

Pact to combat money laundering

The State Audit Institution (SAI) on Monday signed a cooperation programme with the National Centre for Financial Information to exchange information in the fields of combating money laundering and financing terrorism. The step aims to achieve joint cooperation and governance of information exchange to serve the common interest of SAI and the centre in combating money laundering, corruption and financing terrorism.



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

OMAN OBSERVER

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AL ZADJALI
ELECTED AS
SPORTS FIGURES

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CELEBRATES START
OF CONSTRUCTION
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THE CLIMBING
WALL... A NEW
CHALLENGE
FOR ADVENTURER

MUSCAT

HM CONDOLES WITH
S AFRICAN PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, on the death of Desmond Tutu, the Nobel Peace prize laureate. His Majesty expressed his sincere condolences and sympathy to the president, the family of the deceased and the friendly people of South Africa. — ONA

3,600 METEOROIDS
RECOVERED

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism completed the Omani meteoroids recovery project at Nizwa Cultural Centre in the Governorate of Al Dakhiliyah. The project worked on compiling an inventory of meteoroids based on scientific and practical requirements to preserve them from environmental effects and to contribute in introducing their classifications and importance. Ibrahim bin Said al Kharousi, the Ministry's Under-Secretary for Heritage said that more than 3,600 meteoroids, weighing more than 1.7 tonnes, were recovered. The recovered bodies were previously sent to scientific and research institutes for analysis and study purposes. SEE P3



INSIDE



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SNOW CAUSES TRAVEL
CHAOS IN JAPAN

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BOOSTER DOSE
HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

VINOD NAIR
@vinotnair

The government on Monday warned that hospital inpatients are likely to go up in the coming days, which can put an extra burden on the healthcare system just like in the second quarter of this year. Speaking at the 28th press conference of the Supreme Committee, Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, stressed the need for taking the third dose or booster to increase protection against the Omicron. Dr Ahmed also praised the continuous support of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to the health sector. He said that the number of infections witnessed an increase in recent days and added it is the government's duty to protect members of the society and maintain public health, as the health sector underwent a rough



95,277, OR 4%
OF THE TARGET
GROUP HAS RECEIVED
THE THIRD DOSE

230,000 CITIZENS
AND RESIDENTS HAVE
NOT TAKEN ANY
VACCINATION DOSE

4% OF CITIZENS ARE YET
TO GET THE FIRST DOSE
AND 10% THE SECOND
DOSE OF VACCINE

90 SUSPECTED AND
16 CONFIRMED
CASES OF OMICRON
INFECTION REPORTED

time in the previous year. "There is no plan, at the time being, to make the booster dose mandatory and it is very early to discuss the possibility of administering an annual dose against Covid-19," Dr Ahmed said. The latest decisions taken by the Supreme Committee will be effective till January 31, 2022, if the situation does not worsen. It may be changed depending on the epidemiological situation. On the possibility of

lockdowns, the minister said that the Supreme Committee will not take measures that might affect the economy or social life, but it will still make appropriate decisions if forced to do so. "We are counting on the awareness of citizens and residents to contain the spread of the virus by adhering to precautionary measures." Vaccination centres are open in all governorates and wilayats and vaccines are available free of charge for citizens and residents. As of Sunday, 95,277 have received the booster dose, which is the four per cent of the target groups. The Sultanate of Oman has 16 confirmed cases of Omicron and there are 90 suspected cases. Dr Saif bin Salim al Abri, Director General of Disease Surveillance at the Ministry of Health, said that the Omicron cases have been registered among vaccinated people. "Their health condition is stable." TURN TO P2

MINISTER
REPLIES TO
QUERIES
ON ROADS



MUSCAT: The Majlis Ash'shura on Monday hosted Engineer Said bin Hamoud al Maauali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, at a session dedicated solely to the topic of Sultanate of Oman's road strategy. The session saw deliberations about the causes of delay in implementation of road projects beyond the specified periods. The high cost of projects was put to scrutiny by the Shura members, who also demanded a review of technical specifications. The members asked the minister to compare the actual cost with the real cost of major projects on the strategy, as well as the time accorded to the execution of the projects as against the progress made so far. SEE P2

CBO foreign exchange
reserves reach \$18bn

MUSCAT: The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) held its fourth Board of Governors meeting on Monday. At the outset of the meeting, the Board reviewed a report elaborating on the state of CBO reserves and the performance of its foreign investments. The Board expressed its profound satisfaction with the state of CBO 2021 FX reserves, which has reached an impressive level of \$18 billion. The Board opined that

prominent growth achieved in the FX reserve numbers, has been supported by stable cash flows witnessed throughout the year in view of the rise in oil prices, and recovery of the global economy from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Likewise, the Board observed that the total demand for foreign currency in the local market has remained at reasonably comfortable and satisfactory levels. — ONA

AWARD WINNING PHOTO



For the 5th time in a row, the Sultanate of Oman has won the two world cups of the International Federation of Photographic Arts in the age-groups of 16 and 21 years. In the age-group of 21 years, Mohammed bin Sulaiman al Shuali won gold medal for his photograph titled "Tafkeer" (Thinking), while Mahir bin Naseer al Khusaibi won silver medal for his photo titled "Itlwaa" (inflection) and Zamzam Bani Oraba won the bronze for her photo titled "Talashi" (blackout). — ONA

10 biggest natural disasters caused \$170bn damage this year

PARIS: The ten most expensive weather disasters this year caused more than \$170 billion in damage, \$20 billion more than in 2020, a British aid group said on Monday. Each year, UK charity Christian Aid calculates the cost of weather incidents like flooding, fires and heat waves according to insurance claims and reports the results. In 2020, it found the world's ten costliest weather disasters caused \$150 billion in damage, making



this year's total an increase of 13%. Christian Aid said the upward trend reflects the effects of man-made climate change and added that the ten disasters in question also killed at least 1,075 people and displaced 1.3 million. The most expensive disaster in 2021 was hurricane Ida, which lashed the eastern United States and caused around \$65 billion in damages. After crashing into Louisiana at the end of August,

it made its way northward and caused extensive flooding in New York City and the surrounding area. Spectacular and deadly flooding in Germany and Belgium in July was next on the list at \$43 billion in losses. A cold snap and winter storm in Texas that took out the vast state's power grid cost \$23 billion, followed by flooding in China's Henan province in July that cost an estimated \$17.6 billion. — AFP



Transport minister debates road projects with Shura

MUSCAT: The Majlis Ash'ishura on Monday hosted Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, in a session dedicated solely to the topic of the Sultanate of Oman's

road strategy. The session saw deliberations about the causes of delay in implementation of road projects beyond the specified periods. The high cost of projects was put to scrutiny by the Council members,

who also demanded a review of technical specifications. Monday's session was the first in a series of topics listed for discussion during the current Majlis Ash'ishura term. It was held in execution of Article 68 of the

Majlis Ash'ishura Law promulgated under Royal Decree No 7/2021 and in accordance with Article 68 of Oman Council Law. The deliberations of Monday's session take place as part of the fifth annual sitting of the Majlis

Ash'ishura for the period 2021-2022 of the Shura's 9th Term (2019-2023) being convened under the auspices of Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of the Majlis Ash'ishura. The members asked the

minister to compare the actual cost with the real cost of major projects on the strategy, as well as the time accorded to the execution of the projects as against the progress made so far. — ONA

Expats told to take vaccine at old Seeb airport

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Residents of the Sultanate of Oman have been urged to take their vaccine, either first dose or second dose, only from the field hospital located at the old airport in Seeb. This is in the wake of the many expats visiting the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) believing that vaccines are still administered there.

"All expatriates are advised to get their first or second dose of vaccine, as the case may be, only from the old Seeb International Airport premises from 8am to 2pm and no registration is needed for the same," informed Dr Nihal Afifi, Head of Primary Health and contact point for vaccination.

However, expatriates wouldn't be receiving any booster dose from the Field Hospital or public hospitals or clinics for the time being and they have to approach private hospitals or clinics.

"All health centres would continue to provide Covid-19 vaccines for Omani citizens, from different clinics. Expa-

triate, however, have to get them from the private clinics at the moment", said Dr Nihal.

The Ministry of Health, represented by the General Directorate of Health Sciences, had earlier announced the venues where citizens and residents can take their vaccines free of cost.

The Sultan Qaboos University Health Centre will provide first or second dose of vaccine or booster doses to citizens of Seeb Wilayat from 8am to 8pm. The people of Bausher, on the other hand, should approach the Al Khuwair North Health Centre between 8am to 8pm for their jabs. The citizens of Muttrah Wilayat will receive vaccination from Ruwi Health Centre from 8am to 2pm while people of Muscat Wilayat are to get their doses from Muscat Health Centre between 8am and 2pm.

Amerat Health Centre will be providing vaccines for people from Wilayat Amerat from 8am to 2pm and Sahil Health Centre will provide vaccination for Omani citizens of Wilayat of Qurayat during the same time.

Media centre holds programme on dealing with rumours

MUSCAT: The Media Training Centre is currently organising a training programme in cooperation with Al Jazeera Media Institute on dealing with rumours and false news. The three-day programme sees the participation of employees of communications and media departments from various government units. The course aims to arm participants with skills to deal with rumours and false news. It also covers best practices in collecting news and information from open sources, as well as validating their authenticity. — ONA

Booster dose highly recommended



FROM P1 He added. "The booster and third dose are the same, but the only difference between them is the scientific term, as the third dose is a basic dose for people who have immunodeficiency and must wait for one to three months after the second dose, while the booster dose is taken by everyone above 18 years to stimulate immune system". Studies say that two doses of

the vaccine give about 22 per cent immunity against Omicron while the third dose offers 75 per cent. The Ministry of Health (MoH) officials said that around 230,000 citizens and residents have not received any vaccination dose so far, which means community immunity has been not reached yet. Of the target groups, around four per cent of Omanis are yet to

get the first dose and 10 per cent the second dose. The person who died on Sunday of Covid-19 (the first in 49 days) was an unvaccinated elderly citizen. On Monday, 69 new cases were reported. One person was admitted to hospital taking the total number of inpatients to 11, including two in ICUs. Other highlights of the press

conference include that schools have not seen an increase in the numbers as teaching staff and students strictly follow precautionary measures. The authorities mentioned that the movement between the Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates is continuing, and the validity of PCR tests have been revised to 14 days only for citizens of both countries.

Employees should submit vaccination certificate

MUSCAT: As part of efforts being undertaken by the government to address the impacts of coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and, based on Covid-19 Supreme Committee's decision requiring the Ministry of Labour to devise a uniform mechanism to deal with unvaccinated employees of public sector units, private sector establishments and other legal entities, the Ministry of Labour is bringing the following points to the attention of all units of the State's Administrative Apparatus, other public legal entities and the private sector: Firstly, to ensure that an

employee or worker submits a vaccination certificate stating that he/she has taken two doses of any vaccine approved in the Sultanate of Oman or shows a medical report issued by a health institution confirming that the employee is facing a health condition that prohibits him/her from taking the vaccine. Secondly, not to allow access to a workplace for any employee or worker who fails to submit a Covid-19 vaccination certificate or present medical report confirming that the employee is facing a health condition that prohibits him/her from taking the

Action to be taken against staff who fail to submit a vaccination certificate stating that he/she has taken two doses of vaccine or medical justification vaccine. Thirdly, in the event that an employee has been denied access to the workplace due to non-submission of a vaccination certificate or a medical report stating the condition that barred him/her from taking the

prescribed vaccination, the unit has a right to apply the provisions of a unit's job system pertaining to an employee's non-attendance (at the workplace) that is not justified by an authorised leave of absence. The Ministry of Labour requests all units of the State's Administrative Apparatus, other legal public bodies and private sector establishments to distribute this circular to their employees and to advise those who have not yet taken the vaccination to come to terms with its requirements, notably to protect their colleagues and families and limit the risks posed by the virus. — ONA



Day of the Disabled marked with focus on leadership and participation

ZAINAB AL NASSRI

@zainabalnassri

The Ministry of Social Development on Monday celebrated the International Day of Persons with Disabilities for the year 2021 under the patronage of Her Highness Mona bint Fahd bin Mahmood al Saeed, in the presence of HE Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najjar, Minister of Social Development and a number of under-secretaries, high-level officials and media representatives.

This year's celebration comes under the theme "Leadership and participation of persons with disabilities towards an inclusive, accessible and sustainable world in the post-Covid-19 pandemic". The United Nations adopted this slogan due to the impact of the spread of Covid-19 on various aspects of people's lives in general and persons with disabilities in particular, as they are more vulnerable to the virus due to the many social and environmental barriers and infrastructure conditions.

In his speech, Hamoud bin Mirdad al Shabibi, Director General of Persons with Disabilities, said, "Arab governments, civil society institutions and international organisations have sought to identify the effects of the pandemic, including people with disabilities; the most recent of which was the United Nations Virtual Ministerial Forum on "The Future of Social Protection in the Arab Region: Building a Vision for the Post-Covid-19 Pandemic Reality" held on November 30, 2021.

This vision focused on the importance of comprehensive social protection programmes in the Arab countries, as well as allowed the creation of new policies and



progress in the field of social protection as a whole. This was confirmed by the Sultanate of Oman in its participation, as well as the conference and ministerial forum and the 41st session of the Council of Arab Ministers of Social Affairs held on December 22 and 23 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

He added that at the local level, the Sultanate of Oman has taken a set of preventive measures to limit the spread of the virus among persons with disabilities with the contribution of everyone, including the disabled, to achieve the

sustainable development goals. Persons with disabilities and the institutions that represent them throughout the Sultanate of Oman are taking the necessary measures to translate the slogan: "We are indispensable in matters that concern us" into a tangible reality.

"Since the beginning of the pandemic, work mechanisms have been developed and harmonised to take into account the protection of persons with disabilities, the most important of which is the work of the individual sessions system, the creation of the spatial



environment, the provision of requirements for the staff and the implementation of safety in buses. These procedures are subject to continuous follow-up to ensure adherence to them," he affirmed.

