of Islam. Throughout this period, Muslims observe fasting from dawn until sunset, refraining from food, drink, smoking, and other physical needs as acts of worship and self-discipline. However, the genuine essence of Ramadhan transcends mere abstention from physical desires. “At its core, Ramadhan represents a time for spiritual reflection, self-improvement, and heightened devotion to Allah. It serves as a period for Muslims to deepen their connection with their faith and seek forgiveness for past transgressions. Fasting during Ramadhan entails more than refraining from consumption; it symbolises purification and demonstrates self-control,” remarked Ronya Naboulsi, The Wellness Coach.

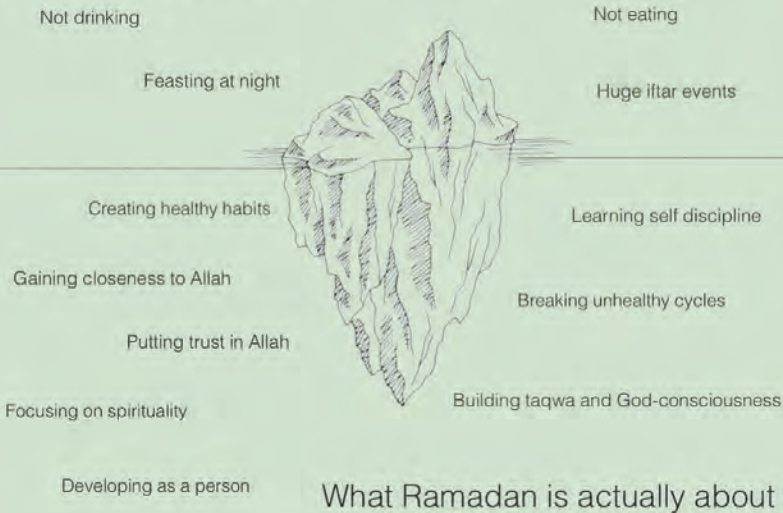
A fundamental objective of fasting during Ramadhan is to foster Taqwa, or God-consciousness. “By abstaining from worldly indulgences and focusing on spiritual endeavours such as prayer, Quranic recitation, and acts of charity, Muslims aim to heighten their awareness of Allah's presence in their lives. Through fasting, Muslims endeavour to refine their moral character, nurture patience and empathy, and nurture a greater sense of gratitude for bestowed blessings,” she shared. Moreover, Ramadhan fosters community and solidarity. “Muslims are urged to fortify the bonds of brother-

hood and sisterhood, extend assistance to those in need, and practice generosity and kindness. The tradition of Iftar, or breaking fast together, fosters communal unity and compassion. It's a time for families and friends to gather for meals and prayers, strengthening relationships and fostering unity within the community,” she emphasised. Furthermore, Ramadhan serves as a reminder of empathy and compassion

sonal growth. Fasting isn't merely a ritualistic practice but a spiritual journey requiring introspection, self-discipline, and a genuine desire to draw closer to Allah,” she observed. Throughout Ramadhan, Muslims intensify acts of worship, including additional prayers, Quranic readings, and spiritual reflection. “It's a time for self-improvement, self-discipline, and an opportunity for personal growth and transformation. By pri-

Ramadan Mubarak

What people think Ramadan is about



towards the less fortunate. Muslims are reminded of their blessings and duty to share them with others. “Charity, or zakat, assumes a pivotal role during Ramadhan, with many Muslims engaging in acts of giving and supporting the less fortunate. By aiding the needy, Muslims uphold the principles of social justice and compassion, embodying Islamic teachings through action,” she highlighted. Beyond the physical aspects of fasting, Ramadhan signifies spiritual renewal and rejuvenation. “It's a month for seeking forgiveness, purifying hearts and minds, and aspiring for per-

oritising spiritual development and striving to embody Islamic values, Muslims aim to emerge from Ramadhan as better, more conscious individuals,” she noted. In essence, Ramadhan epitomises a period of spiritual rejuvenation, self-reflection, and faith renewal. It serves as a reminder of piety, compassion, and community, urging Muslims to pursue spiritual growth and self-improvement. Through acts of worship, self-discipline, and fostering empathy and generosity, Muslims embody the true essence of Ramadhan, aspiring to live its teachings throughout the year.

