

Manufacturing sector aids recovery

As a result of economic stimulus and economic diversification efforts, the Omani economy continued to recover in the post-Covid scenario and recorded a 12.7 per cent growth by the end of the third quarter of 2021, the latest figures released by the Ministry of Economy said. **SEE P3**



P10

COUNTDOWN STARTS FOR AL MOUJ MUSCAT MARATHON



P13

TRA MOVES TO SECURE IOT MARKET FROM SECURITY THREATS



P20

THIS WINTER, TRY THESE 5 FUN ACTIVITIES TO DO IN THE DESERT



MUSCAT

HM CONGRATULATES CHILE PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent congratulations to Gabriel Borek of the Republic of Chile on being elected as his country's new president. In the cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of success to President Borek in leading the people of Chile towards further progress and prosperity. His Majesty also wished the relations between the two countries further development and growth.

AGREEMENT SIGNED FOR HOTEL PROJECT

The Wilayat of Qurayat, a destination that attracted history-lovers from across the globe in the Governorate of Muscat, will soon be home for a state-of-the-art hotel project aiming to cater to the increasing number of tourists. Located in Bimma, this ambitious tourism project overlooking the sea with 80 hotel suites with a private pool and all advanced amenities will mark a milestone in the tourism map of the Sultanate of Oman once it is operational in the next two years. **SEE P2**

Take booster dose: Supreme Committee

V A C C I N E S O N L Y T O O L T O C U R B S P R E A D O F O M I C R O N

VINOD NAIR/ ONA
Muscat, Dec 21

The Supreme Committee on Covid-19 on Tuesday exhorted all people aged 18 years and above to go for a booster dose of Covid-19 vaccines available at primary healthcare establishments as Muscat witnessed huge turnout of citizens and residents for the third jab.

The Supreme Committee reviewed Ministry of Health's report of 15 new cases of Omicron variant in the Sultanate of Oman. The new cases are currently under epidemiological investigation. The Supreme Committee urged the citizens and people to wear face masks indoors, maintain physical distance, avoid crowded areas and keep their hands clean.

Meanwhile, senior health



People wait their turn for the third dose of Covid-19 vaccine in Muscat.

experts and MoH officials, in separate statements, have warned that a rapid rise in infections may be expected in the coming days and vaccines are still the only effective tool to fight Covid-19. MoH said the third dose of the vaccine will help those who suffer

from weak immunity due to some diseases or taking medications.

The Pfizer vaccine is the approved vaccine for the third dose in the Sultanate of Oman.

“Though the risk of getting the severe illness is low, it is important to take the third dose to contain

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Though the risk of getting the severe illness is low, it is important to take the third dose to contain the widespread of the new variants

DR ZAID AL HINAI
SQU Hospital

the widespread of the new variants,” said Dr Zaid al Hinai, a consultant on infectious diseases at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital.

Dr Ahmed bin Salim al Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern

Mediterranean region, said in an interview that some countries did not adhere to the precautionary measures, which led to the spread of the mutant.

“As we are approaching the New Year, WHO recommends adhering to the procedures to avoid any additional burden on health systems. Priority should be given a vaccination to those who did not receive a single dose,” he said.

“The effectiveness of Covid-19 vaccines is reduced due to the omicron variant, and there are studies that show that the third/ booster or supplement dose raises antibodies and immunity to more than 75 per cent,” said Dr Feryal bint Ali al Lawatiyah, Senior Consultant at the Communicable Disease Department at Royal Hospital said in an interview with Oman TV.

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INSIDE



AIR STRIKES HALT AID FLIGHTS INTO YEMEN CAPITAL

P6



14 DEAD, 70,000 DISPLACED IN MALAYSIAN FLOODS

P7

PACT TO PRODUCE GAS



The Ministry of Energy and Minerals on behalf of the government of the Sultanate of Oman has signed a concession agreement in Muscat on Tuesday with Shell Integrated Gas Oman BV to develop and produce natural gas from block 10 of the Saih Rawl gas field. **REPORT ON P13**

CYCLONE CLAIMS TOP RO 62M

Insurance companies paid claims worth RO 62.373 million in number of the wilayats affected by the cyclone in the governorates of Muscat, North and South Al Batinah. The data also indicated RO 51.7 million worth claims are still under process these require some time because they are houses, buildings and facilities.

The largest number of claims of all kinds was reported in Muscat, with 4,391 claims, followed by North Al Batinah, especially A'Suwaiq, with a total of 2,632 claims, and the Wilayat of Al Khabourah, with 1,023 claims, while the rest of the claims were distributed among the various wilayats, such as Suhar, Saham, A'Rustaq, Al Musanah and Barka.

The total volume of claims paid by insurance companies in 2021 until December 16 amounted to about RO 173.514 million. **SEE ALSO P15**

WHO approves Novavax as 10th authorised Covid jab

GENEVA: The World Health Organization on Tuesday approved a Covid vaccine made by US pharma giant Novavax for emergency use, after the European Union medicines regulator gave it the green light.

The European Medicines Agency had assessed and approved Nuvaxovid on Monday.

It is made from a more conventional technology than

others already approved, which has led officials in Brussels to express hope that this will help persuade those hesitant about vaccination to come forward.

The jab uses a traditional technology involving proteins found on coronavirus spike proteins that trigger an immune response.

It is a tried and tested approach, used for decades to vaccinate



people against diseases including hepatitis B and whooping cough.

A so-called emergency use listing (EUL) by the WHO paves the way for countries worldwide to quickly approve and import a vaccine for distribution.

It also opens the door for them to enter the Covax global vaccine-sharing scheme, set up to provide equitable access to doses around the world and particularly in

poorer countries.

The two-shot Nuvaxovid jab is the 10th Covid vaccine issued an EUL by the UN health agency.

WHO said Nuvaxovid was around 90 per cent effective at reducing symptomatic cases of Covid-19 in two major clinical studies, one in Britain and the other in the United States and Mexico, involving more than 45,000 people. — AFP



State Council reviews trade agreements

MUSCAT: The State Council on Tuesday hosted Azzan bin Qasim al Busaidy, adviser of the minister of commerce, industry and investment promotion for economic affairs, who presented a visual display on the economic impact of the agreements the Sultanate of Oman signed with countries and economic groups.

Khalid bin Ahmed al Saadi, Secretary-General of the State Council, noted that the meeting comes within the framework of the firm communication and cooperation between the government and the State Council. One of the aspects of that cooperation is the hosting of officials to shed light on the activities, plans and programmes of their respective entities.

The adviser of the minister of commerce, industry and investment promotion for economic affairs, spoke about the agreements related to enhancing the economic effect that were signed between the Sultanate of Oman and



countries and economic groups namely: free trade and avoidance of double taxation agreements as well as the agreements for mutual encouragement and protection of investments.

The visual display explained the objectives of the free trade agreements particularly boosting trade activities through reducing or removing the obstacles that hamper trade activities.

The presentation reviewed the free trade agreements signed by the Sultanate of Oman and other countries and economic groups. These include the Free

The presentation touched on the volume of Omani non-oil exports to countries of the world, and the most important sources of foreign direct investment to the Sultanate of Oman

Trade Agreement signed with the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA) in 1998, the Free Trade Agreement signed with the United



States in 2009. The agreement for Omani non-oil exports to the United States of America and the Free Trade Agreement with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) signed in 2014 and the Free Trade Agreement with Singapore signed in 2015.

The presentation touched on the volume of Omani non-oil exports to countries of the world, and the most important sources of foreign direct investment to the Sultanate of Oman. It also suggested recommendations for maximising the economic return from free trade agreements.

The presentation also dealt with the objectives of the double taxation avoidance agreements, which aim at providing a legal framework to eliminate double taxation that hinders intra-regional trade and boosting mutual investment between countries, enhancing the competitiveness of Omani investments abroad by ensuring non-discrimination in tax treatment between local investors of these countries.

It explained that these agreements contribute to the fight against tax evasion and help improve tax collection.

ROP foils drug smuggling attempt

MUSCAT: Within the context of international cooperation, the Royal Oman Police (ROP) in cooperation with the authorities concerned in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, managed to foil smuggling of 1.8 million Captagon pills weighing 315 kg that were concealed in glass panels. The case is under legal procedures.

HIT-AND-RUN MURDER CASE

Meanwhile, North Al Batinah Governorate Police Command arrested a person in connection with a hit-and-run case. The defendant fled the scene after the accident that caused the death of a resident.

In another development, North Al Batinah Governorate Police Command arrested two people on charges of sabotage and robbery from a commercial store.

Legal procedures against the defendants are under way.



Oxy Mountain Run in Wadi Bani Awf kicks off on Friday

MUSCAT: The Oxy Mountain Run in Wadi Bani Awf, the Wilayat of Al Rustaq, will kick off on Friday December 24, 2021 with 1,000 participants from all over the world.

The race will start in front of Wadi Bani Awf School towards the dirt road of Wadi Bani Awf. The participants will go through a mountain track and then return to the starting point to complete the 50-km race.

The race is organised by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, in cooperation with Occidental Oman.

The ministry aims to organise such races in each governorate of the Sultanate of Oman to utilise the geographical diversity of each governorate for those wishing to participate. The Sultanate of Oman is among the best countries

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth aims to organise such races in each governorate to promote the geographical diversity

in the world in terms of environmental and terrain diversity.

The race is considered a long run marathon, which is among extreme sports of endurance for long distances that range between 50 to 200 km and sometimes extending to 250 km. Such marathons can be continuous or divided into stop points. The races test the participants' endurance, vitality, as well as physical and mental fitness. — ONA

Pact signed for hotel project in Bimma

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The Wilayat of Qurayat, a destination that attracted history-lovers from across the globe in the Governorate of Muscat, will soon be home for a state-of-the-art hotel project aiming to cater to the increasing number of tourists.

Located in Bimma, this ambitious tourism project overlooking the sea with 80 hotel suites with a private pool and all advanced amenities will mark a milestone in the tourism map of the Sultanate of Oman once it is operational in the next two years.

A Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) was signed between Al Fayhaa United Real Estate Development and Radisson International Group for the operation in the presence of Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI); and Shaikh Saud bin Hamed al Tai, Chairman of Al Fayha United Development Company.

Speaking to the *Observer* on the sidelines of the signing ceremony,



OCCI chairman said that the project is part of the Vision 2040 Oman and one of the pillars of the longer national vision is tourism.

"This is a major tourist hotel apartment project which comes under the Vision 2040 and we are expecting it to be complete in two years. This is one of the classic examples of how the private sector can support the government in achieving the national goals and

The ambitious tourism project overlooking the sea with 80 hotel suites with a private pool and all advanced amenities will mark a milestone in the tourism map of the Sultanate of Oman

will be a great value addition to the ambitious tourism plans. Tourists from across the world will be able to visit the tourist attractions here comfortably once the hotel is operational," he said.

"With this project and other tourism projects, we are expecting the revenues from tourism to grow from RO 3 million to 12 million," said the OCCI chairman.



Social development minister meets with Algerian counterpart

RIYADH: Her Excellency Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najar, Minister of Social Development, on Tuesday met with Kawthar Kriko, Minister of National Solidarity, Family and Women's Issues of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria.

The meeting came on the sidelines of the deliberations of the 41st session of the Council of Arab Ministers of Social Affairs held in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA).

The two sides discussed aspects of cooperation between their ministries on fields related to the economic empowerment

of women, services for persons with disabilities and services to the elderly, as well as motherhood, childhood and family in general.

The two sides also reviewed other areas of interest to the Ministry of Social Development and ways to enhance them and exchange experiences in various social fields.

During her visit to the Domestic Violence Reporting Center in Riyadh, HE Dr Laila al Najar was briefed on the experience of KSA in the field of women and child protection.

She also listened to a comprehensive explanation of

the work mechanism starting from receiving the call, direct intervention by the centre and the authorities concerned and means to provide protection, rehabilitation and reform.

HE Dr Laila al Najar visited the Autism Center of Excellence (ACE), which is one of the exemplary centres in its field.

The Minister of Social Development praised the volume of services rendered in both centres.

She noted that it is an experience worth benefiting from and implementing in the future. — ONA



Manufacturing sector aids economic recovery



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As a result of economic stimulus and economic diversification efforts, the Omani economy continued to recover in the post-Covid scenario and recorded a 12.7 per cent growth by the end of the third quarter of 2021, the latest figures released by the Ministry of Economy said.

The manufacturing sector was the biggest contributor with the highest growth rate this year of 25.8 per cent, the report said.

It may be noted the economy registered a negative growth of 16.5 per cent at end of the third quarter of 2020.

"The non-oil activities grew at 8 per cent and contributed 17.6 billion to the GDP, while oil activities grew 26.5 per cent, contributing 7.4 billion to the



GDP." By the end of Q2, 2021, The Sultanate of Oman's gross domestic product (GDP) rose by 10.1 per cent at current prices, registering RO 15,302 million as compared with RO 13,898 million over the same period in 2020. This is mainly attributed to an increase in the average price of crude oil by 9.9 per cent as of the end of Q2-2021. The value-added of non-oil

activities amounted to RO 11,456 million by the end of Q2-2021, up by 11.1 per cent compared with the same period in 2020. In its latest World Economic Outlook report (October 2021), the IMF projected that the global economy would increase by 4.9 per cent and 5.9 per cent in 2021 and 2022, respectively. In its report issued in May 2021, Fitch Ratings affirmed

the Sultanate of Oman's credit rating at BB-. The agency expects that the Sultanate of Oman's deficit will decline to 6.1 per cent of GDP during 2021 and predicted the national economy would grow by 3.3 per cent during 2022.

However, on Monday, Fitch revised Oman's Outlook to Stable from Negative while affirming the sovereign's Long-Term Foreign- and Local-Currency Issuer Default Ratings (IDR) at 'BB-'. The report estimated that the budget deficit narrowed to 3.4 per cent of GDP in 2021, from 16.1 per cent of GDP in 2020.

Hydrocarbon revenue grew by a third, according to our estimates, driven largely by a 28 per cent rise in The Sultanate of Oman's average fiscal oil price, and likely accounted for more than half of the narrowing in the budget deficit.

SQU conference highlights role of IT in modern age

MUSCAT: The 22nd International Arab Conference on Information Technology (ACIT) began at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) on Tuesday.

The three-day conference is organised by the Colleges of Computing and Information Society (CCIS), which stems from the Association of Arab Universities.

The opening ceremony of the event was held under the patronage of HH Sayyid Dr Fahad Al Julanda al Said, Vice-Chancellor of SQU.

As many as 113 research papers from 33 countries will be presented during the conference, covering various information technology specialisations.

The conference aims to highlight the importance of information technology

in the modern age and its role in developing society through the areas it tackles, such as Internet of Things (IoT), Artificial Intelligence (AI), Big Data, among other fields.

The event, which is hosted for the first time by SQU, promotes joint research projects and sharing their outcomes. It aims to organise specialised and general seminars and connect research with the needs of Arab Societies.

Moreover, the conference is an opportunity for Arab researchers and scientists to meet and exchange expertise. It also attracts experts from non-Arab countries to benefit from their capabilities, in addition to highlighting the latest IT developments. — ONA



University students get practical work experience

MUSCAT: In line with the programmes and initiatives launched by the Omani Talent Support and Empowerment programme at The Zubair Corporation, the students of Muscat University participating in the Zubair Practical Training Programme continued their intensive training in 6 different companies across The Zubair Corporation. This training programme will last for 7 months.