Al Shabibi said that the National Committee for the Care of Persons with Disabilities approved the preparation of "a national guide for engineering specifications for an inclusive built environment and means of transportation for people with disabilities" with the participation of the competent governmental authorities

and civil society institutions. This guide will guarantee the right of persons with disabilities to have easy access to various services, and it will be easier for the various competent authorities to apply international and national standards to make the environment and means of transportation easy to access and use. "The Sultanate of Oman seeks, with the countries of the world, to adopt a disability-aware approach in efforts to address and recover from the pandemic, expand the opportunities available to access technology,

and strengthen institutions to get out of the Covid-19 pandemic to a better world in terms of embracing everyone, ease of living and its components in the field of sustainability; to ensure the provision of quality programmes and services for persons with disabilities", he asserted.

He also said, "In implementation of the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Sultanate of Oman has witnessed a quantitative expansion and a qualitative development in the programmes and services provided by the Ministry of Social Development to achieve comprehensive social integration, and the transition of performance from the sponsorship concept to a development concept based on partnership, empowerment and equality.

On behalf of their counterparts from the disabled, Balqees al Abri, Khamis al Sharji and Durar al Ameri, expressed their happiness at being an integral part of this world, which pledged to guarantee them everything that would preserve their rights to a decent life. In a compiled speech, they said "the celebration of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, which falls on the 3rd of December of each year, is an opportunity to renew societies' interest in our reality and prove our abilities and skills that qualify us to obtain all the facilities necessary to deal with various aspects of life."

The ceremony included a visual show with five creative personalities of people with disabilities, a three-dimensional movie entitled "My Right is Guaranteed", a poetry show, and a music show by the Omani orchestra.

OMANI LENS MEN BAG GLOBAL AWARDS

MUSCAT: For the 5th time in a row, the Sultanate of Oman has won two global awards of the International Federation of Photographic Arts (FIAP) in its 40th round, within the age group of 16 years and the age group of 21 years.

The Sultanate of Oman bagged 462 points through the presentation of 20 works submitted by 13 of its photographers.

In the age group of 21 years, the country bagged 457 points through the entries of 13 photographers who submitted 20 works.

In the age group of 21 years, Mohammed bin Sulaiman al Shueili won gold medal for his photograph titled "Tafkeer" (Thinking), while Mahir bin Naseer al Khusaibi bagged silver medal for his photo titled "Iltwaa" (inflection) and Zamzam Bani Oraba won the bronze for her photo titled "Talashi" (blackout). — ONA



■ BORDER AUTHORITIES MEET



MUSCAT: The 15th meeting of top border authorities between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was held on Monday.

The Sultanate of Oman's delegation was headed by Maj Gen Abdullah bin Ali al Harthy, Assistant Inspector General

of Police and Customs for Operations, while the Saudi side was headed by Maj Gen Mohammed Abdullah al Shahri, Chief of the Border Guards.

The meeting discussed border-related matters between the two countries. — ONA

Meteoroids recovery project completed

NIZWA: The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism completed the Omani meteoroids recovery project at Nizwa Cultural Centre in the Governorate of Al Dakhiliyah.

The project worked on compiling an inventory of meteoroids based on scientific and practical requirements to preserve them from environmental effects and to contribute in introducing their classifications and importance.

Eng Ibrahim bin Said al Kharousi, the Ministry's Under-Secretary for Heritage said that more than 3,600 meteoroids, weighing more than 1.7 tonnes, were recovered. The recovered bodies were previously sent to scientific and research institutes for analysis and study purposes.



He pointed out that the ministry invests this geological heritage by displaying the meteoroids in various exhibitions. — ONA

SHED VACCINE HESITANCY

VINOD NAIR

vinot_nair

VACCINATION campaigns across the world have been telling a

few interesting stories to say, including in the Sultanate of Oman. While the countries with efficient healthcare systems managed to secure vaccines and administer them to their population, they still struggled to vaccinate five to six per cent of the population that refused to join the bandwagon.

Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, expressed concern over the reluctance on the part of some residents and citizens to take the vaccine, despite its proven effectiveness in preventing deaths. Of the target groups, around four per cent of Omanis are yet to get the first dose and 10 per cent the second dose.

Among expatriates, 10 per cent are yet to take the first dose and 17 per cent the second dose.

According to Dr Zakaria bin Yahya al Balushi, Consultant of Infectious Diseases at the Royal Hospital, “The third dose is one of the important strategies to control the virus in society and maintain epidemiological stability.” “Even if you are not convinced of the vaccine, do not just pass on the same thought to the people, especially the elderly, which may prove costly if they did not receive the vaccine,” said a senior health expert based at MoH.

Several citizens and residents

have told the *Observer* that they prefer to wait for the boosters as they are not yet convinced of its requirement at this stage.

With Omicron spreading faster than expected, countries are hurrying up with campaigns to offer boosters though they have not yet vaccinated the target groups with the second dose.

The WHO recently issued interim guidance on booster doses, expressing concern that ‘mass programmes for countries that can afford them, will exacerbate vaccine inequity’.

Currently, around 20 per cent of all vaccine doses administered are being given as boosters or additional doses. “Blanket booster programmes are likely to prolong the pandemic, rather than ending it, by diverting supply to countries that already have high levels of vaccination coverage, giving the virus more opportunity to spread and mutate,” said the WHO.

It stressed that the priority must be on supporting countries to vaccinate 40 per cent of their populations as quickly as possible, and 70 per cent by the middle of 2022.

“It’s important to remember that the vast majority of hospitalisations and deaths are in unvaccinated people, not un-boosted people,” he said. “And we must be very clear that the vaccines we have, remain effective against both the Delta and Omicron variants.”

Covid killed 3.5 million people this year and continues to claim some 50,000 lives each week.

Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, expressed concern over the reluctance on the part of some residents and citizens to take the vaccine, despite its proven effectiveness in preventing deaths. Of the target groups, around four per cent of Omanis are yet to get the first dose and 10 per cent the second dose



SAI pact to combat money laundering

MUSCAT: The State Audit Institution (SAI) on Monday signed a cooperation programme with the National Centre for Financial Information to exchange information in the fields of combating money laundering and financing terrorism.

The protocol was signed at SAI headquarters by Ahmed bin Salim al Rujaibi, SAI Deputy Chairman of Audit in the



State Administrative Apparatus, and Lt Col Abdulrahman bin Amer al Kiyumi, CEO of the National Centre for Financial Information.

This step aims to achieve joint cooperation and governance of information exchange to serve the common interest of SAI and the centre in combating money laundering, corruption and financing terrorism. — ONA

Upgrade winners excel in innovation and technology

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 27

The 5th edition of Upgrade, a programme that transforms the best graduation projects in the 4th Industrial Revolution technologies into successful ICT startups to bring socio-economic benefit to the Sultanate of Oman, has announced the three winning projects for this year at the 8th Annual Research Forum.

Upgrade is a competition-based programme in which the winners will be assisted to transform their graduation projects into startups in the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector on topics such as Smart Cities, Internet of Things, Information Security, Artificial Intelligence, Big Data and Blockchain.

Out of the 10 finalists, the winning projects of this year's Upgrade programme were awarded to 'Development of AI based Arabic Natural Language Processing of sentiment analysis application software for national security and planning', 'Industrial IoT for Operational Efficiency Improvement' and 'Thermal Infra-Red Imaging Assessment of Solar PV Modules'. The winning teams will be provided with incubation services,



business and marketing consultation, networking and mentoring opportunities, as well as educational awareness programmes that include a group of workshops and lectures in the incubation centre. For 'Development of AI based Arabic Natural Language Processing of sentiment analysis application software for national security and planning' prepared by Ali al Harthy and Safiya al Harthy from Middle East College, they aimed to develop two main natural language processing (NLP) applications that are beneficial for the Sultanate of Oman; creating an Arabic Omani Dialect corpus (AODC) including more than

10 thousand statements and developing an NLP sentiment analysis based on AODC. The project focused on NLP since it can be considered as one of the 4IR core technologies and its applications may have big impacts on the national economy, society and government services.

With 'Industrial IoT for Operational Efficiency Improvement', it was prepared by Ahmed al Ghadani from the National University of Science and Technology. The project focused on the integration of existing infrastructure and assets using IoT, Big Data and AI analytics for key insights and data-driven decisions to help industries improve

two core business objectives: Asset Uptime and Operational Efficiency.

As for 'Thermal Infra-Red Imaging Assessment of Solar PV Modules' prepared by Al Qaisar al Aamri, Majid al Omairi and Sultan al Shabibi from Sultan Qaboos University, a system composed of drone and thermal camera was designed and implemented. The system will automate the inspection process of the whole solar photovoltaic (PV) plant to solve faulty modules with the ordinary inspection process, which will greatly reduce the cost and time of the operation and maintenance as well as improve system efficiency and equipment life.



Agreement inked to fund health project at Adam

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 27

The Ministry of Health (MoH) signed on Monday an agreement with the Petroleum Development Oman and CC Energy Development to fund the construction of Renal Dialysis Unit at Adam in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

Dr Fatima bint Mohammed al Ajmiah, Under-Secretary for Administrative, Financial and Planning Affairs at Ministry of Health, signed the agreement on behalf of the MoH. PDO was represented by its External Affairs and Communication Manager Eng Mohammed bin Ahmed al Ghareebi, and on behalf of CC Energy Bader al Sariri, Head of ICV & External Affairs.

Dr Fatima al Ajmi stressed the importance of cooperation between the private and public sector to achieve the public interest's needs, praising PDO and CCED initiative to spearhead Corporate Social Responsibility in the country and dedicating special attention to the health sector.

The agreement is part of the two companies' keenness to strengthen their social responsibility in delivering meaningful improvements and creating sustainable benefits to the local communities as well as broader Omani society. It should be noted that the project will serve the increasing demand of renal dialysis service in both A Dakhiliyah and Al Wusta governorates.

150 students attend IELTS courses

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 27

About 150 students attended IELTS courses offered by the ELC, UTAS-Ibri, between November 21 and December 22. Employees, students, job-seekers, and students from other higher educational institutions joined the courses and were hugely benefited.

A team of highly trained teachers conducted the courses. They employed customised teaching methods and strategies to facilitate the participants to clear the IELTS. The teachers

trained the aspirants to develop an ear for details to improve listening skills and equipped them with the tips and techniques to clear their IELTS writing test.

IELTS instructors provided essential tips and techniques to become proficient in listening, reading, writing and speaking skills. Models of question types and handouts with concept check questions were given for all four skills and were like ready reckoners for the students. Practical and helpful online links were also shared with the participants.

SULTANATE OF OMAN
MINISTRY OF HEALTH

ANNOUNCEMENT

Invitation No.	Subject	Eligible company to Participate	Last Date of Purchase	Qualification Submission Closing Date
1/2021	Pre-qualification to participate in Service of Providing Specialized Professionals from outside Sultanate of Oman to work in Various Health Establishments at the Ministry of Health	Specialized Local Companies registered with The General Secretariat of the Tender Board	Thursday 06/01/2022	Wednesday 19/01/2022

- Document can be obtain through the Esnad Service on the website <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> until the last date of purchase.
- Qualification documents must be submitted through the Esnad service on the above-mentioned website before 8 o'clock in the morning of the day specified for bid submission. The document submitted after this date and time will not be considered, whatever the reasons for the delay.
- The Ministry of Health is not bound accept any Qualification.

Math quiz held for Al Buraimi schools

AL BURAIMI: University of Buraimi has conducted a math quiz competition among high school students from Al Buraimi Governorate about basic mathematics. In all, 12 teams from different schools participated. Gifts for all the winners were distributed, besides certificates of participation to each group/team. The main objective of this event was to build in students self-confidence and to make them understand the importance of mathematics in their present and higher studies. The participants also explored the university campus and got a chance to interact with the university students.

Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Heritage & Tourism

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Tender No.	48/2021	Tender Name	THE REHABILITATION OF PROPOSED RESTORATION LABORATORY AT MINISTRY OF HERITAGE AND TOURISM BUILDING
Brief Description		THE REHABILITATION AND MAINTENANCE OF PROPOSED RESTORATION LABORATORY AT MINISTRY OF HERITAGE AND TOURISM BUILDING.	
Fees of Tender Documents (Non-refundable)		25 O.R	
Tender Document Sales End Date		19/1/2022	
Last Date for Bid Submission		9/2/2022	
Grade		Third	
E-Tendering Portal		https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om	

- Interested Companies registered with Tender Board (in the mentioned Grade) may obtain Tender documents from the E.Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>, against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document.
- Bids are submitted that fulfill the technical conditions and specifications, accompanied by a tender bond from a local bank not less than (1%) of the bid value, valid for (90) days from the date of its submission.
 - Any bid that does not meet the required tender bond will not be considered
 - The Ministry shall not be obligated to accept the lowest or any other bids
- The bid submission period starts after the end of the inquiry period shown in the e-tendering system, until the last date for submitting bids before (10:00 am, Oman time).

Support and inquiries	For more information, related to the tender, kindly communicate through the website of the e-tendering system: https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om For inquiries related to the technical support for the e-tendering system, kindly communicate through etenderhd@ita.gov.om or 24402200
For further information	Email : stotc@mht.gov.om Phones : 22088348 - 22088085



Iraqis attend a court session at the Supreme Judicial Council in Baghdad on Monday. – AFP

Iraq’s apex court rejects bid to annul poll results

BAGHDAD: Iraq’s supreme court on Monday rejected a motion filed by the Hashed al Shaabi ex-paramilitary alliance contesting its defeat in the October 10 parliamentary election.

“The Federal Court has decided to reject the complaint... and to make the plaintiffs bear the costs,” Judge Jassem Mohamed Aboud said, reading out the verdict.

The court “rejects the request of the plaintiffs... not to ratify the final results of the election,” he said. “The verdict is binding on all authorities”.