ENTERTAINMENT

Zendaya Says
Goodbye to
Sandworms,
Hello to Skorts

IN “CHALLENGERS,” ZENDAYA plays a tennis star named Tashi Duncan. Her clothes are central to her identity; the character is sponsored by Adidas and costumed in sporty-and-rich outfits by designer Jonathan Anderson. “She'll have a fashion line,” one of Tashi's suitors predicts to another in the trailer. “She is going to turn her whole family into millionaires.” Fashion is equally important to the

real-life Zendaya — a tool of both image-making and moneymaking. She has become a defining star of the modern movie press tour. Coverage of these appearances can be feverish, with thousands of articles and social-media posts produced for each stop: a premiere in New York, a photo call in Mexico City, a news conference in Seoul, South Korea. The fever rises when actors lean into thematic dressing. The cast of “Barbie” drowned themselves in blingy netted gowns. Kristen Stewart wore very little to promote her erotic thriller “Love Lies Bleeding.” Still, few can generate quite as much attention as Zendaya, who, for example, wore a vintage robot suit by Mugler to the London premiere of “Dune: Part Two” in February. (Her apparent theme for this press tour: futuristic desert warrior queen.) From this single moment, the

data analytics company Launchmetrics valued the media impact for Mugler to be worth \$13.3 million, according to *Women's Wear Daily*. Yet despite her commitment to cosplay, Zendaya has not been wearing Adidas in the lead-up to “Challengers,” the Luca Guadagnino film that will premiere in late March. She is wearing preppy looks made by her real sponsor, Louis Vuitton, a luxury brand increasingly enmeshed in the sports world. For a promotional image released on March 12, Zendaya wore a buttery sweater with a deep V neckline, relaxed white shorts and white pumps — like the most formidable stepmom at the country club, down to her long blown-out bob. Her stylist, image architect Law Roach, credited Louis Vuitton and Bulgari for the outfit. Then, on March 17, Zendaya attended the BNP Paribas Open in Indian Wells, California, to watch the women's final. Louis Vuitton dressed her again in ten-



nis whites: a pullover, a tank top and a pleated skort. She accessorised with white sneakers, a small monogram

purse — its attached neon yellow coin purse looked like a tennis ball — and her boyfriend, actor Tom Holland. They sang along to Whitney Houston in their seats. Zendaya, who trained for “Challengers” with the famed coach Brad Gilbert, later posed for photos with Iga Swiatek, winner of the match and the sport's top-ranked women's player. She looked more at ease in her Sunday “tenniscore,” breaking from the severity of her “Dune” chapter. It wasn't just her cyborg looks that made her seem otherworldly. (That Mugler fembot costume was followed by a vintage circuit-board Givenchy skirt set.) Crisp white gowns from Alaïa (in Paris) and Stéphane Rolland (in New York) also gave her the gravitas of a sci-fi empress at a state dinner. Now she's coming back down to earth. Or at least the tennis court. As Swiatek observed after her victory: “Meeting Zendaya was crazy, but on the other hand, she's a human like all of us.” — NYT

HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF
MUSLIM FAITH

629
First Pilgrimage (“lesser” pilgrimage or “umrah”) made by Prophet Muhammad to Mecca

The first Umrah, or Lesser Pilgrimage, undertaken by Prophet Muhammad and his followers after migrating to Medina, occurred in the 6th year of the Islamic calendar. Despite facing resistance, they completed it, symbolising the establishment of Islam. This event holds great significance for Muslims, demonstrating their commitment to the faith amidst adversity.

DOS & DONTs:
ETIQUETTE
GUIDE DURING THE HOLY MONTH

AVOID STEREOTYPES
AND ASSUMPTIONS

Recognise that not all Muslims observe Ramadhan in the same way, and individual practices may vary based on cultural and personal factors. Avoid making assumptions or generalisations about Muslims and their observance of Ramadhan.