Commenting on this occasion, Hilal bin Omar al Siyabi, Head of Corporate Services at The Zubair Corporation, said, "We would like to welcome the students participating in the Zubair



Practical Training Programme to the companies and institutions of The Zubair Corporation. This programme is part of our efforts

to support and empower Omani competencies to localise job opportunities by providing graduates with the skills and competen-



cies required by the labour market. This step is also aligned with the government's future vision in empowering young Omanis in vari-

ous companies and private sector institutions.

"The Zubair Corporation will continue to attract new batches of distinguished students from Muscat University, based on the joint cooperation agreement with the university. As the Corporation is committed to training and qualifying these students in the various sectors in which the corporation operates. I would like to thank Muscat University for this fruitful cooperation to make the Zubair Practical Training Programme a success.

Together, we will strive to enable the students to make the

most of their training programme, which is the first step in their professional career," he added.

Abeer al Shamisi, Student Training Officer at Muscat University, said, "We would like to thank The Zubair Corporation for their cooperation in training final year students across various companies and institutions of The Zubair Corporation. Through the Zubair Practical Training Programme, we are keen to refine their skills of training and qualification across different work environments, in order to highlight their competencies and prepare them to enter the labour market."

WHY ARABIC IS IMPORTANT

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The Arabic language is the oldest living language on the earth. Although researchers disagree about the age of this language; there is no doubt that the Arabic we use today has passed for more than one thousand six hundred years. Since the first eras of Islam, Arabic has spread in most parts of the world and was linked to the lives of Muslims, becoming the language of science, literature, politics and civilisation, in addition to being the language of religion and worship.

Arabic ranks as the sixth most spoken language across the world with an estimate of over 280 million native speakers across the 22 countries of the Arab world.

The Arabic language has been able to accommodate different civilisations; Arabic, Persian, Greek, and Indian, contemporary with it at that time, and to make them all as one civilisation. Also, under the Holy Quran, the Arabic language became a global language, and the mother tongue of many countries. The

importance of the Arabic language stems from several aspects; the most important of them: its close connection with the Islamic religion and the Quran.

That is why the non-Arabic speakers are keen to study this language, and learn about its vocabulary, meanings, rules and everything related to it. The emergence of the so-called “Teaching Arabic to Non-Arabic Speakers” has helped activate the role of the Arabic language. The spread of Arabic among non-Arab Muslims helps to understand the matters of religion, as it is the source of the Holy Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet.

In the Sultanate of Oman, the Sultan Qaboos College for Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers strives to contribute in building communication and cultural bridges with other non-Arabic speaking nations. The college is affiliated to Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science and is located in Wilayat of Manah, Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

Arabic is significant in the Sultanate of Oman’s cultural approach locally and globally. It is the official language of the country, the language of education, the language of communication between the Sultanate of Oman and all the Arab countries.

The establishment of the Sultan Qaboos College for Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers in the Sultanate of Oman has been a response to a global desire to learn Arabic and foster greater cultural understanding and openness.

The late Sultan Qaboos bin Said has promoted the spread of Arabic globally by establishing

chairs in Arabic Language Studies in a number of universities across the world.

Arabic is also important because it is one of the remaining Semitic languages. It is known that most Semitic languages have disappeared, with the exception of a few languages, including Arabic and Hebrew. This is what gave it an advantage that made the attention of non-Arabs turn to it, as it was the language of the most powerful civilisations in the world for long periods of time.

Add to this the fact that the Arabic language is of an increasing economic importance, as the Arab countries are among the countries that import the most foreign products and export oil, petroleum products and others. Recent political crisis conditions in the Arab world have pushed many from major international organisations to learn the Arabic language to have the ability to clearly understand the reality in the Arab region.

RANK AMONG MOST WIDELY SPOKEN LANGUAGES
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Permanent committees of Arab Parliament meet

AMMAN: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by Council of Oman, on Tuesday participated in the deliberations of the Arab Parliament's preparatory committees, scheduled to be held on Thursday during the second session of the second sitting of the third legislative term in Amman, Jordan.

Dr Hasan al Madhani, Member of the State Council, chaired the deliberations of the Joint Committee on Sustainable Development.

He gave a presentation on the participation of the Arab Region Parliamentary Forum on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Said bin Hamad al Sa'adi, Deputy Chairman of Majlis Ash'shura and member of the Legislative and Legal Affairs Committee of the Arab Parliament, also participated in the deliberations of the committee's meetings.

The meeting discussed the memorandum of the Secretariat General of the Arab Parliament on preparing a unified Arab strategy to combat child exploitation and labour.

Humaid bin Ali al Nasri, member of Majlis Ash'shura and member of the Economic and Financial Affairs Committee of the Arab Parliament, participated in the deliberations of the relevant committee meeting. The committee's members reviewed the updates on the preparation for the Arab Forum on the requirements for enhancing economic integration among Arab countries, as



Permanent Committees of Arab Parliament Meet

well as the role of the private sector in promoting intra-trade.

Shaikh Ali bin Nasser al Mahrouqi, member of the State Council and member of the Social, Educational, Cultural, Women and Youth Affairs Committee,

also participated in the relevant committee meeting. The meeting discussed the draft Arab guiding law on combating violence against women, besides a study of developing a mechanism and framework to support Arab legislation

on preserving environment in line with the Arab initiatives and the Middle East Green Initiative.

During the main session of the Arab Parliament, scheduled to be held on Thursday, Dr Hasan al Madhani, Vice-President of

the Arab Parliament and Head of the Sustainable Development Committee, will present the most prominent decision adopted by the Committee namely establishing an "Arab Parliamentary Network for Sustainable De-

velopment". The move aims at strengthening Arab parliamentary communication mechanisms, and exchanging experiences with organisations and committees concerned with sustainable development. — ONA

Strengthening online education with extracurricular activities

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The current Covid-19 crisis has obliged most education systems to adopt alternatives to face-to-face teaching and learning. Many education systems moved activities online, to allow instruction to continue their schools by not closing.

Online education becomes one of the indispensable tool in this pandemic period. Many researchers provided new dimensions of research in online education. Technology also played immense role in imparting the online teaching and learning to the students and also to the faculty. Google, Microsoft, Cisco, Coursera Inc and many contributed significant role in the online education. Most of the countries started zoom, teams, classroom, WebEx etc. given good platforms in the teaching, meetings and imparting the new technology.

In the Sultanate of Oman many government and private universities also turned to technology. As an example, if we analyse the online programmes conducted by one of the colleges, Oman College of Management and Technology conducted 18 major online platforms within 41 days.



This shows how the college is dedicated for strengthening the online education.

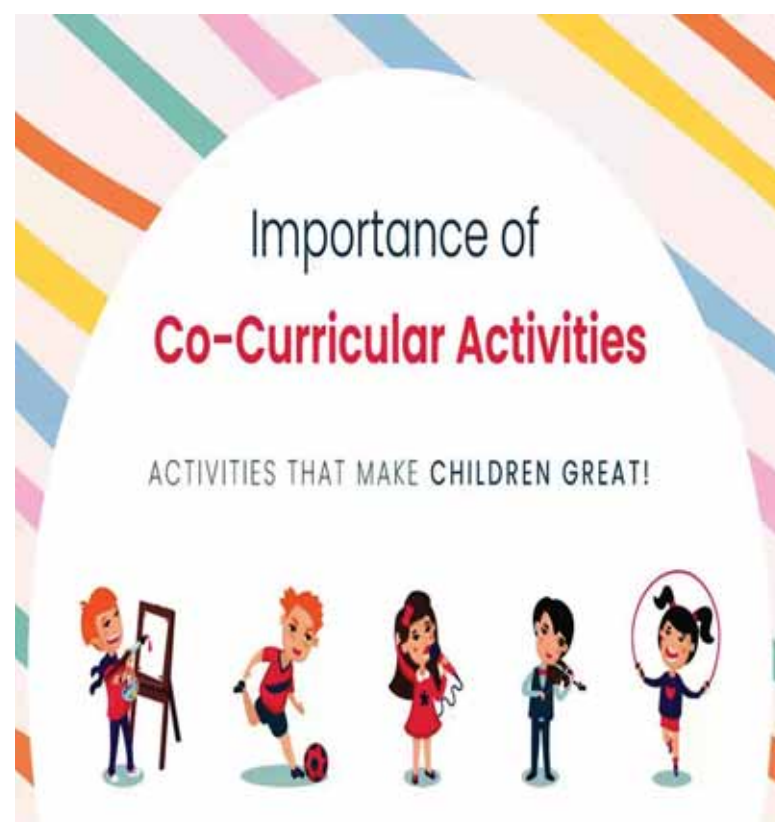
Among 18 online programmes, 11 were conducted to one of its biggest department known as Administration and Financial Sciences. In these 11 online interactions, Online Seminar for Accounting; Brock University Canada on October 20, 2021 and Virtual Co-Curricular Activity 1: The Future of Marketing by Professor Philip Kotler on November 24, 2021 are worth mentioning. Computer Science and Management and Information System Department conducted

Technology also played immense role in imparting the online teaching and learning to the students and also to the faculty

3 programmes, Innovative Department called as Interior Designing conducted three and three were assigned to all the departmental students. On December 15th of 2021 David Gurteen who is a writer, keynote speaker, and conversational facilitator conducted The Future of Knowledge Management

webinar and all the 24 students of OCMT registered and participated. OCMT not only concentrate on its students but also believes that the staff has to be trained with new technology so it emphasizes the staff to learn online courses.

The other private universities and colleges are also conducting seminars online trainings. Governmental agencies also stressing on these trainings. The performance appraisal is going to link by the new technology learning and contribution to the Online education. The teaching staff has to initiate their students to register and attend the different



online training programs. But still we need knowledge cafes and workshops to strengthen the knowledge. Knowledge is not only acquiring but it is also sharing.

If we observe the opinions of the different educationalists in the Round table held in November 2021 on how Omani institutions are finding success in blended learning, then the importance of online education in the Sultanate of Oman can be easily understandable. Here I am mentioning only few educationist's opinions. Zaher Srou, partnerships director at Coursera, agreed that online was good for boosting employability and soft skills — for faculty as well as students.

"I hear that many in the Sultanate of Oman want to keep digital learning active, especially for emerging skills that universities are not used

to teaching. Fouad Chedid, Vice-Chancellor of Al Sharqiyah University, spoke about the importance of retaining some level of digital delivery.

"All the additional skills that students were equipped with... online is an approach that should stay irrespective of the pandemic," he said. Al Sharqiyah is now offering additional digital skills training to students.

"This is what employers want to see," Chedid said. The panelists agreed that there was a blended future for lifelong learning and employability skills. (Source: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/hub/coursera/p/how-omani-institutions-are-finding-success-blended-learning>)

So it is time to think and strengthen the online education, and the role of the teaching staff is cannot be limited.

Air strikes halt aid flights into Yemen capital

SANAA: UN aid flights into Yemen's Ansar Allah-held capital Sanaa have been halted by air strikes carried out by the coalition which supports the government, an airport official said on Tuesday.

Because of coalition air strikes targeting the Ansar Allah fighters, "the airport is no longer able to receive aircraft operated by the United Nations or international humanitarian organisations", the official said.

Flights into Sanaa airport have been largely halted by a blockade since August 2016, but there have been exemptions for aid flights that are a key lifeline for the population.

The airport official, who asked not to be identified, called on the United Nations to secure a halt to the raids so that the airport could resume operations.

On Monday evening, the coalition said it had carried out "a limited number of precision strikes on legitimate military targets in Sanaa international airport".

"The operation was mounted in response to the threat and use of airport infrastructure to carry out cross-border attacks," it said in a statement carried by the official

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The operation was mounted in response to the threat and use of airport infrastructure to carry out cross-border attacks

SAUDI PRESS AGENCY

Saudi Press Agency.

Coalition aircraft hit six targets in the airport, including sites used to "control attacks by drones loaded with explosives" or to "train terrorist elements" for such operations, the statement said.

The coalition insisted that its strikes were "in accordance with international humanitarian law" and should have no impact on the airport's operational capacity.

Khaled al Shayef, director general of Sanaa airport, said that the "health quarantine quarters and warehouses to store export and import goods were destroyed".

A metal hangar and cement structures near an air traffic



An airport worker walks through the debris of a building destroyed following a reported air strike by the coalition targeting the Ansar Allah-held Sanaa International Airport on Tuesday. — AFP

control tower were also destroyed, an AFP correspondent reported.

"A UN team is on the ground at Sanaa airport to verify the extent of any damage," a World Food Programme spokesperson said.

The Norwegian Refugee Council urged both sides to work with the UN to reopen the airport

for humanitarian and commercial flights.

"Aid delivery to the airport is now at a standstill. We urge both the authorities in Sanaa and the Saudi-led coalition to keep Sanaa airport out of the crossfire and to ensure that it can function again for medical and

commercial flights," NRC country director Erin Hutchinson said in a statement.

TIT-FOR-TAT ATTACKS

The Ansar Allah fighters have repeatedly launched missile and drone strikes against neighbouring Saudi Arabia,

targeting the kingdom's airports and oil infrastructure.

They have intensified their strikes on the kingdom in recent months.

In August, a drone hit Abha International Airport, wounding eight people and damaging a civilian plane.

And in October, Saudi state media reported that 10 people were injured in a drone attack on a civilian airport in the Saudi Red Sea city of Jeddah.

The Yemen conflict has led to what the United Nations has called the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Tens of thousands of people — most of them civilians — have been killed in the war.

More than 80 per cent of the population of around 30 million require humanitarian assistance.

A UN Development Programme report last month said the war will have claimed 377,000 lives by the end of the year through both direct and indirect impacts.

Nearly 60 per cent of deaths will have been caused by consequences such as lack of safe water, hunger and disease, it said, suggesting that fighting will have directly killed over 150,000 people. — AFP



A woman watches as waves hit the Lebanese shoreline during a storm, in the northern city of Batroun, on Sunday. — AFP

Middle East hit by bad weather

BEIRUT: A severe winter storm has hit the Middle East region, leaving many areas with unusually low temperatures and gusty winds.

Pictures on social media showed hail showers in Alexandria in northern Egypt. Temperatures have dropped to near freezing, the state-run Al Ahram website reported.

According to the report, a man in the northern Egyptian city of Tanta died "from electrocution when he touched a lamppost while walking during the rain."

In Lebanon, heavy rain and strong winds hit the capital, while roads in mountainous regions were blocked

with snow on Tuesday.

According to the weather department at Beirut Airport more heavy rain is expected in the coming days.

In neighbouring Syria, refugee camps in Idlib, the last rebel-stronghold in the north-west of the country, heavy rains covered tents with water.

"These displaced people, who have already suffered so much, deserve better than this. We urgently need more funding to provide these people with safer and more dignified living conditions," Mark Cutts, UN deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator wrote on Twitter. — dpa

Iran, unlike West, upbeat about nuclear talks, say experts

TEHRAN: Iran believes it has scored points in the Vienna talks meant to revive its tattered 2015 nuclear deal by managing to include sanctions relief in discussion documents for the next round, experts say.

The lifting of the punishing sanctions regime then-US president Donald Trump imposed when he pulled Washington out of the agreement in 2018 has been Tehran's top priority.

European powers have voiced frustration at a lack of progress so far in the Vienna talks, which their diplomats warned on Friday are "rapidly reaching the end of the road".