While the ruling is a key step forward, it does not mean that the final results have been ratified, an electoral commission lawyer who attended the court hearing said.

That requires an official announcement to endorse the results, only after which can the new parliament be inaugurated and a new government formed.

In multi-confessional and multi-ethnic Iraq, the formation of governments has involved complex negotiations ever since the 2003 US-led invasion toppled

dictator Saddam Hussein.

Cleric Moqtada Sadr was declared on November 30 as the biggest winner of the election.

Sadr’s movement won nearly a fifth of the seats — 73 out of the assembly’s total 329, well ahead of the 17 seats of the Fatah (Conquest) Alliance, the political arm of the pro-Iran Hashed.

Hashed leaders rejected the result — sharply down from their 48 seats in the outgoing assembly — as a “fraud”.

The Hashed organised protests and appealed the results hoping to have them annulled, claiming “serious violations”.

The Fatah Alliance alleged the electronic voting system had failed to recognise the finger print identification of many voters.

It also protested at what is claimed were the alleged failings of a new electronic machine used for the election.

Once parliament holds its inaugural session, lawmakers will elect a president, who will in turn appoint a prime minister to be approved by the legislature.

— AFP

Iran seeks assurances as nuclear talks resume to salvage 2015 deal

TEHRAN: Iran said nuclear talks that are set to resume on Monday in Vienna should focus on lifting sanctions on the Islamic republic and “guarantees” the US will return to the fold.

Negotiations to salvage the 2015 Iran nuclear deal resumed in late November, after a five-month hiatus following the election of Iran President Ebrahim Raisi.

The talks seek to bring back the United States, after it withdrew from the accord in 2018 under president Donald Trump and began imposing sanctions on Iran.

Iran has reported progress in the talks, but European diplomats have warned they are “rapidly reaching the end of the road”.

US negotiator Rob Malley has said there are only “weeks” left to revive the deal, if the Islamic republic continues its current pace of nuclear activities.

The talks were expected to get under way in the Austrian capital at 6:00 pm (1700 GMT), according to a source close to the negotiations.

Ahead of the resumption, Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said the agenda on Monday should be “the issue of guarantees and verification” on the lifting of US sanctions if it returns to the accord.

“The most important thing for us is to reach a point where we can verify that Iranian oil will be sold easily and without any limits, that the money for this oil will be transferred in foreign currency to Iranian bank accounts, and that we will be able to benefit from all the revenues,” he said, quoted on Monday by state news agency IRNA.

The opening of the eighth round of the talks involves delegations from Iran and the other countries that remain party to the landmark



The Hotel Palais Coburg is reflected in a window as journalists wait outside ahead of the resumption of talks aimed at reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, in Vienna on Monday. – AFP

“The most important thing for us is to reach a point where we can verify that Iranian oil will be sold easily and without any limits, that the money for this oil will be transferred in foreign currency to Iranian bank accounts

HOSSEIN AMIR-ABDOLLAHIAN
Iran’s Foreign Minister

accord — Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia.

The multilateral nuclear deal reached in 2015 offered Iran a lifting of economic sanctions in return for strict curbs on its nuclear activities.

The goal was to make it practically impossible for Iran to build an atomic bomb, while allowing it to pursue a civilian nuclear programme.

But the deal started to unravel

in 2018 when the Trump administration pulled out and began imposing sanctions on the Islamic republic.

US President Joe Biden has said he is willing to return to the deal as long as Iran also resumes the original terms.

POSITIVE MESSAGE

Iran, which denies it wants to acquire a nuclear arsenal, has gradually abandoned its

commitments to the accord since 2019, including by stepping up its enrichment of uranium.

The UN’s nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), recently expressed concerns over Iran’s growing stockpile of highly-enriched uranium. Iran’s arch-rival Israel, which staunchly opposes the nuclear deal, had reportedly warned in November that the Islamic republic had taken the technical steps to prepare to enrich uranium to military-grade levels of around 90 per cent.

On Saturday, Atomic Energy Organization of Iran director Mohammad Eslami said Tehran has no plans to enrich uranium beyond 60 per cent, even if the Vienna talks fail. Eslami said the enrichment levels were related to the needs of the country, in remarks published by the Russian news agency RIA Novosti. — AFP

Israel approves plan to double settlers in occupied Golan

GOLAN HEIGHTS: Israel’s government on Sunday approved a \$317 million plan to double the Jewish settler population in the Golan Heights, 40 years after it annexed the territory captured from Syria.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett’s cabinet voted in favour of the plan that aims to build 7,300 settler homes in the region over a five-year period, during a meeting held at the Mevo Hama community in the Golan.

It calls for 1 billion Israeli shekels to be spent on housing, infrastructure and other projects with the goal of attracting roughly 23,000 new Jewish settlers to the area, seized during the 1967 Six Day War.

“Our goal today is to double the population of the Golan Heights,” the right-wing Bennett said ahead of the meeting.

He was forced to leave the meeting after his 14-year-old daughter tested positive for



the coronavirus, putting him into isolation, but a vote on the programme went ahead after a delay.

NO CHANGE IN US POLICY

Around 25,000 Israeli settlers live in the Golan Heights, along with about 23,000 Druze, who remained on the land after Israel seized it.

Israel annexed the territory on December 14, 1981, in a move not recognised by most of the international community.

Former US president Donald Trump, widely viewed as pro-Israeli, granted US recognition to Israeli sovereignty over the Golan in 2019.

“The Golan Heights are Israeli. This is self-evident,” Bennett said.

“The fact that the Trump administration recognised this, and the fact that the (President Joe) Biden administration has made it clear that there has been no change in this policy, are also important.”

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

TEL AVIV

Israeli hospital starts 4th jab trial

An Israeli hospital launched a clinical trial on Monday on the impact of a fourth shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine, as the health ministry weighs a national fourth jab rollout. The study being conducted by Sheba Medical Centre involves 150 volunteers from the hospital’s staff, who are at least four months removed from their third vaccine shot and have signs of waning antibodies.

Director of the Infectious Disease Epidemiology Unit at



Sheba, Gili Regev-Yochay, said the study would assess the potential antibody boost from a fourth shot, the existence of adverse effects and whether an additional booster reduces the risk of infection.

DUBAI

Iran to announce new Yemen ambassador

Iran plans to announce the appointment of a new ambassador in Yemen after the death of previous envoy Hasan Irlu, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said on Monday. Tehran said on December 21 that Irlu, its envoy in the Yemeni capital Sanaa that is controlled by the Ansar Allah group, died of Covid-19 after being repatriated in mid-December.

“We are in the process of announcing a new ambassador” in Sanaa, Khatibzadeh told a



news conference. A Saudi-led coalition that has been battling Ansar Allah forces in support of Yemen’s internationally recognised government for more than six years has imposed a sea and air blockade on Ansar Allah-controlled areas.

PARIS

French cops arrest man over chemical arms

A French-Syrian man has been detained by French police on suspicion of supplying components for the manufacture of chemical weapons in Syria through his shipping company, sources briefed on the case told AFP on Sunday. The man, who was born in 1962 and lives abroad, was arrested on Saturday in the south of France according to one of the sources.

“He returned to France with his family for the holidays,” a source close to the case said.



He has been held on suspicion of “conspiracy to commit crimes against humanity, accessory to crimes against humanity and accessory to war crimes,” a judicial source told AFP.

In brief

■ COLOMBO



SECURITY CLEARANCE REQUIRED FOR FOREIGN SPOUSES

Foreigners seeking to wed Sri Lankans will need security clearances from the defence ministry, under new regulations that were met with scorn and ridicule by the opposition.

The new rules will require foreigners from next week to get a clean bill of health and a security check before their nuptials, with registrar general W M Weerasekara attributing the policy to “national security” concerns.

“We have seen some foreigners wanting to marry Sri Lankans here with ulterior motives like engaging in drug trafficking and money laundering,” Weerasekara told the local *Sunday Times* newspaper.

The new regulations have prompted scorn from opposition lawmakers who pointed out that several members of the ruling family are dual nationals.

■ MANILA



TYPHOON RAI DEATH TOLL RISES TO 388

The death toll from one of the most destructive typhoons to hit the Philippines in recent years rose to 388 on Monday, the government said, as disease outbreaks threatened some of the stricken areas. Typhoon Rai struck the south and centre of the Asian nation on December 16 and 17, toppling power lines and trees and unleashing deadly floods that also left hundreds of thousands homeless.

The civil defence office in Manila raised the death toll from Rai to 388 with 60 others missing and hundreds injured. Police previously put the death toll at 375. Civil defence officials said more than four million people were receiving typhoon aid in 430 cities and towns where about 482,000 houses were damaged or destroyed.

More than 300,000 people remain in evacuation camps, with more than 200,000 others sheltering in the homes of relatives or friends.

■ DHAKA



FERRY OWNER ARRESTED AFTER DEADLY BLAZE

Bangladesh police on Monday arrested the owner of an overcrowded ferry that caught fire and killed at least 39 people last week, after investigators blamed the toll on a disregard for safety.

Ferry owner Hum Jalal Sheikh was arrested on Monday, a police spokesman told reporters, a day after a court issued an arrest warrant for eight people including the captain and crew of the Obhijaan-10.

Marine police officer Mahbubur Rahman said the vessel did not have adequate fire extinguishers and buoys to face a major mid-river accident.

“We spoke to the survivors and they said the driver of the ferry kept the vessel moving for nearly an hour after its engine room caught fire,” he said.

Snow causes travel chaos in Japan

TOKYO: Heavy snow caused traffic jams, flight cancellations and disruption to train services in central Japan on Monday, with record drifts recorded in some areas.

More than 3,200 households have been left without power in the region, according to Kansai Electric Power, as officials warned more snow was forecast overnight.

No injuries or deaths due to the freezing weather have yet been confirmed, government spokesman Hirokazu Matsuno said.

“A strong winter pressure pattern is causing heavy snow, mainly along the Sea of Japan side of the country from northern to western Japan, with some areas experiencing record snowfall,” Matsuno said.

“The amount of snow is expected to increase tomorrow... increased caution and vigilance are still required.”

A major road in the Shiga region was closed “due to stranded vehicles”, Matsuno said, with TV footage showing long lines of stationary cars that later began



People cross a street in heavy snow in the city of Toyama. — AFP

to move. The traffic snarl-up reportedly began when a truck slipped near Hikone city, where 68 centimetres of snow fell in 24 hours to this morning — 30 times deeper than average — according to public broadcaster NHK.

Nearly 200 passengers were snowed in overnight on a local train line in the region, NHK said.

One picture from a train carriage posted on Twitter showed a huge pile of fresh powder between

two open doors as a station lamp illuminated snowflakes against the night sky. Around 130 domestic flights were cancelled on Sunday due to the snow, Jiji Press said, with NHK reporting some 50 cancellations on Monday.

SUPPORT FOR PM UP

In another development, nearly two-thirds of Japanese voters support Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s government, with

the public welcoming his anti-coronavirus measures, including temporary border closure to new foreign entrants, the *Nikkei* business daily said on Monday.

Support for Kishida’s cabinet rose to 65 per cent, up by 4 percentage points from the previous survey a month ago, the newspaper said. In the latest poll taken from Friday to Sunday, 61 per cent of those surveyed evaluated positively Kishida’s anti-coronavirus steps, the highest figure since the *Nikkei* started asking the public’s views on the government’s coronavirus response in February 2020. Amid the global emergence of highly transmissible Omicron variant of coronavirus, Kishida late November announced that Japan was barring entry to foreigners for about a month. Last week, he extended the measure through New Year holidays. Kishida took office in October, replacing Yoshihide Suga, whose one-year term as prime minister saw his support crumble as Covid-19 surged. — AFP/Reuters

■ MIGRATORY BIRDS FIND SANCTUARY



People enjoy a ride at an amusement park in Kabul. Few nations endured as tumultuous a year as Afghanistan in 2021 and the country’s woes are far from over as a bitter winter draws in. The Taliban’s astonishing return to power caught everyone on the wrong foot and Afghans are stumbling to make sense of what happened and what the future holds. — AFP

Myanmar actor on wanted list jailed for 3 years



YANGON: A leading Myanmar actor, singer and model who was on a junta celebrity wanted list for supporting protests has been jailed for three years, his legal team said on Monday.

Paing Takhon, 25 — a star in both Myanmar and neighbouring Thailand — had been active in the mass protests that rocked the country following the February coup, at rallies and through his massive social media following.

He was arrested during a dawn raid at his mother’s home in Yangon in April, his sister said, as the junta hunted more than 100 celebrities for supporting the movement.

On Monday, he was “jailed for three years with hard labour,” at a court in Yangon, his legal advisor Khin Maung Myint said.

“The family is deeply saddened about his sentence,” he said, adding they were considering whether to appeal.

In February, Paing Takhon — who had more than a million followers on Facebook and Instagram — posted pictures of himself in a white tracksuit with a megaphone, hard hat and a white fluffy dog strapped to his chest at a protest.

“Help us stop crime against humanity,” he posted on Instagram.

Paing Takhon is also famous in Thailand and has appeared in TV commercials and shows.

— AFP

Ship captain sentenced to 20 months over oil spill

PORT LOUIS: The captain and first mate of a freighter that crashed into a coral reef off Mauritius, unleashing the Indian Ocean archipelago’s worst environmental disaster, were sentenced to 20 months in jail on Monday.

“The court took into consideration the fact that both defendants pleaded guilty and apologised. The sentence handed down is 20 months in prison,” said magistrate Ida Dookhy Rambarrun.

The MV Wakashio, a Japanese-owned but Panamanian-flagged vessel, ran aground in July 2020, spilling more than 1,000 tonnes of toxic fuel into pristine waters, coating mangroves, corals and other fragile ecosystems.

The vessel’s captain, Sunil Kumar Subhoda Janendra Tilakaratna, was convicted by a court in the capital Port Louis last



Sunil Kumar was charged under the piracy and maritime violence act. — AFP

week, admitted drinking during an onboard birthday party.