RAMADHAN AROUND THE
WORLD

IRAN



The history of Islam in Iran spans fourteen centuries. Beginning with the 7th-century Arab conquests, Iran gradually embraced Islam, with Islam gaining prominence by the 9th century, further solidified by the Safavid Dynasty. Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran became an Islamic Republic, with Islam shaping its governance and societal structure.

Today, Iran's population of over 80 million predominantly adheres to Islam. During Ramadhan, Muslims in Iran observe fasting, increased worship, and communal iftar meals, fostering spiritual renewal and community bonds. Traditional iftar dishes like dates, soups, fruit juices, and savoury delights reflect regional tastes and cultural heritage.

Ramadhan serves as a unifying force, transcending borders and bringing Muslims worldwide together in spiritual reflection and solidarity. In Iran, Islam's historical influence persists, shaping its cultural, social, and political identity. Through Ramadhan's rituals and culinary traditions, Iranians honour their faith's enduring significance in their lives and society.

RAMADHAN
TRIVIA HOW WELL DO YOU
KNOW THE HOLY MONTH

WHAT DOES THE BREATH
OF A FASTING PERSON
SMELL LIKE, ACCORDING
TO THE HADITH?

Answer to last trivia: Shatan



A CHEF'S RAMADHAN
REFLECTIONS
THROUGH FOOD

BY LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

With 1000-year-old recipes to cherish, food plays an important role in preserving memories. The individuals we encounter each hold their own cherished memories of Ramadhan. Food stands as an integral component of culture and remembrance.

Demir Erhan, an executive chef at Mövenpick Hotel and Apartments Ghala Muscat,

Chicken Mandi rice with fried onions and nuts, Lamb harees, Beef saloona, Shish taouk with garlic sauce, Chicken madrouba, Lamb qalya, Lamb Ouzi, and Prawns jareesh.

Reflecting on his Ramadhan memories with the Observer, Erhan recalls his initial impressions of his mother preparing sweets and dishes approximately



experiences his first Ramadhan in Oman. What adds intrigue is his close study of Omani cuisine and food preferences. This Ramadhan, Amoun is reimagining an Iftar themed around and inspired by the traditions of Al Batinah N&S, Al Dakhiliyah and Al Sharqiyah N&S governorates.

"I noticed that in Oman, everyone enjoys ouzi during Ramadhan, much like in Türkiye where kebabs are a must," noted Chef Erhan. Ouzi entails rice cooked traditionally with whole lamb, spices, and a smoky flavour.

Thus, when planning Iftar in Oman, he amalgamates Omani, Arab, Turkish, and Ottoman cuisines. He integrates timeless Omani classics such as

mately two weeks before Ramadhan. "My mother excelled in preparing sweets, especially baklava and luqaimat. Another highlight was the visits from relatives," he reminisced.

What inspires him most is Ottoman cuisine. What characterises Ottoman cuisine? "Ottoman cuisine, dating back a thousand years, comprises truly ancient recipes. These recipes not only reflect its rich history but also exert influence on international cuisines. For example, you can find variations of Ottoman recipes in French, English, and Italian cuisines," he elucidated.

A favourite example is Lahmajun, a flatbread topped with minced vegetables and



herbs, its origins tracing back to the Ottoman Empire. "There are likely 10,000 recipes in Ottoman cuisine. Another example is vine leaves stuffed with rice, a recipe possibly spanning a thousand years, yet deeply ingrained in my childhood memories due to my mother and grandmother's preparation. And it's incredibly flavourful," he emphasised.

"As Ramadhan approaches, memories flood back from my youth when sleep seemed unnecessary. About two weeks prior, my mother would commence preparations of sweets and dishes, memories that remain vivid throughout Ramadhan," Erhan recollected, now an accomplished international chef.

He elucidated that during the initial week of Ramadhan, gatherings for Iftar are more subdued as families come together. "It's relatively quiet during the first week as families reunite, but by the second week, outings become more frequent," he observed.