But from Tehran's perspective, there has been progress, say Iranian officials and political analysts from the Islamic republic and abroad.

"The parties have agreed on two new texts, the result of intense discussions in recent days in Vienna," Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said on Monday.



Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani arrives at the Coburg Palais, venue of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) meeting aimed at reviving the Iran nuclear deal, in Vienna on December 17. — AFP file photo

"These are documents in which Iran's position has been taken into account... and on the basis of which we can continue future discussions."

Bernard Hourcade, a French expert on Iran, said Tehran had "succeeded in this session in convincing their interlocutors that the sanctions must be settled as a priority, because this will pave the way for technical settlement of the nuclear component".

He said Iran regularly stresses that it has "always respected" the

original 2015 deal, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and "that it is up to the United States, which has flouted its honour, to repair the damage".

Iran, Hourcade added, "knows the balance of power is to its advantage because it is now at the threshold, that it is able in the short term, like about 30 other countries in the world, to manufacture an atomic bomb if it wishes. It can enrich uranium whenever it wants."

The parties to the 2015 deal

with Iran — Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States — saw it as the best way to stop it developing a nuclear weapons capability, a goal Tehran has always denied pursuing.

Iran pledged to reduce its nuclear activities, which are monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency, in exchange for relief from sanctions then in force against it.

When Trump pulled out of the deal, he imposed an even more painful and sweeping sanctions regime, including a unilateral US ban on Iran's crucial oil sales, leading Iran to step up its nuclear activities again.

After US President Joe Biden replaced Trump, talks to revive the accord resumed. They stopped before Iran's June presidential election, then resumed on November 29. Tehran's new ultraconservative government has said agreement could be reached "quickly" if the West is serious about lifting sanctions and stops making "threats". — AFP

SHORT TAKES

TEHRAN

Envoy dies of Covid after evacuation

Iran's envoy to Yemen died of Covid on Tuesday despite his evacuation from the Ansar Allah-held capital Sanaa in a rare exemption from a Saudi-led air blockade, the foreign ministry said.

Foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh blamed the "slow cooperation of certain countries" in facilitating the Saturday evacuation for the death of envoy Hassan Eyrlou.

The diplomat served as ambassador to the administration in Sanaa.



"The ministry announces the death from Covid-19 of martyr Hassan Eyrlou, ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Yemen's National Salvation Government," ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said in statement.

TRIPOLI

Minister arrested over lack of school textbooks

Libya's education minister was arrested on Monday as part of an inquiry into a lack of schoolbooks, the prosecution service said. Moussa al Megarief "was placed in preventative detention pending an investigation into (possible) negligence", it said in a statement.

"The Public Prosecution has launched an inquiry to determine the circumstances around contractual procedures for the printing of textbooks and the reasons for a shortfall," it said.



A number of other officials are wanted for questioning, including the minister for planning, it added. Since the times of dictator Muammar Gaddafi, Libyan authorities have had a budget earmarked to provide free textbooks.

KHARTOUM

Second death, abuse at Sudan protest

The death toll from a crackdown on Sudanese protesters on Sunday rose to two, medics said on Tuesday, while a government ministry said two women were raped in the chaos.

On Monday medics had reported a first shooting death in the previous day's street violence, while the health ministry reported 125 protesters injured, many by tear gas inhalation.

On Tuesday, the independent Sudan Doctors' Committee reported the additional death. It



said Abdelmoneim Mohamed Ali, 28, was killed with "a bullet in the head" in Omdurman, Khartoum's twin city.

Security forces cracked down on Sunday as hundreds of thousands marched.

In brief

NEW DELHI



MAN FINED FOR PLEA TO REMOVE MODI'S FACE FROM JAB DRIVE

An Indian man went to court to complain about Prime Minister Narendra Modi promoting himself as the face of the nation's Covid vaccination drive — but walked away on Tuesday with a fine for wasting the judge's time.

Peter Myaliparampil of Kerala had objected to Modi's face being printed on his vaccine certificate with a message exhorting the public to fight the coronavirus. He told a court that India's inoculation rollout risked becoming "a media campaign" for Modi's benefit. In his petition, Myaliparampil said he had paid for his own vaccine and the image of Modi on his certificate "served no utility or relevance". But the Kerala High Court threw out the case, saying it appeared to be politically motivated and fined him 100,000 rupees (\$1,322) for wasting its time.

BEIJING



WOMEN TO GET RIGHT TO DECIDE ON CAESAREAN BIRTH

China will give pregnant women the right to choose a caesarean birth for babies even if husbands object, state media reported on Tuesday, one of the latest steps to safeguard women's rights in a society in which traditions can play a powerful role.

China's top law-making body, the standing committee of parliament, is meeting this week to discuss bills, including a draft amendment to the Women's Rights and Interests Protection Law, which was first passed in 1992.

He Yiting, a parliament official for societal issues, said that while the law had been in place for years, some old problems had not been resolved while some new ones had arisen as society and the economy progressed, the *Beijing News* reported.

YANGON



JUNTA ARRESTS HUNDREDS OF JADE TRADERS IN MANDALAY

Myanmar authorities have arrested hundreds of jade traders working at emporiums that compete against a junta-backed market in Mandalay, traders said on Tuesday. Taxes on the shady, multi-billion dollar jade industry are a major source of revenue for Myanmar's military and help fund rights abuses, advocacy groups say.

On Monday, junta soldiers swooped on three markets in Mandalay — where most stones pass through — and "arrested hundreds" including several Chinese brokers, one trader said on condition of anonymity. None of the arrests took place at Mandalay's sprawling government-run jade market, which closed for months during the pandemic and was bombed by the anti-junta "People's Defence Forces" shortly after it re-opened in October.



Aerial view shows vehicles and buildings inundated by floods in Shah Alam's Taman Sri Muda, one of the worst hit neighbourhoods in Selangor state, Malaysia, on Tuesday. — Reuters

14 dead, 70,000 displaced in Malaysian floods

SHAH ALAM: The Malaysian military used boats on Tuesday to distribute food to desperate people trapped in their homes after massive floods, as the death toll rose to 14 with over 70,000 displaced.

Days of torrential rain triggered some of the worst flooding in years across the country at the weekend, swamping cities and villages and cutting off major roads.

Selangor — the country's wealthiest and most densely populated state, encircling the capital Kuala Lumpur — is one of the worst-hit areas.

Some parts of state capital Shah Alam were still under water on Tuesday, and military personnel in boats distributed food to people stuck in their homes and government shelters.

Kartik Subramany fled his house as floodwaters rose, and took refuge in a school for 48 hours before being evacuated with his family to a shelter.

"My house is totally damaged, my two cars are wrecked," the 29-year-old said. "These are the worst floods of my entire life. The federal government has failed the people miserably — it has failed in its primary function to protect

Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob admitted on Tuesday there were "weaknesses" in the response to the disaster and pledged there would be improvements in future

and safeguard lives."

He is among a growing number attacking what they say is a slow and inadequate official response.

Thousands of emergency service and military personnel have been mobilised, but critics say it is not enough and volunteers have stepped in to provide food and boats for the rescue effort.

An AFP journalist in one hard-hit Shah Alam neighbourhood saw people desperate for food snatching items from a devastated supermarket.

Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob admitted on Tuesday there were "weaknesses" in the response to the disaster and pledged there would be improvements in future.

"The responsibility is not that of the federal government alone, but also the state governments," he added, noting a month's rainfall

had come down in a single day in Selangor.

'HOPELESS' RESPONSE

Opposition MP Fuziah Salleh described the official response as "hopeless" and "incompetent".

"No early warning of the torrential rain was given," she said. "It is so sad lives have been lost."

Opposition politicians have accused the government of ignoring their calls to better prepare for the monsoon season, from November to February, particularly by improving drainage in densely populated urban areas.

On Tuesday, the death toll from the floods rose to 14, including eight in Selangor and six in the eastern state of Pahang, official news agency Bernama reported.

But with reports of people still missing, it is expected to increase.

More than 71,000 people have been forced from their homes due to the floods, including 41,000 in Pahang and 27,000 in Selangor, according to official data.

Evacuees are being housed in government relief centres but officials have warned to expect a rise in coronavirus cases linked to the crowded shelters. — AFP

Taliban allow protest calling for Afghan assets to be released

KABUL: Around 200 Afghans marched in Kabul on Tuesday to demand the release of billions of dollars of assets frozen by the international community — a rare protest allowed by the Taliban as the country battles a major economic crisis. There were no women in Tuesday's march, organised by a little-known group called the Afghan People's Movement which in the past has held peace rallies in the capital.

The Taliban have outlawed protests unless approved, cracking down hard on several demonstrations held by women clamouring for the right to jobs and education. Tuesday's march clearly had the blessing of Afghanistan's

new rulers, with Taliban social media accounts featuring multiple images and video clips saying participants spoke for ordinary citizens.

"Let us eat" read one banner carried by a marcher near a square in central Kabul. "Our main demand is that the United States should release our assets as soon as possible," organiser Shafiq Ahmad Rahimi said. "This is the wealth of the nation, not of any single person, group or government," he said.

Since the Taliban's August 15 return to power, nearly \$10 billion of assets have been frozen by an international community loathe to give access to the funds directly to the hardliners. — AFP



People hold banners before marching on the street during a protest in Kabul on Tuesday, as the country struggles with a deep economic crisis. — AFP

Businesses fret as S Korea reimposes Covid curfews

SEOUL: As clocks struck 9 pm this week, customers packed up and left restaurants and other eateries across South Korea as a reimposed curfew designed to help stem a surge in coronavirus infections sparks fears of economic disaster for some businesses.

Last week, authorities announced a series of social distancing measures lasting until at least January 2.

They include limiting gatherings to no more than four people and forcing restaurants, cafes and pubs to close by 9 pm

(1200 GMT).

The measures came just six weeks after highly-vaccinated South Korea eased many restrictions to try to "live with Covid-19." Since then daily cases and serious infections have hit record highs, adding to strains on the country's medical system.

At one Korean barbecue restaurant in Seoul on Monday, customers hurriedly put on their jackets and face masks as the curfew arrived, with some expressing disappointment that the measures were imposed ahead of the holidays. — Reuters

Philippine troops race to deliver aid to Rai survivors

LOBOC: Troops raced on Tuesday to deliver food and water to typhoon-ravaged islands of the Philippines as charities appealed for aid to help hundreds of thousands left homeless by the deadly storm.

At least 375 people were killed and hundreds injured when Typhoon Rai pummelled the southern and central regions of the archipelago on Thursday, wiping out wooden houses, uprooting trees and knocking out power across entire islands.

"Our food is about to run out, probably in a few days or tomorrow," Simplicia Pedrablanca, a town mayor in the Dinagat Islands, told local radio station DZBB.

More than 400,000 people were sheltering in evacuation centres or with relatives, the national disaster agency said, after their homes were damaged or destroyed by the strongest typhoon to hit the



Residents, who were not able to take a flight out with a Philippine air force blackhawk helicopter which transported relief goods, leave the landing site at a sports complex in Dapa town, Siargao island, on Tuesday. — AFP

country this year.

One of the hardest-hit islands was Bohol — known for its beaches and dive spots — where at least 96 people have died, provincial Governor Arthur Yap said on Facebook.

A state of calamity has been declared on the island where

people sat under umbrellas next to their empty water drums.

Yap said the province had run out of money and pleaded for President Rodrigo Duterte's government to send funds to buy food and drinking water for desperate families.

"If you won't send money to

buy food, send soldiers and police because there will be looting here," Yap warned during an interview with DZBB.

While other parts of the Philippines celebrated Christmas, Bohol was "undergoing a Yolanda-like situation", he added, using the local name for Typhoon Haiyan

in 2013. On nearby Negros island, Carl Arapoc, 23, said there was no electricity in his city and his family was using "driftwood" to cook.

There has also been widespread destruction on Siargao, Dinagat and Mindanao islands, which bore the brunt of the storm, packing winds of 195 kilometres (120 miles) per hour.

"It was really, really bad, the strongest storm I ever witnessed in my life," said Tal Oran, an Israeli living in the Siargao tourist town General Luna.

FLOOD RELIEF

Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana has ordered the military to deploy ships, boats, aircraft and trucks to deliver food, drinking water and medical supplies to survivors, who have been struggling for basic necessities.

The Red Cross is also flying relief to popular holiday destinations Siargao and Bohol islands. — AFP



Pope Francis speaks during an audience to the Italian Air Force in St Peter's Basilica at the Vatican recently. – Reuters

Spend on education, not weapons, says pope

VATICAN CITY: Nations should divert money spent on armaments to invest in education, Pope Francis says in a yearly peace message, decrying growing military costs at the expense of social services.

In his message issued on Tuesday for the Roman Catholic Church's World Day of Peace, which is celebrated on January 1, Francis also called for a better balance between a free market economy and the need to help the needy and protect the environment.

He dedicated about a third of the four-page message to education, saying there had been a "significant reduction" in education and training spending worldwide while military expenditure had increased beyond the levels at the end of the Cold War and "seem certain to grow exorbitantly".

He did not give any sources for the statistics.

"It is high time, then, that governments develop economic policies aimed at in-

verting the proportion of public funds spent on education and on weaponry," he said in the message, which is sent to heads of state and international organisations.

"The pursuit of a genuine process of international disarmament can only prove beneficial for the development of peoples and nations, freeing up financial resources better used for health care, schools, infrastructure, care of the land and so forth," he said.

The proportions of military and education spending differ from country to country, but positions on what to increase and what to cut often follow partisan lines.

A poll by the Pew Research Center in 2019 showed that in the United States, 84% of Democrats favoured more spending on education versus 56 per cent of Republicans and that 56% of Republicans wanted more military spending as opposed to 26 per cent of Democrats.

— Reuters

Europe weighs Omicron curbs as Biden turns to military medics

German scientists urge maximum curbs at once • Restrictions reimposed in Germany, Ireland

LONDON: Countries across Europe considered new curbs on movement on Tuesday as US President Joe Biden called on military medics to support hospitals and fight the Omicron variant that has swept the world days before the second Christmas of the pandemic.

Omicron infections are multiplying across Europe, the United States and Asia, including in Japan, where a single cluster of Covid-19 cases at a military base has grown to at least 180.

Biden struck a dire tone about the risks to the one in four American adults who remain unvaccinated. He will lay out new initiatives on testing on Tuesday, a senior administration official said.

The measures include activating some 1,000 military medical personnel to support hospitals that are already being overwhelmed.

Germany, Scotland, Ireland, the Netherlands and South Korea are among countries to have reimposed partial or full lockdowns or other social distancing measures in recent days.

Nicola Sturgeon, first minister of Scotland - part of the United Kingdom but with devolved responsibilities for health — set out plans for further restrictions on big public events, including sports fixtures, for three weeks after Christmas.

"It will also mean unfortunately that large scale Hogmanay celebrations, including that planned here in our capital city (Edinburgh), will not proceed," she said, referring to traditional Scottish



A man wears a mask riddled with syringes during a protest in front of the headquarters of the Romanian Parliament in Bucharest, on Tuesday, amid the Covid-19 pandemic. – AFP

New Year parties.

New Zealand Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins said his country, which imposed some of the world's toughest Covid-19 measures, was delaying the start of a staggered reopening of its border until the end of February.

"All of the evidence so far points to Omicron being the most transmissible Covid-19 variant yet," he said.