He and first officer, Hithanillage Subhoda Janendra Tilakaratna, were found guilty of “endangering

safe navigation”.

“The captain and his second in command were irresponsible and did not deliver as they should on their ‘navigational duties,’ the

magistrate said on Monday.

The MV Wakashio was sailing from Singapore to Brazil with 3,800 tonnes of fuel oil and 200 tonnes of diesel onboard when it ran into the reef off the southeast coast of Mauritius.

During the trial, the captain said he had given instructions to approach Mauritian waters in order to gain access to a mobile phone network so that crew members could contact their families.

“The sea was bad, but the visibility was clear and it was safe to navigate... At one point, the ship could not move and had touched the sea floor,” Nandeshwar said.

“Since I had had a few drinks, it did not seem worthwhile to intervene and it did not occur to me that we were sailing that close.”

The two men were taken into

custody in August 2020, and have been behind bars since then.

ECOLOGICALLY CRITICAL

More than 1,000 tonnes of oil seeped into waters full of marine life from a gash in the vessel’s hull before salvage crews were able to remove all the remaining fuel.

The accident occurred near two ecologically critical sites: Blue Bay, known for its coral gardens, and Pointe D’Esny, which hosts a mangrove forest — a crucial ecosystem as well as a weapon in the fight against global warming.

In the days after the accident, thousands of volunteers marshalled along the coast wearing rubber boots and gloves, scrubbing rocks and stringing together makeshift cordons to contain the oily tide.

— AFP



The bonus for doctors and nurses on duty during the New Year holiday period is set to be doubled.

Russia plans further bonuses for doctors as pandemic thank-you

MOSCOW: Russian doctors are to receive a bonus again next year in recognition of their service during the coronavirus pandemic, according to a statement from the Kremlin on Monday.

It said the bonuses had been ordered by President Vladimir Putin but gave no details on how much medical staff would get. The bonus for doctors and nurses on duty during the New Year holiday period is set to be doubled.

Previously, bonus sums of about \$51 per shift had been paid out to hospital doctors and \$34 to nursing staff. But according to the radio station Ekho Mosky, there were many complaints earlier in

the year that bonuses had not been paid.

The spread of coronavirus continues to put Russia under pressure, although the daily case numbers have dropped in recent months.

On Monday, authorities reported 23,210 new cases nationwide and 937 Covid-19 deaths. However, many cases are thought to go unreported.

Just under half of Russia's population of about 146 million has been double-vaccinated, according to official statistics.

"The vaccination rate is not high enough," Putin admitted last week. However, he opposes making the jobs mandatory for all. — **dpa**

Brazil's east hit by floods after two dams burst under heavy rainfall

ITABUNA: Two dams gave way in the northeastern Brazilian state of Bahia after weeks of heavy rains, swamping already swollen local rivers as flooding hit towns across the region, authorities said.

The Igua dam, on the Verruga river near the city of Vitoria da Conquista in southern Bahia, collapsed on Saturday night, forcing authorities to evacuate residents, mainly in the town of Itambe.

A second dam gave way to rising water levels in Jussiape, 100 kilometres to the north, bringing more alerts for residents to move to safer ground.

There were no reports of deaths or injuries caused by the dam failures, though bridges and roads were damaged.

Further towards the coast in Itabuna, a city of 200,000 inhabitants, fire brigade teams rescued residents trapped in their homes in the downtown area that was under water, reporters said.

"It's crazy by the bridge, there are waves almost 2 metres high," shopkeeper Luiz Constancia told reporters.

Rescuers rowed dinghies along flooded streets to reach trapped families or take them supplies. One man paddled on an inflatable mattress to reach a home.

Residents said the level of the Cachoeira river that runs through



More than 30 areas in Bahia were hit by floods after weeks of heavy rainfall. — **Reuters**

the town located 30 kms from the coastal port city of Ilheus was the highest in 50 years.

In Vitoria da Conquista, Mayor Sheila Lemos, said all residents close to the collapsed Igua dam had been evacuated.

In a posting on the city's website, Lemos said the flooding threatened to cut off the BR-116 highway, a major truck route between northeastern and southern

Brazil.

Bahia Governor Rui Castro said at least 400,000 people have been impacted by the heavy rains and thousands evacuated from some 67 towns facing emergency situations due to floods caused by heavy rainfall for almost two months.

"Thousands of people have had to leave their homes because the water rose one or two metres,

even three metres in some places," he told reporters on Saturday.

The rains have caused 18 deaths in Bahia since the beginning of November, including a 60-year-old ferry owner who drowned on the swollen Rio das Contas river, civil defence officials said.

In the state capital of Salvador, weather officials said December rainfall has been six times greater than the average. — **Reuters**

World mourns Tutu, 'warrior for justice'

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa on Monday began a week of mourning for revered anti-apartheid fighter Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

The Nobel Peace laureate passed away on Sunday at the age of 90, stripping the world of a towering moral figure and the last great protagonist of a heroic South African era.

His funeral will be held on New Year's Day at Cape Town's St George's Cathedral, his former parish, his foundation said, although ceremonies are likely to be muted because of Covid-19 restrictions.

Dozens of people braved rain to gather outside the cathedral on Monday, leaving flowers and messages.

The widow of South Africa's first black president Nelson Mandela, Graca Machel, on Monday mourned "the loss of a brother".

Tutu "is the last of an extraordinarily outstanding



Mourners pay their respects to the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu outside St Georges cathedral in Cape Town. — **Reuters**

generation of leaders that Africa birthed and gifted to the world", she said in a statement.

"He masterfully used his position as a cleric to mobilise South Africans, Africans, and the global community against the brutalities and immorality of the apartheid government," she said.

"He stood resolute and fearless,

leading demonstrations cloaked in his flowing clerical robe with his cross as his shield — the embodiment of humankind's moral conscience."

The bells of St George's will ring for 10 minutes from noon each day until Friday. The church has asked those who hear the sound to pause in their daily work and

think of Tutu.

A memorial service will be held in the capital Pretoria on Wednesday. Family and friends will gather on Thursday evening around Tutu's widow, "Mama Leah".

On Friday, his remains will be placed in the cathedral on the eve of the funeral, although attendance at his farewell will be capped at 100, according to the archbishop of Cape Town, Thabo Makgoba.

Around 400 people have already expressed their intention to attend the event.

But Makgoba told a press conference: "Only a fraction of those who want to be there can be accommodated in the cathedral. So please don't get on a bus to Cape Town."

Music at the ceremony will also have to be moderated because of Covid curbs, officials said.

Tutu's remains will be cremated and his ashes will stay in the cathedral. — **Reuters**

UK firm closer to offering global Internet via satellites

MOSCOW: A Russian Soyuz rocket on Monday took 36 more satellites from British operator OneWeb into orbit, bringing the company more than halfway towards its goal of providing global broadband Internet.

The London-headquartered company is working to complete the construction of a constellation of low earth orbit satellites providing enhanced broadband and other services to countries around the planet.

The UK company plans for its global commercial Internet service to be operational by next year, supported by some 650 satellites.

With the latest mission, it now has a total of 394 satellites in orbit for the

constellation.

The Russian rocket, operated by Europe's Arianespace, took off at 1310 GMT from the Moscow-leased Baikonur cosmodrome in ex-Soviet Kazakhstan.

"LIFTOFF!" Russia's Roscosmos space agency tweeted after the launch.

OneWeb is competing in the race to provide fast Internet for the world's remote areas via satellites along with tech billionaire Elon Musk and fellow billionaire Jeff Bezos of Amazon.

Arianespace, which has worked with Russia for close to two decades, is under contract to make 16 Soyuz launches between December 2020 and the end of 2022. — **AFP**

SHORT TAKES

ROME

Pope voices concern over low birth rates

Pope Francis expressed his concern about falling birth rates in comments. "Many couples prefer not to have a child or to have only one child. This is a tragedy," Francis said after the traditional Angelus prayer, addressing thousands of people as rain fell on St Peter's Square.

Pope Francis was referring to the falling birth rate in Italy in particular, in a trend possibly related to the pandemic.

Francis spoke of a "demographic winter" that must



be overcome for the good of the family and the future.

He also wrote a letter to married couples that was published on Sunday, writing that "children are always a gift."

ATHENS

Ex-president Karolos Papoulias dies

Former Greek president Karolos Papoulias has died at the age of 92, according to state broadcaster ERT and Greek news agency ANA-MPA.

"We bid farewell to Karolos Papoulias," Greek President Katerina Sakellaropoulou said in a tweet, adding that he had worked for "social and national coherence."

Papoulias was twice elected president, a largely ceremonial role. He held the office from March 2005 to March 2015.



He was born in 1929 near the northwestern city of Ioannina.

He was a founding member of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement and one of the closest associates of former socialist prime minister Andreas Papandreu.

WASHINGTON

Fauci acknowledges Covid 'testing problem'

Top US pandemic adviser Anthony Fauci on Sunday acknowledged a Covid "testing problem" as the Omicron strain overwhelms the nation, and he vowed to make more tests available to Americans next month.

"One of the problems is that that's not going to be totally available to everyone until we get to January, and there are still some issues now of people having trouble getting tested," Fauci told ABC talk show "This Week". "But we're addressing the test-



ing problem," he added, saying it should be corrected "very soon."

Covid cases have skyrocketed across the United States in recent weeks as the highly infectious Omicron variant became the dominant strain.

Smaller nations have more to gain from digital currencies

RINA CHANDRAN

When Cambodia’s central bank launched a pilot for a digital payment system in July 2019, its aim was to increase financial inclusion in the country and expand use of the local currency over the US dollar. Then came the coronavirus pandemic.

For the National Bank of Cambodia (NBC), which had been researching a blockchain-based payment system since 2016, the pandemic was a boon that accelerated the adoption of Bakong, named for an ancient Khmer temple near Siem Reap.

Launched formally in Oct. 2020, Bakong — which provides a platform for more than a dozen banks and financial institutions — has reached about 5.9 million users, with transactions worth nearly \$2 billion so far, according to the NBC.

“We didn’t foresee a pandemic when we launched in 2020,” said Chea Serey, director general of the NBC.

“But it was a blessing in disguise, as adoption was faster because people were worried about handling money,” she said.

Worldwide, the pandemic quickened the growth of digital transactions, with corporations encouraging online payments and governments taking steps to increase financial inclusion for those who had been excluded due to poor connectivity, limited access to handsets or low literacy.

Bakong, developed by Japanese blockchain company Soramitsu, enables Cambodians to use a free mobile app to make payments and transfer money through any bank on the platform, even if they don’t have a traditional account with the bank.

More than 200,000 previously unbanked Cambodians use a Bakong e-wallet now, the NBC said.

That is just a fraction of the more than 70 per cent of the 17-million population estimated to be unbanked in the Southeast Asian country who never or rarely use a bank. — Reuters

Smaller nations are quicker to embrace digital currencies because they have real challenges to overcome, and the risk of adopting a new technology is probably lower than the risk of not doing anything

CHEA SEREY

Director general, NBC



HARBIN ICE AND SNOW WORLD

People looking at ice sculptures at the Harbin Ice and Snow World in Harbin, in northeastern China’s Heilongjiang province. — AFP

2021: A year that changed lives forever



Lakshmi Kothaneth lakshmiobserver@gmail.com

2021 HAS BEEN A YEAR THAT SAW REALITIES CHANGE AND MANY HAD TO DEAL WITH THE UNEXPECTED

Counting down the days to New Year has us looking back at the year that is winding down.

A young friend said it has been a slow year. He is a student and students have had to stay happy with online classes. It is these young years when we collect experiences.

It has been a year that saw realities change and many had to deal with the unexpected.

One might say that is the case every year but not quite so much as the pandemic years because almost the whole world had to go through the same processes — the fear of the virus and the vaccinations, the loneliness and anxiety the list is endless.

Along with the fear and anxiety was performances of companies and the impact on economy and job security. We have been creative and adaptive as new situations emerged such as the current one with Omicron.

In the recent days there have been occasions to look back and reflect. Have just been reading interview of singer, Peter Andre, and he talked about how conscious he was about fitness and looks during the 90s so much that he had

developed an uncomfortable relationship with food. Now right at the beginning of my radio career Peter Andre had made an impact as ‘Mysterious Girl’ was one of the most requested songs on Radio Sultanate of Oman. His style was much admired but only now we know the struggles he went through.

Nothing in life is easy especially success. You can be a one hit wonder but to sustain the success there are too many sacrifices. For that matter Michael Jackson remains timeless because of his originality and the Beatles for urging in an era that was reflected in their songs. Pop music of course today is much enjoyed through various digital media but music and car is an irresistible combination whether it is going to be driverless or not. Whichever the decade there is nothing like long drives and music.

Even while the musical world also transformed from analogue to digital one was not still thinking about Internet of things and a digital economy that will move towards paperless cash. Plastic money was talked about then but online world has just made it all faster and by 2022 it might be mandatory to go digital payment all the way in the Sultanate of

Oman.

Banking went online so we do not get to see tellers anymore and it is the automated voices that greets us on mobile banking but how about speaking to robots?

So most of us wait for the person to speak online for queries only to be told in some cases, “That is all we can do.”

Visiting branches have become a rare event and sitting with a token and playing games on the tab or sitting and staring blankly have become a ritual that is a good break from the routine. With less and less human contact and more on the digital world our etiquettes need reworking and our people skill has been diminishing. Listening skill and focus have been challenged thanks to social media’s one minute duration videos.

In an ever changing world we can expect more from new fields for career and in medicine but one aspect that works all time is practicing gratitude.

So as the world winds us to the last month on the calendar of 2021, let us make a list of everything we are grateful for.

Make it a beautiful year! 12 months and 365 opportunities are awaiting us!

Tutu’s truth commission a balm for wounded South Africa

KRISTEN VAN SCHIE

Two days after South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) started to investigate apartheid-era crimes, Archbishop Desmond Tutu broke down in tears.