A recipe he enthusiastically shares for everyone to try is Turkish-style Mousaka. "Simply peel the eggplant slightly, make an incision, stuff it with minced meat and vegetables, deep fry it, top it with cheese, and let it melt. It's incredibly simple to prepare, and anyone can do it," recommended Erhan Demmir, Executive Chef at Mövenpick Hotel and Apartments Ghala Muscat.



Qatar Museums exhibition in Venice to reveal new voices in film and video from Arab world

ON VIEW DURING the Venice Biennale, Your ghosts are mine: Expanded Cinemas, Amplified Voices highlights works by more than 40 film-makers and video artists

On view at ACP-Palazzo Franchetti from April 19 through November 24, 2024.

DOHA, March 19, 2024 — Qatar Museums today announced plans for a major exhibition to coincide with the 60th International Art Exhibition at the Venice Biennale, bringing the visions of dozens of film-makers and video artists from the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia to the art world's most prestigious stage. The exhibition, titled Your ghosts are mine: Expanded Cinemas, Amplified Voices, on view at ACP-Palazzo

Exhibition Manager.

The exhibition will offer an all-encompassing journey through ten galleries, each dedicated to themes such as deserts (cradles of civilisation and places of rebirth), ruins (relics of culture), women's voices, borders (demarcations between allowed and forbidden places) and exile, as experienced through selected films supported, co-financed or initiated by the Doha Film Institute and video works from the collections of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art and the future Art Mill Museum. The films and video works span genres including fiction, documentary, animation and memoir, often blending invented narrative with fact, modernity with tradition and spirituality with

Film Institute (DFI), added: "For nearly 15 years, the Institute has worked to correct the misrepresentation of Arab culture, stories and aesthetics by nurturing important new voices in cinema. We are proud to have supported over 800 diverse projects from 74 countries, underlining Qatar's commitment to empower a new generation of storytellers and bring balance to the global film landscape. DFI's creative ecosystem to foster talents from the Arab world and beyond has enabled them to connect with new audiences, and we look forward to visitors discovering the unique perspectives assembled by a team of experts including Qatari film-makers Majid Al Remaihi and Khalifa Al Thani."

them, transforms them in a daring aesthetical approach," said Matthieu Orléan. "These films don't belong to the mass media and cultural industry. They follow their own paths, never forgetting that they are and will be perceived as pieces of history."

"The exhibition architecture created by Cookies engages with each of the curatorial themes, offering visitors a diverse and immersive experience," said Federico Martelli and Clément Périssé. "For each room in the exhibition, Cookies designed unique sculptural structures that respond to the technical needs of displaying cinema in an exhibition context. This approach ensures that the exhibition engages with the architecture of the palazzo,



Franchetti from April 19 to November 24, will present a journey in moving images through contemporary experiences of community life and memory, transnational crossings and exile.

Your ghosts are mine: Expanded Cinemas, Amplified Voices is produced by Qatar Museums and co-organised by Doha Film Institute, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art and the future Art Mill Museum in collaboration with ACP Art Capital Partners. The exhibition is curated by Matthieu Orléan with the collaboration of Majid Al Remaihi and Virgile Alexandre, with exhibition design by architects and spatial designers Cookies (Federico Martelli and Clément Périssé). The advisory committee includes Fatma Hassan Al Remaihi, Zeina Arida and Catherine Grenier. Project management is by Minas Stratigos and Khalifa Al Thani is the

postcolonial sensibilities.

Her Excellency Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Chairperson of Qatar Museums and of the Doha Film Institute, said, "Opening at the same time as the Venice Art Biennale and continuing throughout the presentation of the Venice Film Festival, Your ghosts are mine will open the eyes of multitudes of international viewers to the ideas, the feelings, and above all the artistic visions of today's film-makers from the Arab world and neighbouring regions. By presenting this exhibition, Qatar Museums advances its key mission of encouraging understanding across borders through cultural exchange, while the Doha Film Institute fulfils its mandate to nurture and promote the rising talents of our region."