Germany's Robert Koch Institute for infectious diseases on Tuesday recommended that "maximum contact restrictions" be imposed at once.

Federal and state leaders were due to meet later in the day to decide on new measures, which were likely to include contact restrictions even for the vaccinated and those who have recovered from an infection, but a nationwide lockdown seemed to be off the cards.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Monday he was looking at all kinds of measures to keep Omicron under control.

Finance minister Rishi Sunak announced 1 billion pounds (\$1.3 billion) of extra support for businesses hit hardest by Omicron, which is hammering the hospital-

ity sector and other businesses.

Sweden will urge all employees to work from home if possible and impose tighter rules for social distancing.

"We must now take joint responsibility and we need adapt to the new reality," Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson told a news conference.

"I understand that many are tired of this - so am I - but we now have a new virus variant, which means we are in a new situation."

In neighbouring Denmark, Omicron is now the predominant variant, Health Minister Magnus Heunicke said. — Reuters

UN urges Belarus, Poland to address refugees' 'dire conditions'

GENEVA: Belarus and Poland are pushing refugees back and forth across their border and leaving them with little if any food, clean water or shelter, the UN Human Rights office said on Tuesday, urging both countries to address "this appalling situation".

Refugees and migrants interviewed by a UN human rights team on a November 29 to December 3 trip to Poland said they had suffered violence or threats in Belarus and been left hungry and cold, a spokesperson for the UN Human Rights office said.

"Those interviewed described

dire conditions on both sides of the border, with no or limited access to food, clean water and shelter, often amid freezing temperatures," Elizabeth Throssell told reporters.

Most said that, while in Belarus, they had been beaten or threatened by security forces, who some refugees said had also demanded "extortionate sums" for food and water and forced them to cross the border.

Belarusian officials had no immediate comment when contacted by Reuters.

Thousands of migrants are



Migrants react onboard UK Border Force vessel HMC Speedwell after being picked up at sea, as they are brought into the Marina in Dover, southeast England, on Tuesday. – AFP

stuck on the European Union's eastern frontier.

Poland and the EU accuse Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko of encouraging the migrants to travel to Belarus and cross the border illegally as revenge for sanctions imposed on Minsk over human rights abuses.

Belarus denies this and says the EU is to blame for the humanitarian crisis on the border.

Stanislaw Zaryn, a spokesperson for Poland's special services, said his country's actions were legitimate and aimed to protect the country's borders.

"The migration route, controlled and organised by the Belarusian services, is only a tool used by the regime in Minsk," he said.

Throssell said many migrants and refugees interviewed by the UN team had crossed the border several times in both directions due to "recurring practices by the two countries of pushing people up to or across the border".

Some of them hid from security forces for weeks in the forest along the border, with one making 26 attempts to cross from Belarus to Poland. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

PARIS

World's first SMS sold for 107,000 euros

The world's first SMS — a short greeting with only the words "Merry Christmas" — was sold at auction for 107,000 euros (\$121,000) on Tuesday.

The Short Message Service (SMS) item went under the hammer at the Aguttes auction house in Paris as a non-fungible token (NFT), meaning it has a digital certificate of authenticity and is considered the original.

The unidentified buyer of the NFT — secured by blockchain technology- is now verifiably the



owner of the 2-word SMS from 1992.

Vodafone programmer Neil Papworth sent the message in December that year to a colleague who received it while he was at the company Christmas party.

NAIROBI

Ethiopia says army clearing Tigrayan forces

A government spokeswoman said on Tuesday the Ethiopian army was clearing rebellious Tigrayan forces from the northern Amhara and Afar regions, dismissing Tigrayan statements that their forces were retreating voluntarily to create an "opening for peace".

Thousands of civilians have been killed as a result of the 13-month-old conflict while around 400,000 are facing famine conditions in Tigray and 9.4 million people need food aid across northern Ethiopia.



The TPLF, the party that controls the Tigray region in the far north of Ethiopia and is at war with the government, had announced its withdrawal from neighbouring Amhara and Afar on Monday.

BRUSSELS

EU sets 9-month jab validity for travel pass

The European Commission on Tuesday adopted rules that will make the European Union Covid-19 certificate valid for travel nine months after the completion of the primary vaccination schedule, an EU official said.

The new rules will be binding on the 27 EU states from February 1, the official said. The rule can be blocked by a qualified majority of EU governments or a simple majority of European Parliament members, but officials have said there is sufficient support for it.



The rule replaces a non-binding recommendation the EU Commission put forward in November.

Once the rule is effective, EU states will be obliged to let fully vaccinated travellers with a valid pass access their territory.

What kind of leftist is Chile’s new president?

Despite being branded a “communist” by his critics, Chile’s left-wing president-elect Gabriel Boric has always pointed to Europe as the inspiration for the “social welfare” state he wants to create.

Chile is one of the world’s most unequal countries, where the top one per cent hold more than a quarter of the wealth, according to the ECLAC UN agency.

The incomes of the richest are 25 times those of the poorest, according to the OECD group of developed economies among which Chile is listed as the second-most unequal in terms of household disposable income.

The rich-poor gulf was one of the sparks for a violent uprising in 1919 that left dozens dead and rocked the economy and political establishment.

It is a situation Boric, who backed the protests, has vowed to correct.

He described his project as “something that in Europe would be quite obvious, which is to ensure a welfare state so that everyone has equal rights no matter how much money they have in their wallet.”

Many Chileans, however — among the richer classes but also in rural areas — are distrustful of his Approve Dignity leftist alliance with the Communist Party. Investors don’t like his pledge to increase taxes. And many Chileans have deep-seated fear of communist policies they blame for the demise of Venezuela, many of whose nationals it hosts as migrants.

“Boric is more left than the traditional parties” that have been in government, said Rodrigo Espinoza, a political scientist with the University Diego Portales.

But based on his policy agenda, Boric is more “related to European social democracy” than the left in Venezuela or Bolivia, he added.

Boric was the centrist option in the Approve Dignity’s primary, beating out the Communist Party’s Daniel Jadue.

Espinoza said Boric had been the victim of a fake news campaign portraying him as a kind of Hugo Chavez clamoring for a “Chilezuela,” whereas there was nothing in his programme about “breaking the free-market system.”

His rival for the presidency, far-right, neoliberal lawyer Jose Antonio Kast, managed with some success to paint Boric as a “communist.” — AFP

“It is not possible to do business, or for a country to grow, when a society is tremendously fractured, as it is in Chile

GABRIEL BORIC
President-elect



SWEEPING CHANGE
New Mayor of Berlin Franziska Giffey is welcomed by chimney sweeps as she arrives at the Town Hall, in Berlin, on Tuesday. – Reuters

Life is all about change



Samuel Kutty
@samkuttyp

ALTHOUGH THE PANDEMIC HAS UPENDED OUR LIVES FORCING US TO STAY HOME, MAKING US CONFRONT THE FRAGILITY OF LIFE

One more year draws to a close and we all know that we are older by another year. It is not the age that scares us, but the future. No one can ever know for sure when life will return to normal! Because what’s normal keeps on changing, even in normal times!

Researchers are asking us to brace for more of what we’ve already been through, particularly because of the new developments, such as the emergence of the Omicron variant.

With billions of people around the world are yet to be vaccinated and little chance now of eliminating the virus, they warn that most people will be infected.

And those who are unlucky will contract the virus more than once. Occurrence of new variants and the battle to get the globe immunised won’t be over until the coronavirus has touched all of us!

With billions of people around the world yet to be vaccinated and little chance now of eliminating the virus, the most likely scenario, some researchers claim, is that Covid-19 will circulate just

like influenza, with a seasonal burst of infection.

Many of us will require annual vaccination in the same way we need a flu jab!

Although the pandemic has upended our lives upside down disrupting our routines, forcing us to stay home, making us confront the fragility of life and pushing us well beyond the limits of our comfort zone, we learned to be kind and caring for others.

We focused on others and their needs. We bought groceries for those more vulnerable who couldn’t risk exposure. Communities rallied to share food and essential supplies. We felt like we were all in this together with a common Covid-19 enemy. We proved to ourselves how resilient we are, and we treated each other with compassion.

And for the survivors, as I am one of them, we should realise how fortunate we are. I was lucky to have a fabulous team of doctors and other health staff who encouraged me a lot during my treatment. No words can express how

grateful I am to them for the phenomenal care I received.

I have a wall of memories, and the pictures of friends I have lost are all over it. Today I am alive and well after surviving an invisible war.

As the New Year approaches, it’s important to keep affirming and reminding yourself that you will survive another year of this pandemic. If we continue to work together in unity and solidarity, the rays of hope can reach around the world. We have to be more responsible with our actions, and especially keeping safe.

We may have to wait for some more time. The easiest way to decide what you need to do is to look at what has changed and to find ways to make those changes work for you. Life will never be the same, but ultimately life is about change.

True, it’s a world that most of us never imagined. But a spirit of togetherness gives us hope. In this time of unprecedented crisis, we are all neighbours in the world, and success will only be achieved when all people, in all countries, are protected.

Latin America’s new lost decade



JOSÉ ANTONIO OCAMPO

THE REGION’S ECONOMIES WILL BE THE WORST-PERFORMING OF THE DEVELOPING WORLD AS THEY EMERGE FROM THE PANDEMIC

In any other year but this one, economic growth in Latin America would give the region’s governments reason to boast. The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) estimates that GDP growth in 2021 will be around 6 per cent, while the International Monetary Fund forecasts 6.3 per cent growth. Unfortunately, even the more optimistic projection is insufficient to compensate for the -6.8 per cent contraction the region suffered in 2020.

Latin America will be the worst-performing region of the developing world as it emerges from the pandemic. Due to the very weak growth in the five years prior to the Covid-19

pandemic, the region experienced a “lost half-decade.” Now, with the economic collapse of 2020, the limited recovery of 2021, and expected moderate growth for 2022 (2.9 per cent according to ECLAC), it’s clear the region is in the midst of another lost decade of development. If 2023 is similar to 2022, average annual growth for the 2014-23 period could be just 0.7 per cent a year — worse than the 1.4 per cent annual rate during the lost decade of the 1980s.

The region’s economic recovery from the Covid-19 crisis also has been very uneven. When 2020 and 2021 are considered together, Chile and Colombia are the two best-performing larger countries; both are expected to exceed their pre-pandemic levels of economic

activity. Brazil and Peru also may do so, but Brazil’s GDP contracted in the second and third quarters. Argentina and Mexico will have a lower level of economic activity than in 2019, and the economic collapse in Venezuela has continued. Among the smaller economies, only the Dominican Republic, Guatemala and Paraguay will show higher economic activity in 2021 than in 2019.

The social effects on the region have been devastating. ECLAC and the International Labor Organization estimate that 25 million jobs were lost in Latin America in 2020. Just 17 million jobs had been recovered by the second quarter of this year, so employment is still about 3 per cent below its pre-crisis

level. There are no estimates of the poverty rate for 2021, but it reached 33.7 per cent in 2020 according to ECLAC, so the region has lost more than a decade in terms of poverty reduction.

The domestic effects of the pandemic have been much more significant than the international economic shocks in Latin America. In fact, despite the problems with maritime transportation and global value chains, international trade has recovered much faster than after the 2008-09 crisis. Commodity prices also have shown a strong recovery since the middle of last year. Overall, Latin American exports are expected to grow 25 per cent in 2021, thanks to an 8-per cent increase in volumes

and positive trends in export prices. The major exception is tourism, which has experienced a very incomplete recovery.

Capital flows have been a bright spot for those countries that have market access. For the first nine months of 2021, Latin American bond issues in global capital markets reached \$124 billion, up 5.6 per cent from the same period in 2020, when issuance also showed a positive trend. The cost of such financing has been very low by historical standards. And, contrary to the expectation that the pandemic would undermine remittances from migrants, remittances grew in both 2020 and 2021, particularly from migrants in the United States.

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Countdown starts for Al Mouj Muscat Marathon

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, DEC 20

Momentum is fast building up for the Al Mouj Muscat Marathon, with over 6500 runners already having booked their place and ground fast cleared up for the mega marathon event on February 11-12, 2022.

There are five different categories to choose from this year, ranging from full and half marathons of 42.5 km and 21.1 km respectively, to 5 km and 10 km runs and a kids' run of 1 km, 2 km and 3 km.

Each course has been designed with different fitness and experience levels in mind, ensuring there are opportunities for runners of all ages to be a part of the Sultanate of Oman's biggest race. The 2022 edition of the most popular sporting event is supported by brand ambassadors Ali al Habsi, legendary Omani goalkeeper and renowned television host Ibtihal al Zadjali who will be taking part in the race themselves and encouraging runners from across the Sultanate of Oman and the

GCC region to join them.

The Muscat Marathon is in its 10th year since its maiden edition in 2012, which was organised by 'Muscat Road Runners' with 135 competitors.

It has quickly grown in leaps and bounds and the response from the sport aficionados in the country has been tremendous since registrations opened at the end of September 2021, according to the organisers.

"The overwhelming response from the public is a clear indication that people across the country have recognised the important role that leading a healthy and active lifestyle can have on their wellbeing," says Sayyid Aymen al Busaidy, Vice-Chairman of Sabco Group, the organisers of the newest edition of the Al Mouj Muscat Marathon.

"Registering for the Marathon can support body and mind by setting goals, committing to a routine, and rising to the challenge. The return of this iconic event offers an opportunity to join thousands of others from around



the world and reconnect with a passionate community of athletes, friends, and colleagues through sport," adds Al Busaidy.

LAST EDITION

The last edition hosted in 2020 just under 11,000 runners competing in six race categories across a two-day festival of running witnessed as many as 103 different nationalities represented, furthering the marathon's reputation as the most iconic event on the Sultanate of Oman's sporting calendar.

The Muscat Marathon 2020 marathon relay, half marathon and 10 km routes were all certified by world-running organisation AIMS, aligning the event with International Association of Athletic Federation (IAAF) standards. The Charity Fun Run 5 km saw thousands of runners raise money for good causes and the Kids' Run sold out in record time! The 2021 event had to be cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic but returns in 2022 with the aim of reigniting the Sultanate of Oman's passion for an active lifestyle and

creating memorable experiences.

The event became known as the Al Mouj Muscat Marathon with Al Mouj Muscat, the Sultanate of Oman's premier lifestyle destination, Oman Sail and Muscat Road Runners joining forces.

"We are proud to host the Al Mouj Muscat Marathon for the sixth year running. One of our pillars is to encourage a healthy and active lifestyle, which coincides with this exciting event. We greatly look forward to delivering even more great moments for participants, spectators, and visitors," said Nasser bin Masoud al Sheibani, CEO of Al Mouj Muscat.

Running to the mega marathon, free public training sessions are being held over a 10-week period to help runners improve their fitness, learn warm-up and cool down techniques, and receive nutrition advice.

The sessions will take place every Friday until the race. Organisers further said that there are also opportunities for volunteers to help on-site during the two-day event.

OTTA discuss WTT Youth Contender in Muscat next year

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 21

Oman Table Tennis Association (OTTA) board directors discussed Muscat's hosting of the WTT Youth Contender in 2022 during the board meeting which took place on Sunday. The meeting which was held remotely approved the organising committee of the mega TT event besides short-listing some specialists for assistance in technical and logistics aspects.

Some of the World's top ranking players will attend the event in Muscat to compete for the title beside other ranking paddlers from different parts of the world will take part in the event.