Before him sat a former political prisoner who had been tortured for years by South Africa’s notorious security police.

As Singqokwana Ernest Malgas described being suffocated with a mask, he wept, and Tutu wept with him.

It would be the first and only time Tutu would cry publicly during the emotionally-wrenching work of the commission that he chaired.

“It wasn’t fair,” he told a television interviewer years later.

“The media then concentrat-

ed on me instead of the people who were the rightful subjects. If I wanted to cry, I would cry at home.”

Between 1996 and 1998, some of the darkest days of apartheid repression were re-lived in a kind of public theatre at a series of hearings that Tutu held around the country.

South Africans gathered around their TV sets and radios each Sunday night to hear weekly summaries of the testimonies.

Many learnt for the first time about the brutality of their rigid, right-wing former government, through the words of torture victims or family members of missing activists.

It was “a space within which victims could share the story of their trauma with the nation”, Tutu would later write in the com-

mission’s seven-volume report.

FULL DISCLOSURE

Unlike the Nuremburg trials, he and his 14 fellow commissioners gathered “not to judge the morality of people’s actions, but to act as an incubation chamber for national healing, reconciliation and forgiveness”.

Perpetrators of horrific violence, often foot soldiers of the repressive regime, could come before the commission and receive amnesty for the actions they carried out.

It was a tough pill for many observers and victims to swallow, but only if one thought of justice “as retributive and punitive in nature”, wrote Tutu.

“There is another kind of justice — a restorative justice which is concerned not so much with

punishment as with correcting imbalances, restoring broken relationships — with healing, harmony and reconciliation.”

Amnesty was meant to be earned at a cost — Tutu insisted that reconciliation and forgiveness could only come from full disclosure.

“However painful the experience, the wounds of the past must not be allowed to fester,” he said. “They must be opened. They must be cleansed. And balm must be poured on them so they can heal.”

And so husbands and fathers sat before the commission and detailed their worst crimes, often breaking families and friendships as secrets and divided loyalties spilt into the open.

“People said amnesty was cheap,” former commissioner and human right lawyer, Dumisa

Ntsebeza, a long-time friend of Tutu’s, said in 2015.

“Cheap how? Simply because people don’t go to jail?”

“In fact, amnesty was a kind of justice even weightier than what we would have got through the criminal justice system.

“In an amnesty application, you would say yourself what you did, in detail. It came out of your mouth, with your own lawyer sitting next to you. It’s a sentence for life. You can’t wash that off.”

But Tutu’s vision of a South Africa scrubbed clean through truth fell short.

After the 976 pages of the report were published in 1998, the government led by the liberation giants of the African National Congress failed to act on many of the TRC’s key recommendations.

— AFP



Al Wahaibi, Al Zadjali elected as sports figures

2 8 T H F E B S E T A S D A T E O F O C C E L E C T I O N

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 27

The general assembly of Oman Olympic Committee (OOC) elected Khalid al Wahaibi and Al Mutassim al Zadjali as sports figures in the upcoming term (2020+1 – 2024). The selection came during the regular general assembly meeting which took place on Monday at Crown Plaza hotel. The members of general assembly approved February 28, 2022 as the date of OCC board election for the new term (2020+1 – 2024). The meeting was chaired by the OOC president Sayyid Khalid bin

Hamed al Busaidy in presence of the board directors and general assembly members. The meeting commenced by a welcoming speech from the OOC chief as he thanked everyone's attendance in the meeting. "A dedicated thanks to HM Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq for his care on sporting and youth fields and to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for their continuous support. I would like to congratulate Oman's icon table tennis player Fatma al Nabhani and the shooter Hamed al Khatri for being selected as members of general assembly from athletes category and wishing them all the



best," he said. The list of candidates for sports figures positions were between Khalid al Wahaibi, Al Mutassim al Zadjali, Obaid al Manwari and Salim al Masroori while Ahmed al Marhoon withdrew from the competition ahead of the election. **ELECTION RESULTS** The election results were unveiled post the election as Khalid al Wahaibi had 14 votes, Al Mutassim al Zadjali (15 votes), Obaid al Manwari (1 vote) and Salim al Masroori (2 votes). The former chairman of Oman Volleyball Association, Khalid al Wahaibi, thanked the members for their confidence to represent in the general assembly of OOC. "We will work closely with OOC board directors on their strategies and develop them towards the success of Oman's sports at different levels," he ended. Ex-chairman of Oman Tennis Association (OTA), Al Mutassim al Zadjali, highly appreciated the trust from the members. "OOC had achieved different accomplishments during the past years. We will focus on continuity of different initiatives and plans that will ensure a top show for Oman's Olympic sports and athletes in different levels," he ended.

Dr Shihab attends international meet on Sports Medicine in Turkey

SPORTS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 27

Oman's Dr Shihab Aldin bin Ahmed al Riyami participated in the International Conference on Sports Medicine and Exercise Physiology which concluded recently in Istanbul, Turkey. The International Conference aimed to bring together leading academic scientists, researchers and research scholars to exchange and share their experiences and research results on all aspects of Sports Medicine and Exercise Physiology. FIVB international coach instructor affirmed essentially

of the conference and its main recommendations. "The key outcomes of the international conference covered many areas including daily activity and training at least 30 minutes will be so far so good for enhancing cardiovascular and respiratory systems. Also, studying the differences between sports play positions in team and individual sports in all aspects as per physiological demands, technical, tactical and psychological," he said. The other recommendations raised from the conference highlighted on the importance of understanding the heart disease and trying to find the main reasons

for athletes. The Youth Olympic Games are an excellent opportunity to promote Sport for all, athlete's performance and media roles in improving the athlete profiles in games. There is an increasing need for qualified international physiological studies and researches and development of sports training in all programmes, resulting in a demand for special education schemes for coaches and trainers. The importance of ECK and ECHO medical examination for identifying any historical or family genetic issues in cardiac functioning and stratucal. Using successive procedures

proportional to the ideal shown by the teaching pyramid, when teaching most of the skills of individual games, including swimming, because of the consideration of individual differences for students. Focusing on the element of fun during the whole stages of learning and linking educational fun games with the skills targeted by the process of teaching. Providing the element of learning-related to the challenge, in consideration using the self-challenge, not challenging others. In future, conducting a lot of similar studies in this physiology field on athlete's samples of different age.





Omani, Sri Lankan hockey teams play friendly tourney

MUSCAT: Oman Hockey Association (OHA) is hosting on Tuesday friendly quartet hockey friendly tournament that feature Oman's Ahli Sidab and Suhar, the two teams that have qualified for His Majesty's Hockey Cup, and Sri Lanka's Colombo and the military team, at the hockey ground of Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher.

The matches will be held on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Suhar will take on the military

team and the match will kick off at 6:30 pm while Ahli Sidab meets Colombo and the match will start at 8:15, on Tuesday. In the following day, Colombo meets Suhar and the match will begin at 5 pm and Ahli Sidab meets the military team and the match will start at 7 pm.

The championship commemorates 40 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Sultanate of Oman and Sri Lanka.

Polish FA rejects coach Sousa's request

WARSAW: Poland coach Paulo Sousa asked to end his contract by mutual consent after getting an offer from Brazilian top-flight club Flamengo but Polish football association president Cezary Kulesza has rejected the request.

Portuguese media reported that Sousa was due to start working in Rio de Janeiro in January, although his contract with Poland ends in March. Sousa's agent told Polish press agency PAP on Monday that Sousa had not yet signed a contract with Flamengo.

"This is extremely irresponsible behaviour, inconsistent with the coach's earlier declarations. Therefore, I firmly refused," Kulesza said in a statement on Twitter. — Reuters



LEADERS CITY HIT SIX IN BOXING DAY GOAL FEAST



LONDON: Manchester City led the way in a bumper Boxing Day goal feast in the Premier League on Sunday with a 6-3 win over Leicester City sending them six points clear at the top of the standings.

The opening five games of the Covid-19 impacted festive programme delivered 26 goals with Arsenal romping to a 5-0 win away to bottom club Norwich City and Chelsea enjoying a 3-1 win at Aston Villa.

Tottenham Hotspur beat Crystal Palace 3-0 while Southampton enjoyed a surprise 3-2 win at West Ham United.

Pep Guardiola's City are on 47 points with Liverpool, whose match against Leeds United was called off due to Covid-19 cases in the Yorkshire team, on 41 points.

Third-placed Chelsea are also on 41 points, while Arsenal move up to fourth place on 35 points.

City got off to a flying start, grabbing a fifth-minute lead through Belgian midfielder Kevin De Bruyne, before a Riyad Mahrez penalty put the hosts in control nine minutes later.

Things went from bad to worse for a weakened Leicester side with Ilkay Gundogan and another penalty, converted by Raheem Sterling, giving the hosts a four-goal lead inside 25 minutes.

Despite looking dead and buried, though, Leicester stormed back in the second half as goals from James Maddison, Ademola Lookman and Kelechi Iheanacho threatened to derail the league leaders.

But Aymeric Laporte's 69th-

minute header and Sterling's late second took the champions over the line.

Arsenal's fourth straight win came in convincing fashion at Carrow Road with Mikel Arteta's side taking a sixth minute lead through Bukayo Saka who finished off a fine, flowing move.

KILLER PASS

Kieran Tierney doubled the lead just before the break with Martin Odegaard providing the killer pass for the Scotland left back, who struck a low shot into the net.

England forward Saka grabbed Arsenal's third in the 67th minute with another low strike before Alexandre Lacazette was fouled in the box and got up to stroke home the spot kick in the 84th.

Substitute Emile Smith Rowe

wrapped up the win with a simple tap-in during stoppage time.

Chelsea fell behind at Villa when a Matt Targett cross flew in off the head of defender Reece James but Jorginho brought Thomas Tuchel's side level from the spot just before the break.

Romelu Lukaku, a halftime substitute, put Chelsea ahead with a fine glancing header from a Callum Hudson-Odoi cross and then in stoppage time he was brought down by Ezri Konsa and Jorginho again made no mistake from the spot.

Spurs stretched their unbeaten Premier League run under new manager Antonio Conte to six games thanks to a strong display against a Palace side reduced to ten men for the second half.

— Reuters

Shoaib, Latif shine in Qurum, Ghubrah wins

BY SHAHZAD RAZA
MUSCAT

Qurum Thunders rode on Shoaib Khan's outstanding all-round show to beat Ruwi Rangers by 6 runs in an entertaining six-hitting D20 Cricket League game at OC Turf 1 in Al Amerat on Sunday.

In a match that saw 18 sixes being hit, Shoaib topscored with a fluent 66 followed by a superb 44 by Hashir Dafedar as Qurum posted 177 on the board. The Sultanate of Oman pacer Mohammed Nadeem bowled exceptionally well, taking 4 for 23 whereas Wasim Ali bagged 2 for 30.

Ruwi stayed in the game for much of its spirited chase before running out of wickets and falling short by 14 runs in the final over. Wasim Ali was its main scorer with

a solid 46 off 36. Gustav Burger (30 off 26) and Husnain Ali (25 off 9) were the other notable batters. Shoaib was the pick of Qurum bowlers while Munis Ansari and Ganesh Chandrashekhar claimed two wickets each.

Brief Scores (D20): Qurum Thunders 177 for 7 in 20 overs (Shoaib Khan 66 – 5x4, 3x6, Hashir Dafedar 44 – 4x3, 3x6, Mohammed Nadeem 4-23, Wasim Ali 2-30) beat Ruwi Rangers 163 all out in 19.1 overs (Wasim Ali 46 – 2x4, 3x6, Gustav Burger 30 – 3x4, Shoaib Khan 4-36, Munis Ansari 2-25, Ganesh Chandrashekhar 2-27) by 14 runs.

Latif powers Ghubrah to big win

In the day's first game at the same venue, Imran Latif smashed an unbeaten 83 off only 41 balls

to power Ghubrah Giants to an impressive 8-wicket victory against Azaiba XI on Sunday.

Solid half centuries by Akmal Shahzad (77 off 52) and Arsalan Bashir (58 off 32) saw Azaiba to a robust 181 for 4 in 20 overs. Aqil Khan and Imran Latif bagged two wickets each.

Undaunted by a big target, Ghubrah raced to the victory in just 17.4 overs, scoring 185 for 2 thanks to brilliant batting by Latif, Abid Ali (53 not out off 37) and Ghazanfar Iqbal (41 off 19). Latif led the six-fest by whacking seven hits over the fence while Ghazanfar slammed five.

Brief Scores (D20): Azaiba XI 181 for 4 in 20 overs (Akmal Shahzad 77 – 4x4, 5x6, Arsalan Bashir 58 – 2x4, 3x6, Aqil Khan 2-18, Imran Latif 2-35) lost to

Ghubrah Giants 185 for 2 in 17.4 overs (Imran Latif 83 – 4x4, 7x6, Abid Ali 53 – 4x4, 2x6, Ghazanfar Iqbal 41 – 1x4, 5x6) by 8 wickets.

Mundhir bowls OCT Muscat to victory

Majid Hussein's splendid 47 and Mundhir al Balushi's excellent 4 for 37 steered OCT Muscat to a 28-run win over OCT Al Hail A in a 30-over B Division League game at Muscat Municipality ground 2 in Amerat on Friday.

Apart from Majid's top knock, Muscat relied on brilliant batting by Rashad al Balushi (46) and Mohamed Aslam (30) to reach a respectable 171 for 5 in 30 overs. Nadhir Ghulam and Hisham Shafi took two wickets each.

Pushed back by Mudhir's superb spell, OCT Al Hail folded up for 143 in 25.4 overs. Khalid

al Balushi, Arif al Balushi and Mohamed Aslam claimed two wickets each.