Fatma Hassan Al Remaihi, Chief Executive Officer of Doha



"As co-organisers of Your ghosts are mine, we are proud to collaborate on this innovative exhibition," said Zeina Arida, director of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, and Catherine Grenier, director of concept of the future Art Mill Museum. "The work of our two museums is very much aligned, in its own way, with the ambitious attempt of Your ghosts are mine to reorganise the categories we use to understand the 21st century, whether the lines being crossed are geopolitical borders, the boundaries between fiction and documentary or the outmoded distinction between film and video. We believe that museums have a special role to play in fully integrating cinema at large into the history of art."

"Cinema is not only the mirror of the political changes: it participates in them, anticipates them, accompanies them, supports

facilitating moments of immersion where spectators can fully engage with the carefully curated selection of films from the Doha Film Institute catalog."

On view through November 24, the exhibition is one of several Qatar Museums initiatives coinciding with the Venice Biennale. Mathaf is lending several works from major Arab modern artists to be exhibited in Foreigners Everywhere, the main exhibition of the 60th International Art Exhibition curated by Adriano Pedrosa. Qatar Museums is also a supporter of the Nigeria Pavilion at the Biennale and the founding sponsor of the Art for Tomorrow conference, which takes place in Venice from June 5 to 7, 2024. Your ghosts are mine: Expanded Cinemas, Amplified Voices will remain on view during the Venice International Film Festival, opening 28 August.

The Most Famous Cowboy Hat in the World Right Now



KEMO SABE IS CERTAINLY not the only western-themed store in Aspen, Colorado, but it may be the best known, thanks to the influencer Alix Earle.

While vacationing in Aspen last month, Earle did some shopping for personalised hats at Kemo Sabe with a few friends. Soon after she stepped outside, she was accosted by a local who seemed sceptical of her new look.

"So we all just made hats at Kemo Sabe, because we're trying to get into the Aspen Western spirit," Earle said in a TikTok video recorded moments after her shopping excursion. "And this girl comes up to us and she's like: 'I like your Aspen costume.'"

"We got humbled real quick," Earle added, drawing out the word "real" to underscore her point.

The video, which has received nearly 4 million views, sparked an online debate about the difference between authenticity and cosplay. Some commenters also discussed the cost of Kemo Sabe's hats, which range in price from \$350 to several thousands of dollars.

Founded in 1990 by Tom and Nancy Yoder, the boutique-meets-bar — which also hawks belts, boots and other western-wear items — has since expanded to six locations, including Vail, Colorado, Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and Park City, Utah.

In 2020, the Yoders sold the store to Wendy Kunkle, a zoologist from Ohio who had moved to Aspen and worked her way up the Kemo Sabe corporate ladder, and her brother, Bobby. A month later, the pandemic hit the United States.

The Kunkles were able to keep the store afloat with the help of vendors who fronted them products to sell on the promise that they would be paid back. Their bet paid off. With Europe closed to travel, customers "flooded our



stores, so when we opened the onslaught of human beings that hit the mountain towns was unbelievable," Wendy Kunkle said in a video interview.

Business has continued to boom with the help of celebrities and influencers. Kunkle and the brand's vice president of marketing, Kate Valdmanis, noted that the endorsements have been entirely organic: Kemo Sabe does not pay celebrities or online influencers for product placement.

Earle, who travelled to the ski town with her boyfriend, NFL player Braxton Berrios, followed up her "Aspen costume" video with another TikTok post showing her and her friends making personalised hats at the store.

"She did that video on her own," Kunkle said. "She paid for her hat. We didn't promise her anything. She organically did that — which is crazy to me, because she is one of the top influencers in the world and she gets paid for everything."

Ever since Earle's "Aspen costume" TikTok went viral, Kunkle's son has been keeping track of the online conversation about Kemo Sabe. When he read her "all of the terrible things being said on TikTok," the proprietor said she started crying.

"This is a real store," Kunkle said. "Real people work here. We are hardworking locals, and they think we're some big huge corporations that are backed by celebrities. But we don't pay for celebrities. We don't do any of that stuff. We never have."

Valdmanis, the marketing director, seconded that view. "People have this perspective of Aspen — and it's true to a certain extent — that we are like Rodeo Drive in the mountains," she said. "But we were a mining town. We were cowboy first." — **NYT**