OTTA successfully concluded

hosting the WTT Youth event in October this year which featured participation of 100 players representing 16 countries.

During the meeting, which was chaired by Abdullah Bamakhalif, the board members reviewed the national teams plans.

OTTA's Board recommended holding an external camp for the team in Iran to enhance the paddlers' technical performance and provide them the suitable environment for exposure and gaining more experience. The camp will be under supervision of the Iranian coach Omid Shamas Shababki, the head coach of the national TT team. Appointment of an assistant coach was an item in the meeting agenda. The chairman



Abdullah Bamakhalif

and board members agreed on signing with the female coach who will be in charge for the ladies' team and she will assist in coaching the beginner paddlers. The board discussed the resumption of Stag TT league in the forthcoming 2022/2023 educational year.

The board requested the national

teams committee to do further study with Oman School Sport Association (OSSA) on various ways of improving the league.

The Sultanate of Oman's women TT activities were also reviewed during the meeting including organisation of women's Open championship and having open TT days for junior female students. The competition committee presented during the meeting, the latest preparations for the Sultanate Senior TT championship which will take place in January. The event will be held in Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex. The board approved participation of Masoud al Shaqsi as the Sultanate of Oman representative in the GCC Games in Kuwait.



Premier League to plough through festive schedule

MANCHESTER: Premier League clubs have agreed to continue playing games scheduled over the festive period despite several fixtures being postponed due to a surge in Covid-19 cases, the league announced after a meeting between all teams on Monday.

Ten Premier League games have been postponed this month due to outbreaks amid a busy schedule where teams are set to play three times between Boxing Day and January 3.

The Premier League released that a record 90 new Covid-19 cases were detected among players and staff in the past week, a significant increase from its total of 42 in the previous round on December 6-12.

"The safety of everybody is a priority and the Premier League is taking all precautionary steps in light of the recent rise in Covid-19 cases across the country," the league said in a statement.

Only four of the weekend's 10 fixtures were played after teams told the Premier League they were missing players due to Covid-19.

The Premier League only grants a postponement if a club has fewer than 14 players available, with the board examining requests on a case-by-case basis.

"While recognising a number of clubs are experiencing Covid-19 outbreaks and challenges, it

is the league's collective intention to continue the current fixture schedule where safely possible," the Premier League said.

"A range of issues were discussed at this afternoon's meeting, including the adaption of the Premier League Covid-19 postponement process in response to the impact of the Omicron variant.

"The league also confirmed to its clubs today that 92 per cent of players and club staff have received one, two or three Covid-19 vaccination doses, with 84 per cent of players on the vaccination journey."

FA CUP REPLAYS SCRAPPED

England's Football Association (FA) said FA Cup replays in rounds three and four have been scrapped to help clear the fixture backlog after several postponements.

"Ties in the third and fourth rounds of this season's competition will be played to a finish on the day, with extra-time and penalties if required," the FA said.

However, the English Football League (EFL), which also organises the League Cup, said its fixtures will be played as scheduled.

League Cup semifinals are played over two legs in January. The competition's quarterfinal matches — with seven Premier League teams in action — are set to be played this week. — **Reuters**



INTER LOOKING TO SEE OUT MEMORABLE 2021 IN STYLE

MILAN: Inter Milan will look to go out with a bang in the Italian top flight's final round of fixtures before the winter break this week after a year to remember for Simone Inzaghi's Serie A table toppers.

Inter lifted their first Scudetto in 11 years in May, finishing 12 points ahead of rivals AC Milan in second.

After losing key figures in that title success during the close season — coach Antonio Conte, top goalscorer Romelu Lukaku and flying fullback Achraf Hakimi — things did not start well this term, with Inter playing catch up until recent weeks.

They have found top gear again, however, to sit top of the standings by four points.

Inter were crowned winter champions, too, following their sixth successive league win, at Salernitana on Friday, and Milan's loss to Napoli on Sunday.

Friday's 5-0 success took Inter to 100 goals in a calendar year for the first time in their Serie A history, with Torino their final opponent of a successful 2021 on Wednesday.

By their high standards, Juventus's 2021 has been nothing short of woeful.

Looking to make it 10 successive league titles last season, rookie coach Andrea Pirlo could only steer Juve to fourth position — a return that cost him his job.

Massimiliano Allegri returned to save the day in the close

season, taking charge of the Turin club for the second time, but he has fared even worse, with Juve languishing down in seventh ahead of Tuesday's clash with Cagliari.

Allegri is fully aware he has it all to do to turn things around.

"We have to win tomorrow and then see where we can get," Allegri told a news conference on Monday. "On February 28, we'll know if we are in the race for the top four. There's a lot of work to do over the next two months."

Milan are again looking likely to be one of Inter's main title challengers, but Stefano Pioli's side, who went unbeaten in their opening 12 league matches of the season, have stuttered of late, losing three of their last six

league games.

Empoli are Milan's final opponent before the winter break on Wednesday and will be no pushovers, having already beaten Juve and Napoli this season.

Napoli's 1-0 win in the San Siro on Sunday saw them climb above Milan to sit second on goal difference. They too went unbeaten in their opening 12 league games before falling away. Victory over Spezia on Wednesday will keep them in the title hunt.

Fourth-placed Atalanta's six-game Serie A winning streak was ended by AS Roma on Sunday, meaning they cannot afford more dropped points at Genoa on Tuesday if they are to keep Inter in their sights. — **Reuters**

Richardson happy to play a cameo in Australia's Ashes domination

SYDNEY: Jhye Richardson is painfully aware that the depth in Australian fast bowling means his five-wicket haul in the second Ashes test is far from a guarantee that he will take the field in the third.

Richardson came into the side for the Adelaide Oval clash with Michael Neser to replace the injured Josh Hazlewood and skipper Pat Cummins, who was ruled out after being adjudged a close contact of a Covid-19 case.

The personnel changes made no difference to Australia's utter dominance of the series and Richardson took 5-42 in the final innings as the hosts romped to a victory by 275 runs to take a 2-0 lead in the series on Monday.

Cummins and Hazlewood, ranked first and fourth in the world rankings, will return to the squad on Thursday ahead of the Boxing Day test and Richardson was philosophical about retaining his place in the side at Melbourne Cricket Ground.



"The beauty of Australian cricket at the moment is we've got fast bowling stocks for days," the relatively diminutive paceman told reporters.

"I think that's a wonderful problem for the selectors... to have. Whatever happens, happens.

"I had an unfortunate first innings and then bowled a little bit better second innings. I'm happy to go either way. As long as we're winning, then that's all we can ask for."

Playing his first test in nearly three years after a prolonged

recovery from a shoulder problem, Richardson conceded that he had struggled to make the step up in England's first innings as he went for 78 runs without a wicket in 19 overs.

His ability to bowl straight and get the ball to skid along the deteriorating Adelaide surface played an integral role in ending a spirited English rearguard, however, and Richardson felt it might be effective late on in other tests in the series.

"If my job is to hit the stumps, then that's what I'm going to try and do," he said.

"Potentially being a little bit skiddier on wickets that are up-and-down, that may be an advantage.

"Somewhere like (Sydney Cricket Ground) as well could be an advantage on day four and five when it starts to go up-and-down," he added.

"Having those variations in the team is very important."

— **Reuters**



Czech Muchova withdraws from Australian Open

MELBOURNE: Karolina Muchova, a semifinalist at the 2021 Australian Open, has withdrawn from next year's tournament, the Czech world number 32 said in a statement on Tuesday.

The 25-year-old, who made the last four of a major for the first time and broke into the top 20 this year, hasn't played due to injury following a first-round loss at the US Open in September.

"I'm sad to announce that my 2022 season will not start in Australia. I'm doing all I can to get back on the court as soon as I'm able," Muchova wrote on Twitter.

Muchova is the latest player to pull out of the January 17-30 Australian Open, with Jennifer Brady, Karolina Pliskova, Serena Williams and Bianca Andreescu also ruled out of the year's first major. — **Reuters**

Malaika Mihambo, Alexander Zverev and cycling-quartet scoop German athlete awards



BADEN: Long jumper Malaika Mihambo, tennis star Alexander Zverev and the women's track cycling quartet were named Germany's athletes of the year on Sunday after delivering gold medal performances at the delayed Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games.

The 75th edition of the awards, determined by the votes of 980

sports journalists, took place at a ceremony in the resort of Baden-Baden.

Mihambo took the female honour for the third year in succession.

"It is crazy," she said.

Zverev is the first tennis player to take the male award since Michael Stich following his Wimbledon triumph 30 years ago.

Zverev succeeds ice hockey player Leon Draisaitl while the women's cycling quartet of Lisa Brennauer, Franziska Brausse, Lisa Klein and Mieke Kroeger follow in the footsteps of Bundesliga team Bayern Munich.

"The Olympic victory is something I will never forget. There's nothing bigger than the Olympics, I've said that many

times," Zverev told an audience of 250 — a third of previous events before the coronavirus crisis.

"If I stopped playing tennis now, they couldn't take the gold medal away from me."

Zverev gave Germany's their first gold in men's singles tennis in Japan and beat world number one Novak Djokovic in the semi-final.

The 24-year-old also won the

end-of-season ATP Tour Finals, featuring the eight best players in the world, and triumphed at six tournaments in total during the year.

With 1,739 points, Zverev easily beat Florian Wellbrock (1,198), who won Olympic gold in the 10 kilometre open water competition in Tokyo.

Ski-jump team world champion

Karl Geiger was third (729).

Mihambo picked up 1,845 points with Olympic wrestling gold medallist Aline Rotter-Focken second (942) and Tokyo canoe winner Ricarda Funkhird (686).

Her run of three straight wins is bettered by Steffi Graf, who won four in a row in the 1980s.

— dpa



Shiffrin secures 72nd World Cup in Courchevel giant slalom

PARIS: American Mikaela Shiffrin crushed the opposition in Tuesday's giant slalom in Courchevel in France to claim her 72nd alpine skiing World Cup victory.

The 26-year-old was in a league of her won in the opening run in the French resort and kept things under control in the second to clinch her third World Cup win this season and second in a giant slalom.

Shiffrin clocked a combined

best time of two minutes 15.35 seconds to beat Sweden's Sara Hector by 0.86 and Swiss Michelle Gisin by 1.08.

The result took her to the top of the overall World Cup standings on 670 points, 35 ahead of Italian Sofia Goggia, who had taken the lead after a super G-downhill double in Val d'Isere last weekend.

"Today was quite a difficult one after the last weeks, pushing the schedule hard. It's been a lot just to get here," said Shiffrin, who also

raced in the super-G in Val d'Isere.

"I'm not full tank right now. But tough, very good day."

Switzerland's Lara Gut-Behrami, the giant slalom world champion, and Austrian Katharina Liensberger, the slalom world champion as well as New Zealand's Alice Robinson had to sit the race out after testing positive for Covid-19.

Another giant slalom is scheduled in Courchevel on Wednesday. — Reuters

Embiid sparkles in Sixers win while Morant return spoiled

LOS ANGELES: Joel Embiid scored 41 points and sparked an undermanned Philadelphia squad to victory at Boston on Monday while Oklahoma City spoiled the NBA return of Memphis Grizzlies star Ja Morant.

Cameroonian big man Embiid also delivered 10 rebounds, five assists, four blocked shots and his last of two steals in the dying seconds to deny the Celtics a chance at a tying 3-pointer in powering the 76ers over Boston 108-103. The impressive all-around performance together with 26 points by Seth Curry and 25 by Tobias Harris enabled the Sixers (16-15) to snap a three-game losing skid despite being down Shake Milton due to Covid-19 protocols and Tyrese Maxey with a quad injury.

"I thought we had a calm tonight," said 76ers coach Doc Rivers. "The guys were in a great mental place. They really wanted it. You could sense it."

Jaylen Brown led Boston (15-16) with 30 points.

At Memphis, Oklahoma City guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander seized command down the stretch and finished with 23 points, five rebounds, four assists and three



steals to lead the Thunder over the host Grizzlies 102-99.

It was a measure of revenge for Oklahoma City. Memphis had beaten the Thunder by an NBA-record 73 points, 152-79, on the same court earlier this month.

Morant, Memphis' scoring and assist leader, ended a 12-game layoff for a left knee sprain and had 16 points and eight assists but couldn't spark the Grizzlies late.

"I was really trusting my knee," Morant said.

Morant's jumper put Memphis ahead 95-94 but Gilgeous-Alexander passed to Josh Giddey

for an uncontested layup, then scored one of his own and followed with a steal and two free throws to give the Thunder a 100-95 edge and Memphis missed a desperation half-court 3-pointer at the buzzer.

"We executed well on defence," said Giddey, who had 19 points and a career-high 11 rebounds. "We knew our coverages and we stuck with them well."

French center Rudy Gobert scored 23 points and grabbed 21 rebounds to spark the Utah Jazz over the visiting Charlotte Hornets 112-102. — AFP

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Madayn, Chinese group sign MoU to foster cooperation



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 21

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) has inked a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China's Shandong Shanzuo Holding Group Co Ltd to develop and promote strategic cooperation in diverse areas that serve the interests of the two sides.

The MoU was signed remotely by Hilal bin Hamad al Hasani, CEO of Madayn, and Lillian Shi, CEO of Shandong Shanzuo Holding Group Co, and in the presence of Warda al Shaqsi, Deputy Head of the Sultanate of Oman's mission in China.

The MoU focuses on mutual promotion to encourage investments in both countries and establish projects that contribute to achieving economic growth. The MoU also aspires to boost cooperation in import and export activities between the Sultanate of Oman and China, provide support in carrying out related commercial businesses, as well as ensure provision of administrative and logistical support for the businesses.

Al Hasani said the MoU

is in line with Madayn's 2040 Vision priorities, specifically related to strengthening Public-Private Partnership (PPP), attracting foreign investments, and fostering international cooperation.

"The MoU aims at strengthening strategic cooperation between Madayn and Shanzuo Group, exchange information, organise visits for investors from both sides and explore business opportunities in both countries for the investors. Moreover, we will provide the investors with all necessary information and incentives they need to set up projects in the Sultanate of Oman and China," he pointed out.

Lillian Shi, CEO of Shandong Shanzuo Holding Group Co, said: "As Shandong Shanzuo Holding Group, we strive to be a comprehensive multi-national corporation through delivery of high profile international business services. Besides, we look forward to implement this strategic partnership and promote projects in both the Sultanate of Oman and China to facilitate the way to Chinese businesses to set up projects in the Sultanate of Oman and vice versa."

MEM, Shell sign gas concession agreement for Omani Block 10

NEW MILESTONE: The block is expected to reach production of 0.5 billion standard cubic feet of gas per day (bscf/d)

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 21

The Ministry of Energy and Minerals on behalf of the government of the Sultanate of Oman has signed a concession agreement with Shell Integrated Gas Oman BV, a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell plc, and its partners, OQ and Marsa Liquefied Natural Gas LLC (a joint venture between TotalEnergies and OQ), to develop and produce natural gas from Block 10 of the Saih Rawl gas field.

The parties also signed a separate gas sales agreement for gas produced from the block.

The two agreements follow an interim upstream agreement signed in February 2019. Shell's entry into this block signifies a further commitment to the Sultanate of Oman, while enhancing and diversifying Shell's gas supply.