Brief Scores (B Division): OCT Muscat 171 for 5 in 30 overs (Majid Hussein 47 – 2x4, Rashad al Balushi 46 – 4x4, Mohamed Aslam 30 – 4x4, Nadhir Ghulam 2-31, Hisham Shafi 2-34) beat OCT Al Hail 'A' 143 all out in 25.4 overs (Abdul Jalil 58 – 7x4, 1x6, Mundhir Al Balushi 4-37, Khalid al Balushi 2-7, Arif al Balushi 2-24, Mohamed Aslam 2-36) by 28 runs.

Asghar stars in Bank Muscat win.

In another B Division match, Asghar Khan's super 60 off 43 and Abbas Al Balushi's magnificent 3 for 18 were the highlights of Bank Muscat's 63-run victory against OCT Seeb at

Muscat Municipality ground 1.

Bank Muscat's 236 all out also saw a solid 54 off 42 by Amir Mehmood. Haroon al Balushi and Osman AB picked up two wickets each.

OCT Seeb failed to reach the target as it was restricted to 173 for 9, Haroon Al Balushi topscoring with 42 off 46. Abbas bowled brilliantly in his five-over spell, taking 3 wickets for only 18 runs. Benny Mathew bagged 2 for 25.

Brief Scores (B Division): Bank Muscat 236 all out in 30 overs (Asghar Khan 60 – 8x4, Amir Mehmood 54 – 4x4, Haroon Al Balushi 2-27, Osman Ab 2-30, Issam Othman 2-41) beat Oct Seeb 173 for 9 in 30 overs (Haroon Al Balushi 42 – 3x4, Abbas Al Balushi 3-18, Benny Mathew 2-25) by 63 runs.



No clarity on Djokovic's participation, with ATP Cup days away

MELBOURNE: With players starting to arrive in Sydney for the men's season-opening ATP Cup, there was still no clarity on Monday whether top-ranked Novak Djokovic would be taking part in the team tournament or in the Australian Open that follows.

There has been intense speculation over Djokovic's participation at the Australian Open, which starts on January 17, with the 34-year-old, who is opposed to vaccinations <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-tennis-djokovic-idUSKBN2210V1>, repeatedly declining to say if he has been inoculated against Covid-19. The rate of vaccination in the top 100 in men's tennis is 95%, according to ATP Tour data.

With the organisers of the Grand Slam confirming that all players and participants at Melbourne Park must be vaccinated or have a medical exemption granted by an independent panel of experts, Djokovic has kept everyone guessing.

If the Serbian does not turn

up, world No 2 Daniil Medvedev would be the top draw at the ATP Cup, and he has already arrived in Sydney to help Russia defend its title.

Djokovic, 34, has won a record nine Australian Open titles, including the last three, and the chances of him playing Down Under improved when he was named in Serbia's team for the ATP Cup.

But on Saturday, a report in Serbian daily *Blic* said Djokovic would not be travelling to Sydney for the tournament, adding to doubts over whether he will play at Melbourne Park from January 17.

His father Srdjan told a Serbian television channel last month that Djokovic would probably pull out of the major, saying Tennis Australia's stance on mandatory vaccination was tantamount to "blackmail".

Djokovic's pullout will, however, not impact Serbia's participation in the tournament which has a \$10 million prize purse, with the teams locked in on December 7 based on player entries.

— Reuters

Rain washes out South Africa v India day two



A digital board displays a message that play has been abandoned due to rain during the second day of the first Test cricket match between South Africa and India at SuperSport Park in Centurion. — AFP

PRETORIA: No play was possible on the second day of the first test between South Africa and India at Centurion Park on Monday as heavy rain meant frustration for both sides seeking to gain the upper hand in the three-match series.

India were to resume on an imposing 272 for three, but

persistent rain meant the umpires called the day off at 1400 local time (1200 GMT) with no prospect of play.

Better weather is forecast for Tuesday and Wednesday, but India will have to quicken the pace of their innings if they are to drive home their advantage.

Opener KL Rahul was superb

on Sunday as he made an unbeaten 122 and when play resumes he will be joined at the crease by Ajinkya Rahane on 40.

They will want to post a big first-innings score and potentially bat only once in the test if they are not to run out of time in their quest for victory.

South Africa will feel in the

match too if they can wrap up the Indian innings quickly on the third day, but will have to bowl a lot better than on Sunday, when only seamer Lungi Ngidi (3-45) was among the wickets.

India are seeking a first test series win in South Africa with matches in Johannesburg and Cape Town to follow. — Reuters

Nuggets hold off Clippers, Bulls beat Pacers

LOS ANGELES: Denver and their NBA Most Valuable Player Nikola Jokic thwarted a furious Clippers rally to emerge with a 103-100 victory in Los Angeles on Sunday.

The Nuggets saw their 17-point third-quarter lead evaporate, falling behind by nine with 9:04 remaining only to rally for the narrow victory.

Jokic scored 26 points and pulled down 22 rebounds for the Nuggets. Will Barton added 17 and Austin Rivers and Monte Morris scored 12 points apiece as Denver avoided the kind of collapse that saw them waste a 19-point lead in



a loss to Charlotte on Thursday.

Luke Kennard drained a three-pointer with 19 seconds left to pull the Clippers within one at 101-100. But Jokic was fouled on an inbounds play and made two free throws to push Denver's lead to three and Brandon Boston's three-point attempt at the buzzer for Los Angeles didn't fall.

Boston and Eric Bledsoe led Los Angeles with 18 points apiece. Ivica Zubac scored 17 points and grabbed 11 rebounds for the Clippers, who were playing their first game since announcing that Paul George would miss at least

three weeks with a torn ligament in his right elbow.

Elsewhere, Jimmy Butler returned from an eight-game injury absence to post a double-double in the Miami Heat's 93-83 victory over the Orlando Magic.

Butler, who was sidelined with a bruised tailbone, scored 17 points and pulled down 11 rebounds, handing out four assists and coming up with three steals.

It couldn't have been more timely after Miami guard Kyle Lowry on Saturday joined the parade of NBA players sidelined by Covid-19 concerns. — AFP

Dutch legend Kramer may miss out on Beijing Olympic



PARIS: Speed skating legend Sven Kramer could miss out on a place in the 2022 Winter Olympics after finishing third in the 5,000 metres at Dutch trials for the Beijing Games on Sunday.

Kramer, who won the last three Olympic 5,000m titles, is the most decorated male Olympic speed skater of all time with nine medals.

But the 35-year-old's 6min 12.29sec was third best on the day behind Patrick Roest (6:08.64) and Jorrit Bergsma (6:11.14).

Roest, a three-time world allround champion, is assured of his ticket to Beijing and should be accompanied by Bergsma, but Kramer must now wait until the end of the Dutch trials on Thursday.

Roest, a three-time world allround champion, is assured of his ticket to Beijing and should be accompanied by Bergsma, but Kramer must now wait until the end of the Dutch trials

While the Netherlands can enter three men in the Olympic 5,000m, a nation cannot enter more than nine speed skaters per gender.

Kramer must now count on

certain rivals qualifying for two or three distances to be selected.

Another possibility would be for Kramer to be selected for the team pursuit event in which he won Olympic gold in 2014.

"I can be useful for the pursuit and do a good 5,000m," insisted Kramer, who had back surgery in May, after the race.

Another Dutch legend, Ireen Wust, also failed to guarantee a place at Beijing.

The five-time Olympic champion finished third in the 1,000m on Sunday, but she can make up for it in her favourite event, the 1,500m, on Wednesday.

As with Kramer she is hoping to compete in a fifth Olympics from February 4-20. — AFP

business

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Al Wusta Fisheries celebrates start of construction of tuna fleet



STRONG IMPETUS: New fleet to help harness nation's share of tuna from Indian Ocean

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 27

As part of the Sultanate of Oman's celebration of the 51st National Day of the Renaissance, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, together with Fisheries Development Oman (FDO) attended the keel-laying ceremony marking the start of construction work on a fleet of tuna fishing vessels for eventual deployment in the Indian Ocean.

The newbuildings, owned by Al Wusta Fisheries Industries (a subsidiary of FDO), will target an annual catch of 20,000 tonnes of different tuna fish species in the first phase. The fleet will enable the Sultanate of Oman get its share of the living aquatic resources in the international waters of the Indian Ocean.

The fisheries sector is vital source of national income for the Omani economy, ranked only second to hydrocarbons. The keel-laying ceremony, which was held in the Zamakona Basin in Bilbao, Kingdom of Spain, was attended by Eng Yaqoub bin Khalfan al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources for Fisheries; Nasser bin Sulaiman al Harthy, Chairman of Fisheries Development Oman and a number of officials of the Spanish shipbuilder.

"The Ministry seeks to develop the fisheries sector through its strategic plan within Oman Vision 2040," said the Under-Secretary. "It also aims to increase the return from increasing fish production and raising its added

The tuna fishing vessels, which are designed as per the highest international standards, include fish processing lines with refrigeration of -20 degrees Centigrade and a processing line for high-quality tuna to deliver the products to international markets

equipped with the latest systems and equipment. It is expected that these efforts will contribute to increasing commercial fishing activity and establishing projects that enhance economic diversification efforts.

Al Wusta Fisheries Industries Company is one of the initiatives of the National Programme for Economic Diversification (Tanfeedh).

Al Wusta Fisheries Industries Company, in coordination and cooperation with the relevant authorities, also seeks to establish a commercial fishing fleet that can utilise the natural resources of the Omani regional waters and the Indian Ocean, attract investments to the fisheries sector, increase fish production and collect research data.

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ahlibank welcomes
new batch for Himam
development programme



MUSCAT: Ahlibank recently welcomed the new batch of Himam, the new identity of its Graduate Development Programme. Through this pivotal programme, the bank aims to develop the leadership and professional skills of Omani youth by offering them intensive courses, on-the-job training and skill refinement to prepare them to succeed in the banking sector.

Mohammed bin Mohsin al Mufargi, AGM-Head of Human Resources, ahlibank said, “This two-year programme significantly contributes to the development of management and leadership skills of young graduates, which will equip them to join the banking industry. It also enhances each individual’s self-confidence, as it introduces them to the most important and

critical requirements of working in the market after completing their university studies. On behalf of the bank, I am pleased to congratulate and welcome our future leaders and wish them all the best and success in their continuing journey.”

“Ahlibank is keen to support Oman Vision 2040’s objectives, which places great importance and focus on youth empowerment by upskilling and providing them with training opportunities to be able to lead the future through innovation and excellence. Our real contribution is reflected in a number of programmes and initiatives geared towards human resources and inspiring them to join the national workforce after completing a certain period of training.”

Oxy sponsors
equestrian
federation
endurance race

MUSCAT: Occidental Oman (Oxy) representatives recently attended the “Oxy Endurance Race”, which was exclusively sponsored by the company; in cooperation of the Oman Equestrian Federation, and the Al Dhahirah Equestrian Committee. Under the sponsorship agreement, 3 vehicles were awarded by Oxy to the top three winners of the 100 kms race.

The event was held at Wilayat Ibri, Al Dhahirah Governorate, under the auspices of Najeeb bin Ali al Rawas, Governor of Al Dhahirah. Nasser al Maskari, CSR Manager at Oxy Oman, and Sayyid Mundhir bin Saif al Busaidy, Chairman of the Oman Equestrian Federation, attended on behalf of their organisations.

The sponsorship marks Oxy’s inaugural support of equestrian racing, after its long-term engagement with camel racing in the Sultanate as a local support historically tied to the culture of local communities.

“This sponsorship reflects the company’s long-standing strides in support of historic cultural sports in the Sultanate, and we are proud to engage with the regionally recognised and acclaimed sport of equestrian racing,” said Stephen Kelly, President and General Manager at Oxy Oman.

“Oxy is committed to supporting projects which directly impact communities located within our concession areas, and to enhance social development through long-term projects in the region that aid in diversifying the economy,” he added.

Chevrolet Silverado
Trail Boss: Legendary
off-road prowess

MUSCAT: If you are looking for a pick-up truck, there are very few options that match the power, safety capabilities or comfort of a Chevrolet Silverado. The different configurations and trims ensure there is one that fits your requirement to the T.

The Silverado offers exceptional refinement without compromising on the off-road prowess and towing ability that is its hallmark. It ticks all the boxes from rugged looks to safety features, onboard technology, and convenience, making it difficult to pass it up and settle for anything less.

Adding to its appeal is a six-year extended warranty, 50,000km service and registration that is all included in the price. The Silverado is available with option of 2 engine/2



transmission choices. Powered by 5.3L and 6.2L V-8s, it is equipped with an industry-first Dynamic Fuel Management System that actively shuts off any number of cylinders to improve fuel economy for optimum performance and efficiency.

Key features include 2-inch suspension lift that is standard on all Trail Boss models, 18-inch black alloy wheels fitted with Mud-Terrain Goodyear Wrangler DuraTrac blackwall tyres, and standard trailering package.

BankDhofar gets HR Excellence
Award for ‘People Development’



This accolade highlights BankDhofar’s continuous efforts to set training and qualification strategies within its general strategy whereby all training programmes and opportunities are linked to employees’ career paths.

The bank strongly believes that continuous training and talent development of its employees to best serve the customers.

Learning and development is one of the key pillars in the

bank’s operational strategy. The integrated training programmes, presented by the Performance Academy, are considered as a qualitative investment in human capital. Equipped with state-of-art facilities, Performance Academy includes classrooms where training sessions are conducted, a library full of resources, and computer labs.

Additionally, with the aim of equipping its employees with required skills to best serve the

customers, the academy includes a mock branch where employees are trained and they go through real experience. BankDhofar, through the academy aims to make training available to all its employees through its branch network across the Sultanate of Oman.

Certified online learning and development courses will be available for the bank’s employees across different regions.

The bank has also achieved an Omanisation rate of more than 94% in various administrative levels and different departments and divisions.

BankDhofar is proud of the Omani competencies within the senior and middle management team and the operational level, both at the departments and the branch network. To learn more, check-out BankDhofar pages on social media; Facebook (www.facebook.com/BankDhofar), Twitter (@BankDhofar), Instagram (www.instagram.com/BankDhofar), or visit the official website www.BankDhofar.com or contact the Customer Engagement Hub 24/7 on (+968) 24791111 for inquiries.

Nesto opens new hypermarket in Ruwi

MUSCAT: Nesto Group has opened its new hypermarket in Ruwi. Spreading over two floors, this is the 12th Nesto hypermarket in the Sultanate of Oman. The hypermarket, which is the 96th branch overall, was officially inaugurated by Sayyid Khalid bin Mahfoodh bin Salim al Busaidy in the presence of other dignitaries.

Haris Palollathil and Mujeeb VTK, Directors of Nesto group, and other top Nesto officials were also present on the occasion. In keeping with its endeavour to provide the best quality products most hygienically, Nesto Hypermarket has invested heavily in special areas like the latest baking and cooking machines.

With Nesto’s range of attractive products and competitive prices, the new hypermarket is expected to drive a large segment of the population to experience world-class shopping with unparalleled quality in terms of products and services.

“This shows the kind of demand for quality shopping that



exists here, and we are extremely happy to bring again another world-class shopping experience as close as possible to the residents of Ruwi and its nearby areas,” Haris Palollathil said.

Commenting on the group’s expansion plans, the director said six new hypermarkets are expected to be operational in the country within the next two years.

“These new projects reflect

our ambitious growth plans and our commitment to providing both citizens and residents in this part of the Sultanate of Oman with an unparalleled shopping experience. With the rapid economic growth being witnessed all around the Sultanate of Oman, we strongly feel we should be closer to our customers so that they do not have to make long trips to meet their shopping needs,” Mujeeb VTK added.

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MUSCAT: Lincoln Aviator SUV with its sleek design, impressive luxury and rewarding driving

dynamics, makes it one of the finest luxury SUVs to own and experience.

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The standard twin-turbocharged 3.0-litre V6 engine, paired with a 10-speed SelectShift automatic transmission, it delivers an impressive 400 horsepower and 562 Nm of torque for effortless acceleration.

Lincoln Drive Modes’ five signature settings — Normal, Conserve, Excite, Slippery and Deep Conditions — allow

owners to further customise their driving experience, while a 10.1-inch standard configurable LCD instrument cluster confirms their choices with beautiful, easy-to-read dynamic graphics and prompts.

Aviator delivers a wealth of intuitive technologies designed to assist the driver while enhancing the overall experience of the journey.

Right from the start, the Air Glide Suspension with Dynamic Lower Entry automatically lowers the vehicle to “greet” the driver, adding a new level of sophistication to Lincoln’s signature welcome lighting embrace.

The convenience of this feature makes loading cargo easier as well. The Aviator is also equipped with a technology that enables Aviator to “see” most potholes or uneven pavement and immediately make suspension adjustments to keep the ride as smooth as possible.

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Well-known Omani firm launches EU presence

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 27

Leading Omani firm Global Business Services LLC has initiated procedures to set up a presence in Hungary. It follows a series of MoUs signed by Muscat-based Global Business Services worth around \$450 million in the fields of Oil & Gas, trading, tourism and manufacturing.

Registration of the Omani company in Hungary will boost commerce, trade and investment promotion between the two countries, stated by Shaikh Khamis bin Salim al Junaibi, Chairman.

The company registration process was signed at the Hungarian Embassy in the Sultanate of Oman in the



presence of Dr Tibor Szatmari, Ambassador of Hungary, Zsolt Pakozdy, Commercial & Economic Counsellor

(Hungarian Embassy), Shaikh Khalid bin Abdullah bin Said al Hamrasdi and Shaikh Khamis bin Salim al Junaibi - Chairman

of the newly formed Hungary and EU business entity Global Business Services Europe.

This was followed by

the official signing of the company formation documents GBS EU's team comprises of Jamal bin Salim al Junaibi - Managing Director, Syed Imtiaz Ali Gilani - Technical & Business Development Director, and Sultan bin Juma al Sunaidy - International Relationship Director. Representatives from the Hungarian side include Miklos Ruzics - Managing Director and Andras Kepes - Technical Director.

With the goal of promoting long-term trade and commercial cooperation between Pakistan, Sultanate of Oman and Hungary, Pakistan's Ambassador K K Ahsan Wagan was also invited as a special guest to witness the company registration ceremony.

"Global Business Services acknowledges and appreciates the role played by Dr Tibor Szatmari, Hungarian Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman and his team in the company registration and facilitating trade, commercial and investment promotion between the both sides," said GBS in a statement.

In order to give a practical shape to the business and investment promotion between the Sultanate of Oman and Hungary, a business delegation comprising prominent businessmen and investors will visit Hungary from January 22, 2022.

The main objective of the Omani business delegation is to hold B2B and B2G meetings with the Hungarian side.

Oman Air participates in ICAO regional webinar

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 27

Oman Air, the national airline of the Sultanate of Oman, recently participated in ICAO's Regional Security Culture Webinar under the theme 'Year of Security Culture.'

The webinar provided an opportunity for key aviation stakeholders to explore the principles, importance and benefits of a strong and effective security culture in aviation, with a focus on some of the challenges and subsequent solutions adopted by stakeholders in the Middle East region.

Speaking on behalf of Oman Air, Alauddin al Ali, Senior Manager of Airline Security, explained how a strong security culture is embedded into Oman



Air's operations and forms the foundation of a pro-active safety-first mindset across the airline.

"In aviation, a well-entrenched security culture must never be adopted as an afterthought, but rather as a priority that guides all facets of the business. At Oman Air, our security culture comes before any other operational culture to ensure optimal safety

for our passengers and employees at all times."

In his keynote address during the AVSEC Global Symposium 2021 held in October, the Secretary General of the International Civil Aviation Organization, Juan Carlos Salazar said: "The pandemic has posed many challenges and taught us new lessons, driving us to adapt

and evolve to maintain secure operations under very demanding circumstances. As operators continue to recover from its impact, we have been presented with another opportunity to rethink our approach and update our strategies, and above all to stay flexible and responsive as international air transport recovers to redefine itself as threats continue to evolve. ICAO is proud to serve as a nexus of strategic global partnerships and effective government and industry cooperation in support of these important efforts." The 5th edition of AVSEC Global Symposium highlighted ICAO's 'Year of Security Culture', which seeks to holistically promote security across all aspects of aviation operations as the industry recovers.

Oil prices mixed, US crude falls after Covid flight cancellations

SINGAPORE: Oil prices were mixed on Monday, with Brent edging up while US crude futures slipped after airlines called off thousands of flights in the United States over Christmas holidays amid surging Covid-19 infections.

US West Texas Intermediate crude futures fell 41 cents, or 0.6%, to \$72.99 a barrel by 00:53 GMT. The contract did not trade on Friday because US markets were closed for the Christmas holiday. Brent crude rose 40 cents, or 0.5%, to \$75.85 a barrel after settling down 0.92% on Friday. Both contracts jumped 3% to



A pump jack operates at sunset in an oil field in Midland, Texas. — Reuters

4% last week after early data suggested that the Omicron variant of Covid-19 may cause a milder level of illness. However, the highly transmissible variant is causing Covid-19 case numbers to surge across the world. — **Reuters**

Japan to pay firms to keep sensitive patents secret

TOKYO: Japan will compensate companies to keep secret patents with potential military applications under proposed legislation, the Nikkei reported, without citing sources.

The patents under review in the proposed economic security legislation will include technology that can help develop nuclear weapons, such as uranium enrichment and cutting-edge innovations like quantum technology, the financial daily said.

The Prime Minister's Office, the Cabinet Secretariat and Japan Patent Office were not immediately available for comment outside business hours when contacted by media.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida last month pledged that he will make the nation's economic security a policy priority.

His government will give compensation of roughly 20 years of licensing income to the companies falling under the legislation, the Nikkei said.

— **Reuters**

Blockchain Oman deploys Red Hat solution to power innovation

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 27

Blockchain Services & Solutions (BSS) Oman, an affiliate of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), says it is deploying Red Hat OpenShift, an open source solution from Red Hat Inc, across its organisation for more scalable, consistent application development in order to achieve faster time to market for innovation and to support its expansion strategy.

BSS, part of Oman ICT Group, provides blockchain solutions, services and consulting that enable the use of common digital ledger platforms to record transactions and track assets in distributed networks, offering customers benefits such as reduced operational costs and improved efficiencies.

A primary business objective for BSS is to drive innovation, expansion and optimisation of its services for customers using the most advanced distributed ledger platforms available in the most secure way.

To modernise its IT to support this goal, BSS looked to containerisation for greater



portability of applications and lower risk, with workloads running in isolation and independent from each other and underlying infrastructure.

With the help of Al Nahla Solutions IT Consultancy services, BSS implemented Red Hat OpenShift as its hybrid cloud platform, and used Red Hat Consulting and Red Hat Training to help get greater value from its new technologies as well as adopt agile methods such as CI/CD.

BSS has begun running applications on Red Hat OpenShift, including customer-facing solutions, and has gained flexibility and freedom to run containers consistently across its choice of environment including multiple on-premise data centres.

By deploying Red Hat OpenShift across three sites, BSS has improved the redundancy and high availability of services and can achieve faster disaster recovery.

With its flexible infrastructure, BSS expects to maximise ROI and enable more efficient hosting of high demand services that are in its project pipeline as well as improve scalability of its services.

This is enabling BSS to act as a public cloud and provide Blockchain-as-a-service (BaaS) to enable customers to explore blockchain use cases in an agile environment.

Ahmed al Yamani, vice-president, Technology, Blockchain Services & Solutions Oman, said: "Innovation is at the heart of

what we do, as we work to define new use cases for blockchain to help transform organisations, industries and societies. We found Red Hat OpenShift to be a comprehensive, feature-rich, robust solution backed by enhanced security, stability and support from Red Hat.

After a successful proof of concept, we are pleased to roll out Red Hat OpenShift across our business to help us gain efficiencies within and across our teams to bring innovation to market faster. We view Red Hat OpenShift as a strategic platform to help us evolve our value proposition and enhance our capabilities to provide the most durable, reliable and future-proof blockchain technology."

Russian gas flowing east in protracted pipeline reversal

MOSCOW: A pipeline normally bringing Russian gas into western Europe flowed in reverse for a seventh day on Monday despite surging European heating costs.

President Vladimir Putin said last week that Germany was reselling Russian gas to Poland and Ukraine rather than relieving an overheated market, pointing the finger at German gas importers for the reversal and rocketing prices.

European power prices have risen due to an increase this year in the cost of gas, which is used to generate electricity as well as heat homes during the winter months.

It was not immediately clear precisely where the gas was flowing eastwards through the Yamal-Europe pipeline originated from, beyond a mixture of sources in Germany.

German network operator Gascade's data showed flows at the Mallnow metering point on the German-Polish border were going east into Poland at an hourly volume of nearly 1.2 million kilowatt hours on Monday. — **Reuters**

Climate-change money will flow freely to Plan B

Sustainable investing is pivoting to Plan B. Billed as humanity's last chance to avert disastrous climate change by committing states to halve global emissions by 2030, Glasgow's United Nations COP26 global shindig ultimately managed nothing of the sort.

In 2022 that will focus money minds on what happens when temperatures rise.

The stereotypical climate-change investment thus far has been buying shares in a renewable energy maven like Denmark's \$52 billion Orsted, which mitigates carbon emissions and slows down warming.

COP26 had a new focus on adaptation, which covers what to do when higher temperatures materialise.



Rich countries agreed to double annual transfers to developing countries to \$40 billion for battling rising sea levels, droughts, and more violent storms

Rich countries agreed to double annual transfers to developing countries to \$40 billion for battling rising sea levels, droughts, and more violent storms.

The actual opportunity is much larger. Bank of America reckons the overall climate adaptation market will double to \$2 trillion per year within the next five years.

The UN's Global Commission on Adaptation says a \$1.8 trillion investment by 2030 in early warning systems, resilient infrastructure, dryland agricultural crop production, mangroves, and water resource management would yield more than \$7 trillion of benefits in avoided costs from climate change effects.

To see how this would work in detail, consider the global chemicals sector. Switzerland's Syngenta, whose Chinese owner is mulling a \$60 billion listing, spends \$2 billion a year on research and development helping farmers maintain yields hit by planetary warming.

That includes drought-resistant cabbage and corn with deeper roots, fungicides to stop flood-ravaged crops going mouldy, and grain variants that shorten the time to fatten beef. Its \$50 billion German rival Bayer is a potential winner too.

Who else is in the mix? Big engineers like Canada's \$16 billion WSP Global will be constantly engaged helping municipalities redesign infrastructure to guard against flooding.

France's Veolia is well-placed to scoop up desalination contracts to render saltwater in drought-afflicted areas drinkable. And there are racier ways to hedge against climate change.

Microsoft and Swiss Re have invested in so-called direct air capture to suck carbon from the air. Even wacky ideas like solar geoengineering to dim the sun will gain traction.

Miserabilists, meanwhile, can always try \$1 billion US gunmaker Smith & Wesson, or an appropriate proxy for canned food. But they can achieve the same result by taking a more sober punt on adaptation. — Reuters



COLLECTING LEAKED OIL

Workers collect leaked oil at the beach in Riviere des Creoles due to the oil leaked from vessel MV *Wakashio*, belonging to a Japanese company but Panamanian-flagged, that ran aground near Blue Bay Marine Park off the coast of south-east Mauritius, in this file photo. The captain and first mate of a freighter that crashed into a coral reef off Mauritius, causing the Indian Ocean archipelago's worst environmental disaster, were sentenced on Monday to 20 months' jail. — AFP

The danger of digitalising aid



BECKY FAITH

The writer, a research fellow and Leader of the Digital and Technology Cluster at the Institute of Development Studies, works on the Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research programme at IDS.

INCREASED TRANSPARENCY WILL ENABLE DONORS AND POLICYMAKERS TO VERIFY THAT COLLABORATIONS ARE DELIVERING THE FINANCIAL BENEFITS THAT DRIVE ENTHUSIASM FOR DIGITALISATION.