Dr Mohammed bin Hamad al Rumhy, Minister of Energy and Minerals, said: "We share a long and strategic collaboration with Shell and our other partners. This project will further maximise the potential of the Sultanate of Oman's energy industry, in line with the Sultanate's strategy to create growth opportunities across all energy streams and in line with Oman's Vision 2040



“These agreements generate value and strengthen our Integrated Gas business, which we need to deliver the energy the Sultanate of Oman and the world need today

DR MOHAMMED BIN HAMAD AL RUMHY
Minister of Energy and Minerals

priorities.”

“These agreements represent a major step for Shell and for our relationship with the Sultanate

of Oman. They generate value and strengthen our Integrated Gas business, which we need to deliver the energy the Sultanate of Oman and the world need today. And we are looking at how Shell can help the Sultanate of Oman with developing low-carbon energy in the future,” added Wael Sawan, Shell Integrated Gas, Renewables and Energy Solutions Director.

The concession agreement establishes Shell as the operator of Block 10, holding a 53.45-per cent working interest, with OQ and Marsa Liquefied Natural Gas LLC holding 13.36 per cent and 33.19 per cent, respectively.

For the initial phase, Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) is building the infrastructure for the project, including the main pipeline to the Saih Rawl gas processing facility, on behalf of the Block

10 venture partners. The venture will drill and hook up wells to maintain the production beyond the initial phase.

The block is expected to reach production of 0.5 billion standard cubic feet of gas per day (bscf/d). Start-up is expected within the next two years.

In addition, Shell and Energy Development Oman (EDO) signed an agreement to process the natural gas from Block 10 in EDO's Saih Rawl facility.

Shell and the government have agreed that, in parallel to the development of Block 10, Shell will develop options for a separate downstream gas project in which Shell could produce and sell low-carbon products and support the development of hydrogen in the country. Any project would be subject to further agreements and future investment decisions.

TRA moves to secure IoT market from security threats

STRONG SAFEGUARDS: 'Internet of Things (IoT) Security Regulatory Framework', issued by the telecom regulator last week, seeks to elicit feedback from the general public

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Ahead of what is anticipated to be a strong inflow of electronic devices incorporating Internet of Things (IoT) technology, the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) of the Sultanate of Oman is formulating regulations to ensure that connected devices and networks are safe from security and cyber

threats.

Our world is awash with IoT devices — pieces of hardware and machines that can communicate with each other and exchange data over the Internet.

They are found in everything from household appliances and consumer gadgets to industrial machines and infrastructure systems and even transportation equipment.

But, given the ubiquity of IoT devices and with their presence expected to grow exponentially going forward, they can pose a threat to users — individuals, businesses, infrastructure systems, and government institutions — if not suitably secured from potential attacks from hackers and cyber-criminals.



The Sultanate of Oman stands as one of the leading countries in the world in terms of digital transformation which thereby shows is a swift transition to an IoT environment

To this end, the TRA has come out with draft guidelines that, when adopted and enforced, will require vendors, manufacturers and service providers of IoT devices and related software services to comply with robust security standards.

The draft version of the 'Internet of Things (IoT) Security Regulatory Framework', issued by the telecom regulator last week, seeks to elicit feedback from stakeholders and the general public before it is enacted into law.

"The Sultanate of Oman stands as one of the leading countries in the world in terms of digital transformation which thereby shows is a swift transition to an IoT environment.

"However, new technologies come with new threats. To allow Omanis to derive the most benefit from IoT technologies, their security must be ensured," the regulator noted in the preamble.

"Our vision is a safe society, government, and business environment, which support and adopt developments in IoT as an essential element of Industry 4.0, without increasing vulnerability or compromising trust, while minimising the net cost of IoT cybersecurity for the economy. With this comprehensive and compelling vision, we aim to achieve a secure IoT ground in the Sultanate of Oman with an ultimate alignment with relevant Vision 2040 priorities," it further noted.

TURN TO PAGE 15

Al Maha to offer benefits to Talabat riders

MUSCAT: Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company has announced an association with Talabat, the leading online food delivery service. Under the new terms, Talabat riders will be offered a host of benefits.

The signing ceremony took place recently at the Al Maha Head Office. Representing the Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company at the signing was its Division Head of Marketing & Business Development, Ahmed al Shanfari, while Mohamed Zourob, the Managing Director, signed on behalf of Talabat. Also in attendance at the event were other members of the executive and senior management of both companies.

Speaking about the association, Ahmed al Shanfari commented, “Food and grocery delivery services such as Talabat are a lifeline in light of the current



global health and safety concerns. This is in no small part, due to the hard work of the Talabat riders. Through our association with Talabat, we will reward them for their hard work as well as make their lives a little easier.”

Under the new partnership, all

Talabat riders will be issued an e-Rial card and will benefit from instant cashback on the fuel they purchase using the card. They will also receive discounted prices on all Al Maha lubricants as well as car washes at the service stations. Al Maha will also be hosting raffle

draws with attractive prizes for all Talabat riders making use of these benefits.

That is not all, Talabat riders will also benefit from discounts from Oman International Hospital (OIH) on specific services, as well discounts on insurance purchased

from the Bima insurance platform.

“In addition to these benefits, we also plan to implement ‘Rider Lounges’ at our service stations and convenience stores in the near future. Talabat riders will be able to freely use these spaces to get some much-deserved rest in between their deliveries,” added Al Shanfari.

Mohamed Zourob said, “We’re constantly looking for ways to partner with companies to not only help us better serve our customers but also improve the quality of life of the riders.

Considering the number of deliveries, riders must make everyday and the distances they travel, the fuel savings they can get by using Al Maha’s e-Rial card, as well as the discounted prices on other services, will be of great value to them. We are therefore pleased to have entered into this association with Al Maha.”

OAB launches new app for corporate and government customers



MUSCAT: In line with its commitment to ensuring the provision of high-quality services that is simple and convenient, Oman Arab Bank (OAB) recently launched its new app, OAB Digipass, for its corporate and government customers.

The introduction of this new facility arises from the Bank’s continuous endeavours to extend a high-level of banking experience to its customers across various sectors. OAB Digipass can be used to generate an OTP to access the Bank’s online banking facilities and is a digital alternative to the physical token that is generally used.

Al Salt bin Mohammed al Kharousi (pictured), Head of Corporate & Institutional Banking Division at OAB, said, “At OAB, we believe that is important for us to ensure that our customers receive the highest quality services, across all sectors.

The launch of this app reinforces one of our key pillars, namely the enhancement of customer experience, through the provision of simple, efficient and convenient banking facilities.

With OAB Digipass, our Corporate and Government customers will no longer need to use the physical token to generate their OTP to access our service. The app is an easier and efficient digital alternative, allowing them to carry out their banking transactions — no matter where they may be.”

OAB Digipass is a more convenient way to enable Corporate and Government customers to access OAB’s banking services remotely.

Maisarah revamps digital channels, introduces new ATM/ CDM services

MUSCAT: To further facilitate its customers’ cash transactions through a wider network of digital outlets, Maisarah Islamic Banking Services — the Islamic banking window of BankDhofar — recently launched pioneering facilities that give customers instant access to more services through a larger network of ATM/ CDM outlets nationwide.

Elaborating on the revamp of Maisarah’s self-service ports, Marwan bin Mohammed al Zadjali (pictured), Head of Digital Banking at Maisarah, stated: “In a new addition to our expansive digital banking services, we have recently enabled Maisarah customers to deposit cash to their own accounts and to other Maisarah



accounts instantly via an expansive network of more than 70 BankDhofar and Maisarah CDMs in all major Omani cities and towns. This makes Maisarah one of the first Islamic banking services provider in the Sultanate to offer such cost-free instant cash deposit facility using beneficiary phone number instead of the bank account number.

Additionally, Maisarah account holders can now change their One-Time-Activation-Code (OTAC) for newly issued debit cards and the PIN code for existing cards through the wider network of BankDhofar ATMs across the Sultanate of Oman, 137 ATMs in total. These new services are completely free of charge and they are central to our efforts to continuously enhance our customer experience.”

With an impressive record of constant introduction of new features and services through its digital channels, Maisarah has shown a solid commitment to enrich its customers’ experience, focusing on high product quality and outstanding services level.

Visit Oman obtains full IATA accreditation

MUSCAT: National Travel Operator (Visit Oman) has met the professional standards of the International Air Transport Association (IATA), and been accredited as a full IATA-certified agency to promote and sell international air passenger transportation.



The IATA accreditation greatly simplifies business relationships between travel agents and airlines, and for Visit Oman, it represents another significant step in enhancing its vision to be the Sultanate of Oman’s extensive travel booking gateway that connects the global travel-trade to unlimited discovery in the Sultanate of Oman.

Currently, VisitOman.om is launching as a dynamic, all-encompassing resource which seamlessly connects the entire accredited Omani tourism supply chain to the travel-trade sector in key international source markets.

Some 55,000 IATA travel agents worldwide benefit from IATA accreditation and are able to participate in the IATA Billing and Settlement Plan, which processed more than \$237 billion in ticket sales in 2019. Through the IATA accreditation, Visit Oman can avail a number of value-adding benefits for its own operations: The accreditation now means Visit Oman has the authorisation to sell to all connected flights coming into the country, while participating in IATA settlement systems in the Sultanate of Oman.

Mazoon Electricity launches campaign on unsafe connections



MUSCAT: To raise awareness on the need to practice electrical safety to prevent mishaps, Mazoon Electricity has launched a campaign to educate citizens and residents about the dangers of unsafe connections.

The campaign also aims to educate individuals on appropriate electrical safety practices while dealing with electricity equipment such as streetlights and electricity poles. As part of the safety campaign Mazoon Electricity is conducting awareness campaigns through social media, videos

and workshops.

Mazoon Electricity accords high importance to electrical safety putting strict standards and practices in place. The company sees it as their responsibility to educate people about the risks that come from neglecting electricity assets like streetlights and electricity poles.

Mazoon Electricity also urges everyone to report damaged infrastructure or unsafe connection if they see one. Asking everyone to not underestimate the risk of unsafe and illegal electricity connection, Mazoon

Electricity has stressed the need to work together to ensure safety.

The company provides help to install temporary electricity connections through its call centre 80077771. The company keeps electrical safety as top priority to assist in continuing its goal of guaranteeing zero harm to members of the community, employees and contractors.

Mazoon Electricity is committed to work towards building the awareness on electrical safety and the need for implementation of safety policies in homes and in public.

Toyota plans line-up of 30 battery EV models by 2030

MUSCAT: Toyota is making rapid advancements in the area of battery electric vehicles. For which a lot of efforts are being taken to give these vehicles the legendary Toyota characteristics of quality, dependability and reliability which will be trusted by its massive customer base.

Reinforcing its commitment to accelerating its drive to achieve carbon neutrality and create sustainable mobility for all, Toyota recently announced its strategy for

Battery Electric Vehicles (BEVs) at an event held at Toyota’s MEGA WEB showroom in Tokyo, Japan.

As part of the carbon neutrality strategy, Toyota targets the development of a full line-up of 30 BEV models by 2030, in addition to its wide-ranging electrified vehicle line-up that includes Hybrid Electric Vehicles (HEVs), Plug-in Hybrid Electric Vehicles (PHEVs) and Fuel Cell Electric Vehicles (FCEVs).

The full line-up will include



models in both passenger and commercial segments globally.

After unveiling 16 new BEV models that are part of the new line-up, President of Toyota Motor Corporation Akio Toyoda announced that the company targets to achieve annual global sales of 3.5 million Battery Electric Vehicles by 2030. Toyoda also revealed that Lexus will develop a full line-up of BEVs in all categories and achieve 1 million sales by 2030. Lexus also aims to

sell 100 per cent Battery EVs in Europe, North America and China by 2030 and globally by 2035.

Toyota has announced that it will increase new battery-related investment from 1.5 trillion yen announced in September 2021 to 2 trillion yen, aiming to realise even more advanced, good-quality, affordable batteries.

For any further details & to ascertain availability of stocks, please visit your nearest Toyota Showroom.



Deal inked for first solar-powered biodiesel refinery



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 21

Local oilfield services contractor Al Shawamikh Oil Services has signed an agreement with Omani biodiesel producer Wakud for installation of a solar energy system to power latter's first biodiesel refinery established in Khazaen Economic City in the Wilayat of Barka.

Implementation of this project will give Wakud the distinction of being the first facility of its type regionally and globally powered by solar energy.

An agreement to this effect was signed by Dr Aflah al Hadhrami, CEO of Al Shawamikh Oil Services, and Maher al Habsi, CEO of Wakud, on Monday.

The Sultanate of Oman's first biodiesel refinery, Wakud is set to scale up production and sale of local biodiesel. Wakud's plant utilises locally collected cooking oil turning waste into biodiesel.

"Our company will install the solar energy system for Wakud to produce environmentally friendly biofuel in Khazaen Economic City. The agreement is in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040," Al Hadhrami said on the occasion of the agreement signing.

"The Sultanate of Oman seeks to boost the contribution

The Sultanate of Oman seeks to boost the contribution of renewable energy by 20 per cent by 2030

DR AFLAH AL HADHRAMI

CEO, Al Shawamikh Oil Services

of renewable energy by 20 per cent by 2030."

In line with the Paris Climate Agreement, the Sultanate of Oman has started conducting studies and implementing plans to achieve optimal energy use and focus on the development of renewable energy projects to support economic diversification plans and promote sustainable energy.

"Our agreement aims to support renewable energy projects in accordance with Oman Vision 2040.

We chose Al Shawamikh Oil Services to implement this solar energy project for the plant because of its pioneering experience in this field and its management's constant endeavour to support new projects in the Sultanate of Oman," Al Habsi added.

Shaheen-linked insurance claims total RO 62 million to date: CMA

KEY FIGURES: Of 9,800 claims received, property insurance claims total RO 45.8 million in value

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 21

Claims for compensation arising out of damage inflicted by Tropical Cyclone Shaheen in October this year amount to RO 62.373 million to date, the Capital Market Authority (CMA) revealed here on Tuesday.

More than 9,800 claims have been received from the affected wilayats in the governorates of Muscat and North and South Al Batinah.

The great majority of claims received by insurers from holders of policies covering damaged vehicles, property, transportation services and other various insurance coverages, have been cleared, the Authority said.

Claims worth RO 51.7 million



are still under settlement, as reparation for these damages requires some time because

they are houses, buildings and facilities, it said, adding that insurance companies have so far

paid out RO 10.6 million to settle claims.

The total size of insurance claims linked to Shaheen is estimated at RO 69 million.

As for the amount of compensation for each insurance product, the data indicates that claims against property amounts to RO 45.3 million.

This covers homes, buildings, facilities and other properties. Motor claims come next with a compensation size of RO 8.9 million.

Engineering insurance claims total RO 7.5 million to date. This covers insurance towards securing industrial sites, equipment and machines.

Muscat Governorate accounted for the largest number of claims (4,391), followed by the governorates of North and South Al Batinah, particularly in the wilayats of Al Suwaiq (2,632) and Al Khabourah (1,023), while the rest were distributed among the wilayats of Suhar, Saham, Rustaq, Musannah and Barka.

Sohar International wins ESQR Quality Achievements Award 2021

MUSCAT: Sohar International recently won the Quality Achievements Award 2021 which is run by the European Society for Quality Research (ESQR). This award recognises the bank's outstanding commitment, support and efforts to endorse and improve achievements in quality management.

The Quality Achievements Awards 2021 presentation ceremony took place on Saturday, December 11, 2021 at Dusit Thani, Dubai.

Mazin bin Mahmood al Raisi, Executive Vice-President and Head of Marketing at Sohar International, received the award on behalf of the bank.



Ahmed al Musalmi, Chief Executive Officer of Sohar International, said, "This award attests to Sohar International's unflinching dedication towards upholding the highest levels of business excellence, operational efficiency and customer satisfaction.

"While product innovation, customised services and a keen focus on digitalisation have been

a vital part of our continued success, our excellent team of professionals has always ensured that every initiative, strategy and campaign has been executed keeping in mind all quality parameters.

"At Sohar International, we believe that to achieve exceptional levels of quality, it is imperative to invest in people. Our ongoing training programmes, workshops and seminars ensure that all our employees are continuously updated with evolving market trends, reserve the knowledge to cater to the changing needs of customers and have the proficiency to effectively tackle complex situations."

TRA moves to secure IoT market from security threats

FROM PAGE 13

In rolling out sturdy IoT security regulations, the Authority has pledged to work closely with, among others, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, the Cyber Defence Centre, and other relevant authorities involved in IoT security matters.

A key goal of the legislation is to ensure security across the IoT value chain, encompassing both hardware and software, according to the TRA. Vulnerabilities anywhere in the value chain can be exploited by cyber-criminals to mount large, coordinated attacks, such as Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS), using mass end-devices to bombard a server, software or network with Internet traffic, and causing disruption, it warns.

The proposed regulations also seek to place a certain onus on service providers and licensees to ensure that IoT security is primarily their responsibility across their networks.

Consequently, they have an obligation to ensure they select vendors and integrators who offer secure devices and services.

"Service providers should be aware that they may be legally culpable and/or suffer reputational damage in the case of grave security breaches resulting from their deployed IoT services or the back-end to these services, where the deployed technologies are not of a reasonable standard," the Authority added.

Cyber scam targeting GCC countries uncovered

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 21

Leading global cybersecurity firm Group-IB says it has uncovered a worldwide scam campaign targeting users in over 90 countries all around the world, including the Sultanate of Oman, UAE and Qatar.

The fraudsters employ the tried and tested technique with fake surveys and giveaways purporting to be from popular brands to steal users' personal and payment data, with the total number of big-name companies impersonated in the scheme exceeding 120.

The new wave of the scam is particularly persistent thanks to an innovation in the scammers' toolset — targeted links, which makes investigating and tackling such attacks increasingly challenging, it said in a press statement.

The potential victim pool of a single scam network is estimated



at about 10 million people, while the potential damage totalled about \$80 million per month, according to Group-IB's Digital Risk Protection unit. According to Group-IB, fraudsters trap their victims by distributing invitations to partake in survey, after which the user would allegedly get a prize. Each such offer contains a link leading to the survey website.

For "lead generation," the

threat actors use all possible legitimate digital marketing means: contextual advertising, advertising on legal and completely rogue sites, SMS, mailouts, and pop-up notifications. To build trust with their victims, scammers register look-alike domain names to the official ones.

Less frequently, they were also seen adding links to the calendar and posts on social networks. After clicking the targeted link,

a user gets in the so-called traffic cloaking, which enables cybercriminals to display different content to different users, based on certain user parameters.

But this destination "branded survey" page takes very long to download. This is because the victims find themselves in a long chain of redirects, during which scammers gather information about their session, including country, time zone, language, IP, browser, and etc.

The content on the final page will be determined based on what was learned about the user and tailored as much as possible to their possible interests.

The final scam link is customised to a specific user and can be opened only once. This complicates the detection of such links, which inevitably leads to the scam's longer life cycle, and hampers the takedown and investigations.

At the final stage, the user

is asked to answer questions to receive a prize from a well-known brand and to fill out a form asking for their personal data, which is allegedly needed to receive the prize.

The data required usually includes the full name, e-mail, postal address, phone number, bank card data, including expiration date and CVV. According to Group-IB DRP analysts, this type of fraud has been spotted in 91 countries, with cybercriminals exploiting at least 121 brands as bait.

In the Middle East alone, cybercriminals exploited 9 brands from the Sultanate of Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE. Globally, cybercriminals mostly try to exploit the brands of leading telecommunications companies, which enjoy special "love" in this scheme, and make up more than 50 per cent of the total number of brands exploited, followed by ecommerce and retail.

Xi's 2022 GDP target will be moment of truth

China is preparing to set its most important GDP target since the global financial crisis. The country faces an unprecedented swathe of economic challenges, implying a significant downward revision to growth goals from the “above 6 per cent” for 2021 to something that signals sustained pressure on bad debt. What President Xi Jinping chooses will measure his power to drag China onto a less wasteful development path.

Beyond the threat from new variants, authorities in Beijing have initiated a broad campaign to curb financial risk in the property sector, which contributes between a quarter and a third of the country's economic activity.

They have their work cut out ensuring a sector shaken by China Evergrande and others doesn't collapse, including seeing that \$2.5 trillion of pre-sold properties are completed to fend off a crash in consumer confidence.

Retail sales, domestic tourism and the services sector have lagged under lockdown, but their malaise was offset somewhat by export demand for medical supplies and e-commerce.

As trading partners normalise, however, that is unlikely to be sustained. As for productivity gains, they have been dragging on China's economic growth, not contributing.

Prioritising state enterprises exacerbates the latter trend.

After just 4.9 per cent expansion in the third quarter, a 2022 slowdown is widely expected. It could get ugly.

Xi is trying to keep investors convinced that “flood-like stimulus” is not imminent, which means refraining from big interest-rate cuts while digesting loan and bond defaults. That implies growth closer to 4 per cent, well short of the 5.5 per cent or so that government advisers are pushing.

A more conservative target would indicate Xi is serious about reshaping the \$15 trillion economy. The danger is that bureaucrats freeze up, as they did during a 2015 anti-corruption campaign. It also would strain local government finances.

The alternative, though, is re-warming investment in housing and infrastructure, which would keep output imbalanced, further stretch China's debt-to-GDP ratio and encourage investors to discount tough deleveraging talk.

If Xi can force the system to stay on its credit diet, however painful, it will be the strongest sign yet of his clout. — Reuters

A more conservative target would indicate Xi is serious about reshaping the \$15 trillion economy



SOLAR FARMER

A farmer walks in a field near solar panels on a hillside at Huangjiao village in Baoding in China's northern Hebei province. China is the world's biggest producer of wind turbines and solar panels, and the Winter Olympics is seen as an opportunity to showcase the country's green technologies as they seek global markets. — AFP

Bankers not ready for digital coin



ANDY JALIL
andyjalil@aol.com

PROPOSALS FOR A DIGITAL VERSION OF STERLING AND OTHER FIAT CURRENCIES HAVE BEEN GAINING MOMENTUM

Policymakers around the world are all looking closely at developing central bank digital currencies, as the use of hard cash lessens, but they have yet to decide whether to give a retail CBDC (Central Bank Digital Currency) the go ahead.

Even if the decision were to give the green light for it, the roll-out of a CBDC for an advanced economy would not be expected until the second half of this decade, according to Tom Mutton, the fintech director of the Bank of England (BoE).

He said at a Reuters event earlier this month, “We're not really used to developing consumer products. It will take time to get merchants, retailers and users comfortable with it. It would mean a lot of prototyping and piloting.”

Bosses at lenders such as Citigroup and Starling Bank have previously told British lawmakers that introducing a ‘Bitcoin’ — a new form of digital money that could be issued by the BoE and used to make direct electronic payments — could seriously harm retail banking business models.

The long development time of a CBDC is partly because most central banks have no consumer-facing products other than banknotes. Mutton said the BoE has limited

experience in retail payments. The reasons for banks wanting to develop the digital asset also differ among countries.

Former head of the London Stock Exchange, Xavier Rolet, has said that there is an urgent need for a well-regulated global digital currency, backed by serious and legally safe financial infrastructure.”

Adviser to the governor at the Bank of Canada, at the same Reuters event, Paul Chilcott said: “The use-case will vary quite a lot by jurisdiction and by the circumstances of jurisdiction. It is not one-size-fits-all.”

One of the reasons why Sweden's central bank was looking at CBDCs was the diminishing use of cash for payment, said Gabriela Guibourg, head of policy and analysis at Sveriges Riksbank. She noted that cash-usage in Sweden has dropped dramatically in the past 10 years, 40 per cent of retail payments in 2010 to only 9 per cent now.

She added: “The main motivation to begin to consider the e-krona was whether we would continue to provide the Swedish population with access to central bank money.”

The situation in the UK is similar, with data from the BoE pointing to greater volume and value of non-cash payments.

Proposals for a digital version of sterling and other fiat currencies have been gaining

momentum, with some projects more advanced than others and central banks hurrying to head off competition from private cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin.

This is among the main issues the BoE is considering. Mutton said the BoE is grappling with how CBDCs would compare with and coexist in a world with other digital currencies. “The question is: do you want the option of a digital form of payment using central bank money?” he asked.

The BoE and the UK Treasury announced last month that a consultation on the merits of and use-cases for CBDCs in the UK will start in 2022. This will help the BoE and the Treasury decide if they are ready to move onto a “development phase”, which they said would take several years.

A public-private partnership is key, said Guibourg. An ecosystem where third parties such as banks, fintechs and other intermediaries would help innovate and provide consumer use-cases for CBDC platforms, she added.

Most central banks are looking to a model where consumers do not directly interface with the bank but with a third party who helps to manage the consumers' relationship and provides value-add services. *(The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK)*

East Asia's Squid Game economies



KEUN LEE

The author, Vice-Chair of the National Economic Advisory Council for the President of South Korea, is Distinguished Professor of Economics at Seoul National University.

Squid Game, a dystopian South Korean drama on Netflix, is one of the world's most-watched television series. Like Parasite, which won Best Picture at the 2020 Oscars, Squid Game highlights the increasing gap between South Korea's rich and poor. A similar disparity now exists in many, if not most, developed economies.

It may seem puzzling that South Korea is troubled by such inequity, because the country's previous high growth and low inequality were central to the “East Asian miracle”.

South Korean capitalism seems more noxious — perhaps because it has been converging with the liberal Anglo-Saxon model, which is associated with weak investment, slow growth, and high inequality.

In fact, recent data suggest that

both South Korea and Japan are converging with the Anglo-Saxon camp.

For example, the share of national income accruing to the top 10 per cent has increased globally, but particularly in the United States and East Asia. In the 2010s, the United States had the highest such ratio, at over 45 per cent, followed closely by South Korea (45 per cent) and Japan (40 per cent).

Moreover, South Korea's GDP growth has gradually declined during the last two decades, replicating the Japanese experience.

Following expansion of 6-7 per cent per annum in the 1980s and 1990s, the economy's potential growth rate dropped to about 5 per cent in the early 2000s, and then to 3.7 per cent in the late 2000s, 3.4 per cent in the early 2010s, and 2.8

per cent in the late 2010s.

My colleague, Se-Jik Kim, has even posited a “law” whereby South Korea's potential GDP growth rate decreases by one percentage point every five years.

What is driving East Asian economies' convergence towards the US model? One answer may be financialization, long a key feature of American capitalism, whereby the financial sector accounts for a rising share of GDP and dividend payments exceed reinvested corporate profits.

Since South Korea implemented financialization as a condition of its International Monetary Fund bailout during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the country's economic model has gravitated toward US-style shareholder capitalism.

One of South Korea's first reforms was a radical opening

up of financial markets that lifted the prohibition of share buybacks and encouraged more dividend payments — contrary to the established practice in East Asia of retaining profits for reinvestment.

As a result, the share of investment in South Korean GDP has since declined by five percentage points, reducing domestic growth and job creation. Meanwhile, foreign investors' share of South Korean stock holdings jumped from less than 5 per cent in the mid-1990s to about 40 per cent in the early 2000s.

While many long regarded low dividend payments as one reason for “Korea discounts” in company valuations, leading firms such as Samsung are now adopting US practices by paying out about 40 per cent of their net profits to shareholders.

But East Asian capitalism now

needs rebalancing.

Here, policymakers can learn from Europe, which has initiated several reforms to curb the negative influence of shareholder capitalism.

In 2015, for example, the European Parliament enacted corporate-governance reforms permitting firms within the European Union to grant more voting rights or pay higher dividends to shareholders who hold their stock longer than two years.

While East Asia's convergence towards Anglo-Saxon capitalism may appear shocking, the data does not lie. But by adopting the right measures, policymakers can help to ensure that the region's economic future is brighter than its recent on-screen portrayals suggest.

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This winter, try these 5 fun activities to do in the desert

Have you seen those long caravan of Jeeps headed for the desert and wondered what they are going to do? Chances are, they might cross the desert or embark on some dunes bashing. As winter rages on, we compiled the top five fun activities you can do when visiting the desert... **P20**

ENTERTAINMENT

READ



THESE VIOLENT DELIGHTS

BY CHLOE GONG

A reimagining of Romeo and Juliet set in 1920s Shanghai.

Brit Award nominations feature most women in a decade

NOMINATIONS FOR THE Brit Awards 2022 feature the most women in more than a decade.

The nominations were announced during an hour-long special titled The Brits Are Coming on ITV and ITV Hub on Saturday evening.

Presenters Clara Amfo and Maya Jama announced the shortlists for 13 categories.

Eighteen female artists or all-women groups have been nominated, just behind the 22 female acts given nods in 2010.

In 2000 and 2001, 18 female acts were also nominated.

During Saturday's show, Anne-Marie, Joel Corry and Gracey, Glass Animals and Mimi Webb performed on stage.

The most nominated stars are Adele, Ed Sheeran, Little Simz and Dave- who are each up for four awards.

They will compete against Sam Fender for the inaugural artist of the year award.

Fender, Central Cee and David Guetta are each up for three awards.

Doja Cat, Olivia Rodrigo, Billie Eilish and Lil Nas X are each up for two and will battle it out against Taylor Swift for the international artist of the year award.

Sir Elton John received his first Brit nomination in 20



years, in the song of the year category for his collaboration with Dua Lipa — who is also nominated for the best pop/R&B act gong.

Other nominees include Joy Crookes, Coldplay, Little

Mix and KSI.

The winners will be revealed at the Brit Awards ceremony on Tuesday February 8 at The O2 arena, which will be broadcast on ITV.--**dpa**



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AROUND THE WORLD

ENTERTAINMENT

'Titane' director Ducournau flies flag for genre films, female voices



DIRECTOR AND WRITER Julia Ducournau says France's decision to pick her movie "Titane" as its official contender in the Oscar race for best international feature film shows changing attitudes towards genre movies in her home country.

The film, which won the Palme d'Or at this year's Cannes Film Festival, was chosen over box office hits and other critically acclaimed movies to represent France.

"Honestly, I was not expecting it. We're not a country that values genre films very much," Ducournau, 38, said in an interview.

"For many years it's been looked down on as not being serious enough or valuable enough and it feels like now there is a rising awareness that genre films very much talk about humanity and individuality as well in a deep manner."

"Titane", Ducournau's second feature film, is a body horror that has shocked and wowed audiences with its violence, a sex act scene between the main character and a vintage Cadillac car, and themes of gender-bending, grief and love.

"When you make films like my films, you always have this fear that you're going to be misunderstood or mistranscribed... I was very happily surprised with how open-minded and ready to live the experience all the audiences that I met were," Ducournau said.

The title refers to a titanium plate placed in heroine Alexia's head following a car accident in childhood. The plate attracts her to metallic elements and following the act with the car, Alexia becomes pregnant.

Following a series of violent outbursts, the adult Alexia, played by newcomer Agathe Rousselle, meets a firefighter (Vincent Lindon), who has never recovered from the disappearance of his young son.

Convinced that Alexia is his adult child, he takes her in.

On the sex scene with the car, Ducournau said she was pleased it had become a talking point and elicited a reaction from audiences.

"As far as the sex act was concerned, I knew that I was not going to show it extensively, obviously, and that it was just going to be like flashes to show that her desire overcomes the ridiculous cliché that goes with this kind of car," she said.

"It's like the feminine desire would overcome the car, (which is) an extension of a form of toxic masculinity... So I'm very happy with this scene. I really like it."

Ducournau's Palme d'Or win is one of several major triumphs by women film-makers at festivals and awards ceremonies this year.

"This year has proven that we cannot keep ignoring female voices in the arts," Ducournau said.

The international feature film category shortlist for the 2022 Academy Awards will be announced next Tuesday, with the final nominees revealed on February 8 ahead of the Oscars ceremony in late March. — **Reuters**

CULTURE

Czech Christmas glass, from love affair to UNESCO status



SPARKLING WITH colourful glitter, the small glassware shop in the Czech mountains lights up a grim, foggy day, as Christmas shoppers stream in to the constant chime of the doorbell.

They come to buy blown-glass beaded decorations including stars, angels, snowmen, Santa Clauses or cribs made by a small company in Ponikla, a village in the northern Czech Republic.

The "handmade production of Christmas tree decorations from blown glass beads" earned a place on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage last year.

The practice has survived until today only in Ponikla, whose local tradition has roots in a 19th-century love affair.

"A certain Mr Hajna fell in love with a local maid, they got married and he brought the very basics of the craft to Ponikla," says Marek Kulhavy, owner of the local Rautis factory, the only one left.

Hajna came from a nearby region where glass making had already flourished, and the craft spread fast as his neighbours were quick to learn it to make their living in the poor mountainous region.

Stanislav Horna opened the current Rautis factory in 1902 to produce fancy trimmings for clothes and costumes and met with great success, employing as many as 200 glass blowers at one point.

The company managed to stay afloat even after an act of espionage forced it to redirect its focus to Christmas

ornaments.

"In the 1920s, a group of Japanese industrial spies disguised as tourists copied the process and started to produce the trimmings, taking the eastern markets away," Kulhavy said.

"The warehouses were full of beads and somebody decided to start making Christmas decorations as Christmas trees were a hit at the time."

- 'BLESSING IN DISGUISE' -

In 1948, all of the glass factories were nationalised as the Communists took power in the former Czechoslovakia, and Horna's son was even thrown into prison like many entrepreneurs.

But the business benefited from the move as the Communists limited blown-glass bead manufacturing to Ponikla.

"It was a blessing in disguise," says Kulhavy.

"Glass beads were always on the fringe (of glass production) and they lived their own life even during Communism as nobody was really interested in them and so the business survived."

Shortly after the Communist regime was toppled in 1989, Kulhavy's father bought the Ponikla factory which currently employs 50 people.

Production begins with a glass pipe which is heated and shaped by blowing inside a mould. The plant has more than 1,000 patterns, according to Kulhavy.

The shaped pipe is silvered from inside with a solution and then dyed from outside,

before being cut up, threaded with strings and turned into an ornament.

"Some beads are also treated by a painter. For instance angel heads need painted details," said Kulhavy.

- JURASSIC PARK -

The Czech market is crucial, but the Ponikla decorations also head to neighbouring Austria and Germany and other European countries, as well as Japan and the United States.

Facebook fan Iren Helleroova was excited to receive the parcel she ordered, calling the Christmas beads "beautiful".

She said the ornaments make for unique gifts as "no one else in the world has this".

Some beads still end up on regional costumes in the Czech Republic, Germany, the Baltics, the Balkan countries or Latin America.

Standing in front of a rack with glass motorbikes, cars and spiders in cobwebs, Kulhavy said the company had about 300 products to offer.

"We once made Jurassic Park and Wild West collections to attract US buyers in the 1990s, they were pretty ugly," he chuckled.

UNESCO listed the production as a "specialised and technically demanding" craft, hailing the factory for safeguarding the tradition as the sole survivor.

"Glass beads were always a Cinderella. They entered the spotlight thanks to the listing," Kulhavy said.

"When you cast light on a star, it simply shines." — **AFP**

A PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE



Dr Yousuf Ali al Mulla

Procrastinate on this, not on that!

ARE YOU HOLDING OFF reading this article? Perhaps you are about to finish writing your last chapter or make a phone call, or you are about to finish your shopping but it seemed you are just running out of time all the time.

Sociologists define procrastination as a prolonged task and an inability to adapt, which undoubtedly is something that disturbs almost all of us.

One study indicated that more than 70 per cent of university students postpone the performance of their homework. Hence procrastination gets a bad reputation at the end of the day. Postponing necessary routine responsibilities will make your work pile up and always harm your comfort. But when working strategically with certain creative tasks, a little procrastination can actually be beneficial. So pay the electric bill and do the washing dishes now, you might want to put off that writing job for a day or two.

On other hand, procrastination is usually seen as a problem of time management, but if you take it from another angle, you will notice — if you agree with me — that it is more about managing emotions.

Many people deal with negative feelings surrounding a task or responsibility by simply avoiding the task, at least temporarily.

Also, you might have experienced this if you put off a difficult conversation and justified it by saying: I can't handle this now! Overall whether it is a failure to manage time or emotions, from this point of view procrastination is still portrayed as something negative.

In fact, you can suffer from not procrastinating at least a little in many situations and doing things too quickly may reflect its own form of emotional management of maladaptation.

Don't you see that sometimes, people rush to perform tasks because they are impatient? In other words, they want to get rid of something, even at the risk of making mis-

takes and ultimately putting more effort into correcting them.

Nevertheless, the greatest cost of advanced procrastination and vice versa, the greatest benefit of moderate procrastination — is likely to come in creativity. Where scientists have found that putting off tasks that require innovation and research in order to think about them can lead to better performance, not to mention that we must bear in mind that the greatest danger of procrastination is that the task will become permanently incomplete.

So, we must realise that while strategic episodic procrastination can be beneficial, chronic procrastination will be a problem. To find out if you actually have it, ask yourself if the way you delay tasks makes you feel out of control or unhappy? Hence, remember that postponing creative tasks is beneficial because it allows you to interrogate the ideas in your mind. It certainly will not work if you spend a long period of fatal procrastination. For instance, the reckless use of social media and the Internet not only wastes procrastination time, but also fuels the habit.

Also, let me mention one more thing to consider: you may be procrastinating on a certain task over and over again. In such a case, procrastination may not actually be your problem — you may hate this task simply because it makes you unhappy!

In the end, your best option may be to avoid procrastination by avoiding the task altogether. You may be able to pay someone to wash your car for you. You will lose some money, but the time you save will make you happier if you use it wisely. So your procrastination, however unable to adapt, may actually give you hints about how you can be happier... it's up to you!

Dr Yousuf Ali Al Mulla is a physician, medical innovator and a writer.



This winter, try these 5 fun activities to do in the desert

By Yeru Ebuon

The desert can be an intimidating place. Not only is it dry and dreary but in the winter, it can be unforgivingly cold. It can also be filled with hidden dangers including venomous animals that can strike at any given moment when your presence becomes a threat to them.

But if you know how to transform the desert to become your friend, it can be a fun place to

be at. Now that winter is officially here, exciting opportunities for desert adventures also started to pop up.

Have you seen those long caravan of Jeeps headed for the desert and wondered what they are going to do? Chances are, they might cross the desert or embark on some dunes bashing.

But other than camping in some places where the sand meets the sea like Al Khaluf and Ras al Ruwais, here are other fun adventures you can do while exploring the Sultanate of Oman's fast-shifting sands.

Dunes Bashing



Popular as an outdoor activity all over the world, dunes bashing is comparatively as exciting as any roller coaster ride. But rather than rely on the precision of metals and gears, this activity also strongly requires good driving skills.

For a lot of people in the Sultanate of Oman, dunes bashing has become a beloved activity with many of the accessible dunes nearly seeing dozens of bashers daily. Nearest to Muscat is the Barka dunes. A trip to the desert won't be complete without this wild ride.

"Dunes can be intimidating so if you successfully make it to the top and back down, it kind of speaks to your ability as a good driver. This is why dunes bashing is popular as a desert activity. It's done pretty much all year round and every time there is a good dune, adrenaline-junkies will not be able to resist scaling those heights," Jensen said.

With plenty of deserts all over the country, this activity is done from Barka, to Rimal Al Sharqiya even in the wide expanse of the Empty Quarter.

"We won't recommend this activity to newbie drivers. You must be confident with your driving skills before you even embark on trying it out. For our guests, we usually have experienced Omani drivers who show them how it's done. When done safely and in the right way, it can be an amazing experience," Jensen said.

Sand-Boarding



This is probably one of the most low-key yet equally exhilarating adventures you can do in the desert. All you need is a good sand dune, a long-board that can be attached to your feet with leather straps and a lot of courage to scale a 10-storey high dune.

"Sand-boarding, as of late, has become very popular amongst guests coming to the Sultanate of Oman visiting the desert. While the majority of the players are young males, it is an activity that can be done by everyone even children or women," shared Anurin Jensen, the general manager of the famed Desert Nights Camp located in Al Wasil, in Rimal Al Sharqiya.

Sand-boarding borrows a few tricks from surfing but instead of riding the water, you are riding the sand. The board, usually polished to achieve maximum speed, had to be masterfully navigated so it stays on top of the sand.

While desert camps like Desert Nights provide boards for their guests, DIYs can also be used. If you have an old skateboard from home, you can remove the wheels, cover the holes and polish the board so that you can also enjoy this type of activity.

Quad Biking



For those who can't do 4-wheel drives for dune bashing, the best alternative for you is quad biking.

"This activity allows you to have almost the same thrill of commanding your own vehicle. We provide both quad bikes for adults and children and the thrill of this adventure includes being able to see in a distance the true beauty of the desert," Jensen said.

"Quad bike" comes from the four wheels that were designed for cross country riding on the sand. They are also easier to control and are heavier so the chance of you flipping over is less.

"It scared me to try at first. But when you get the gist of it, it's an enjoyable ride. If a woman in her late 50s can do it, so can anybody else," shared Charry Dasovich who visited the Sultanate of Oman for a few days to check out what adventures are available in the country.

"This is one fun adventure I will never forget. Driving around the desert with these vehicles, it's really a must-try," she recommended.

Camel Riding

For as long as many of us can remember, deserts will always be associated with camels. Absent cars, Bedouin tribes and desert travellers in the past only use the aid of camels to cross long desert distances.

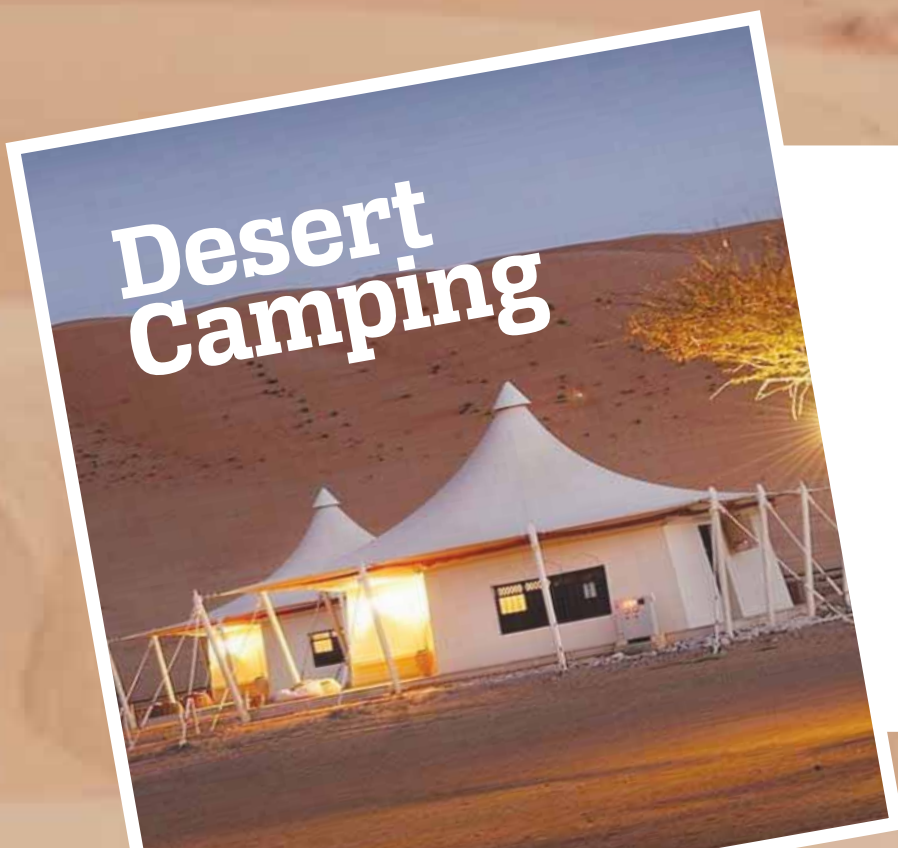
More than an attraction, the camel rides offered in different camps across the Sultanate of Oman is also an opportunity to appreciate the contribution of the desert ships in making life comfortable. As an important part of their community, Bedouins also value their camels not only for the services they render, but also because of the meat, milk and assistance they provide.

"As an attraction, we also take every camel ride an opportunity for people to understand the Sultanate of Oman's Bedu tribe. When guests go for camel rides, they can interact with our Bedu staff who are happy to share insights about their way of life amongst other things sacred to their society," Jensen said.

If you're planning to try this out, be ready for a bumpy ride and make sure to hold tight upon embarkation or disembarkation. It's the kind of experience that you can treasure. It's not every day that you get to try it out.



Desert Camping



Whether you want to catch the sunrise or sunset, the best way to be right on time is by camping on the desert sand.

"Camping has been a time-honoured tradition in the Sultanate of Oman. During winter, dozens of groups visit different locations for camping. The fun part of it is putting up a bonfire, cooking some delicious meals or barbecue, and then feeling

that cold breeze of the desert," shared Jensen.

There are numerous desert camping grounds all over the Sultanate of Oman. The best choices include those in Rimal Al Sharqiya, Ras Ruwais and the nearby coastal deserts.

"It's impossible to find families in the Sultanate of Oman not to have been able to camp in the desert in winter. For those who are unable to

live without modern comfort, that's the exact reason why we introduce glamping — or glamorous camping. You can stay in a luxury tent. You will have the same camping experience but with a proper bed, a proper toilet and bath and all the camping activities like bonfire without sacrificing comfort," Jensen said.

"To fully experience the Sultanate of Oman, you have to also under-

stand what the desert is all about. What fun things you can do on it and what safe adventures you can take. For anyone visiting the country in winter, I would highly encourage you to embark on your desert adventure," Jensen encouraged.

To check out more fun desert adventures, you can follow Desert Nights Camp on Instagram at [@official-desertnightscamp](https://www.instagram.com/official-desertnightscamp).