Digital systems are critical to development and humanitarian activities, but they can expose some of the world's most vulnerable communities to unforeseen risks. Recent examples from Afghanistan highlight these dangers.

In September, it was reported that the UK Ministry of Defence had been involved in two separate data breaches, potentially compromising the safety of participants in the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy programme, which is intended to protect people who had worked for British forces.

These breaches followed revelations that the Taliban now control systems for digital identification that were built using international aid. As a former official with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) put it, "The Taliban have been given the keys to the server room."

Moreover, information in the Tazkira, the digital identity cards used in Afghanistan, reportedly can be used to target ethnic groups.

Organizations and governments tasked with providing cash assistance during humanitarian crises recognise the need for legislation to strengthen data protection, but finding staff with both data protection expertise and knowledge of social protection systems is challenging and expensive.

As data-driven systems are introduced into aid work, there is the potential for a significant power imbalance between technology providers, governments, and vulnerable populations.

And the commercial incentives that drive the involvement of private-sector companies in this domain often are at odds with humanitarian principles – including that the collection and sharing of personal data should not put people at risk.

But aid groups also are guilty of exposing sensitive data.

Four years ago, UNHCR collected personal information — including biometric data — from ethnic Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh and, in contravention of its own policies, shared it with the government of Myanmar to verify people for possible repatriation.

Similarly, a recently released internal audit of the World Food Programme's (WFP) provision of digital assistance services in Iraq, Namibia, and Nigeria found that none of the projects had processes in place to ensure data protection and privacy.

Proponents of digitalisation argue that it will reduce costs. But that may not be true. Unwanted Witness showed that the procurement process for the digital ID scheme in Uganda was conducted with limited public access to tender or contract documents through a "classified procurement" programme, contrary to Uganda's Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Act, 2003.

Likewise, an internal audit of the WFP's SCOPE programme, released in May, found that a system had only recently been put in place that could "rigorously account for the costs and benefits accrued from IT projects and investments."

The WFP has been using SCOPE, one of the largest systems in the world for beneficiary and transfer management,

since the mid-2010s.

Moreover, this was not an isolated case. In 2019, a group of civil-society organisations signed an open letter in response to the controversial agreement between the data analytics company Palantir and the WFP warning of a lack of transparency in procurement processes between humanitarian organisations and technology companies.

The letter suggested that no third-party audits are possible under the current arrangements, making it impossible to do a future cost analysis of this kind of collaboration.

As private-public partnerships continue to grow in the development and aid sector, more research must be done to map the activities of corporate actors to ensure that these relationships are open to scrutiny.

Increased transparency will enable donors and policymakers to verify that collaborations are delivering the financial benefits that drive enthusiasm for digitalisation.

The pressure the humanitarian aid sector faces from powerful donors and others to innovate and adopt digital technologies reflects the urgent need to make such assistance more effective.

Digital systems can reduce transaction costs and improve the efficiency of aid, for example by providing funds to communities in remote areas via remote electronic cash transfers.

But we must guarantee that the world's most vulnerable communities are not forced to make themselves visible to governments that may not have their best interests at heart. **Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2021**

Turkish market for at-risk women at standstill after lira crash

UMIT OZDAL

Hazal Tunc and her friends founded Turkey's first women-only street market eight years ago to help victims of domestic violence and divorcees, and it has provided them with jobs and security — until now.

Like organisations and companies across Turkey, the market has seen business shrivel dramatically as a result of a currency crisis in which the lira has lost as much as 48 per cent of

its value in the past two months alone.

The market in the mainly Kurdish southeastern city of Diyarbakir enjoyed buoyant trade in its early years but declined in the last two, particularly in the last six months as the lira crash has sent prices soaring and ravaged household budgets.

"Sales have come to a complete standstill. In the past, customers used to buy two kilos of carrots. Now they come and buy three carrots," said Tunc, 46, a mother of three who helped found the market for fruits, vegetables and

handicrafts.

The lira crisis was prompted by President Tayyip Erdogan's push for lower interest rates despite a sharp increase in inflation and warnings from economists.

In happier days, up to 256 women made a living selling their wares at the street market, but that has dwindled to 69.

"People's purchasing power is almost completely gone — and so is our selling power," Tunc said. "Everyone has given up."

The lira staged a sharp rebound last week after the government unveiled a deposit-protection

plan, and the state backed a series of market interventions selling billions of dollars.

Tunc was unimpressed. "If they (the government) could intervene, why did they wait three months, four months?" she said. "Many people committed suicide, they went into debt. If (the government) could solve this, why didn't they do it?"

One week ago, before the government moves, one dollar was worth 18 lira. On Monday it was worth 11.4 lira, though still down 35 per cent from a year ago.

Economists say the lira remains

vulnerable, and with it people's living standards. Annual inflation is expected to jump toward 30 per cent next year from 21 per cent last month, as import prices soar and retailers cover rising goods, energy and labour costs. Vegetable vendor Hanim Dogan said people now struggled even to buy basic food items. "In the evening bread costs 4 lira, and the next morning it is 7 lira. People are stumped and don't know what to do. A person who bought 5 kilos of oranges before, now buys 1 or 2 kilos," she said.

"The financial situation has become very difficult." — Reuters

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Berlinale to honour Isabelle Huppert for life-time achievement

FRENCH ACTRESS ISABELLE Huppert, 68, is to receive the Berlinale's Honorary Golden Bear for lifetime achievement. "Huppert is one of the most versatile actors in the world, and has played an impressive range of characters in almost 150 cinema and television productions,"

the festival management announced in Berlin on Thursday. "Huppert is more than a celebrated actor — she is an uncompromising artist who doesn't hesitate to take risks and flout mainstream trends." The Berlinale is one of the major film festivals along-



side Cannes and Venice. The film festival has already honoured many film-makers for their life's

work, most recently actresses Helen Mirren and Charlotte Rampling. The next Berlinale is

planned for February 2022. Huppert's new film "A propos de Joan" (About Joan), which also stars Lars Eidinger, is to be shown at the 2022 festival. The film festival also plans to show some older films with Huppert, for example "8 Women" by Francois Ozon, "L'Avenir" (Things to Come) by Mia Hansen-Love and Paul Verhoeven's thriller "Elle." The film festival paid tribute to Huppert's film and theatre career. She had already taken acting lessons at the age of 14. Renowned film-makers such as Jean-Luc Godard and Bertrand Tavernier took notice of her early on. She worked with directors such as Claude Chabrol and the Austrian Michael Haneke. — **dpa**



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AROUND THE WORLD

HOLLYWOOD EVENTS

Honorary Oscars gala delayed as Hollywood braces for Omicron



THE GOVERNORS AWARDS — an annual gala where honorary Oscars are handed out — became the latest glitzy Hollywood event postponed on Wednesday, as fears grow of a surge in coronavirus cases fuelled by the Omicron variant.

Actors Samuel L Jackson and Danny Glover, Norwegian actress Liv Ullmann and actress-director Elaine May had been due to receive golden statuettes to honour their careers next month at an event that typically draws a who's who of Tinseltown.

"We have made the difficult decision to change our plans in hosting the Governors Awards in person on January 15," the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences said in a statement.

"Given the uncertainties around the variants, and the impact this could have on our community, we feel this is the best and safest decision for our honourees and guests."

Last year's Governors Awards were cancelled due to the pandemic, although the main Oscars ceremony went ahead in person in April.

The Academy statement said "rescheduled plans will come at a later date" for this season's Governors Awards, while the Oscars themselves are still currently set to take place on March 27.

The start to Hollywood's annual film award season had seen a return to in-person premieres, galas and receptions in recent months.

But several events have been scrapped or delayed in just the past few days, including a red-carpet event for new Star Wars series "The Book of Boba Fett," the Palm Springs International Film Festival gala, the annual BAFTA Los Angeles Tea Party and a premiere for Peter Dinklage musical "Cyrano."

California currently boasts the lowest positivity rate of any US state at 3.3 per cent, and continues "to lead the nation in terms of administered doses of vaccine," Governor Gavin Newsom said on Wednesday. — **AFP**

ART



BUILDING ON TRADITION: Iraqi labourer preserves calligraphic art

WHEN HE IS not hauling concrete blocks on a construction site in northern Iraq, Jamal Hussein devotes his time to preserving the gentle art of Arabic calligraphy.

Though he has won awards in numerous competitions, Hussein acknowledged that "you can't live on this", the artistic handwriting of Arabic script.

"I have a big family. I have to find other work," said the father of 11, who is 50 years old and earns his keep working on building sites in the Iraqi Kurdish town of Ranya.

Last week, the United Nations culture agency declared Arabic calligraphy an "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity", following a campaign by 16 countries led by Saudi Arabia and including Iraq.

"The fluidity of Arabic script offers infinite possibilities, even within a single word, as letters can be stretched and transformed in numerous ways to create different motifs," Unesco said on its website.

Abdelmajid Mahboub from the Saudi Heritage Preservation Society involved in the proposal to Unesco said the number of specialised Arab calligraphic artists had dropped sharply.

Hussein is one of them, and he welcomed the Unesco decision.

He hopes it will push "the Iraqi government and the autonomous Kurdistan region to adopt serious measures" to support calligraphy — "khat" in Arabic — and its artists.



Practising since the 1980s, his decades of experience and participation in competitions are attested to by about 40 medals and certificates displayed at his home.

No support

In October he came second in an Egyptian online competition, and is now training for a contest next month in the Iraqi holy Shiite city of Najaf.

Hussein's creations are made with a reed pen that he buys from Turkey or Iran. He sometimes sells the work for posters, shop displays and even tombstones, he said.

For decades, in the major regional centres of Cairo, Amman, Beirut or Casablanca,

calligraphy was displayed on storefronts, on walls featuring popular sayings, or on plaques at the entrances of buildings to signal the presence of a lawyer or a doctor.

Today, the remnants of this calligraphy are only visible on the faded facades of old shops.

Still, nostalgia for the vintage aesthetic has become something of a trend, as hipsters of the region post pictures of their discoveries for their followers on social media.

But in impoverished, war-scarred Iraq, there is no support from the government "whether for calligraphy or for other arts," Hussein lamented.

"Because of technology, the sanctity of calligraphy has declined," he said.

"Calligraphy requires more time, more effort and is more costly. People are moving towards cheaper technological production."

But it is impossible for Hussein to abandon his art. He dreams of "travelling to Egypt or Turkey and living there temporarily to improve my khat".

At the other end of Iraq, in the southern city of Basra, Wael al-Ramadan opens his shop in an alley.

A client arrives to inquire about the preparation of an administrative stamp used to confirm attendance.

Ramadan seizes one of his sharp-nibbed pens and starts again to practise the art which his father introduced him to when he was still a child. — **AFP**

A WINDOW INTO CONTEMPORARY OMANI LITERATURE

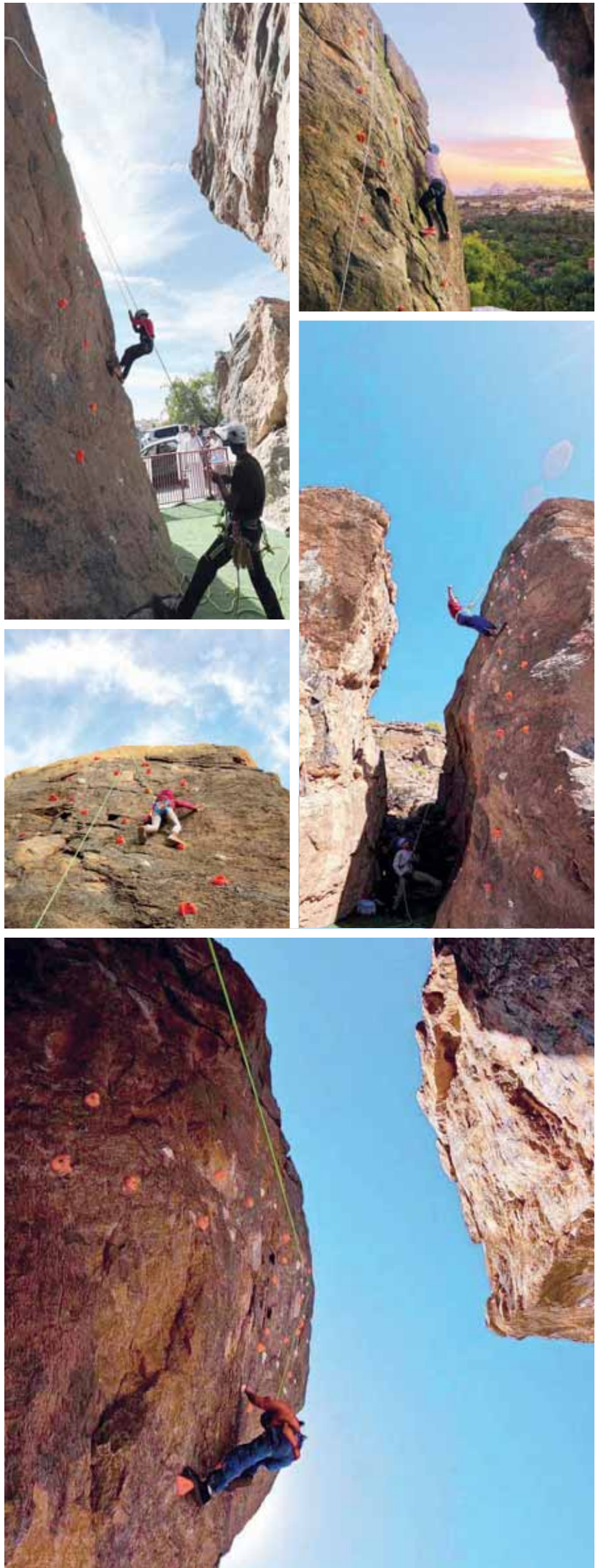
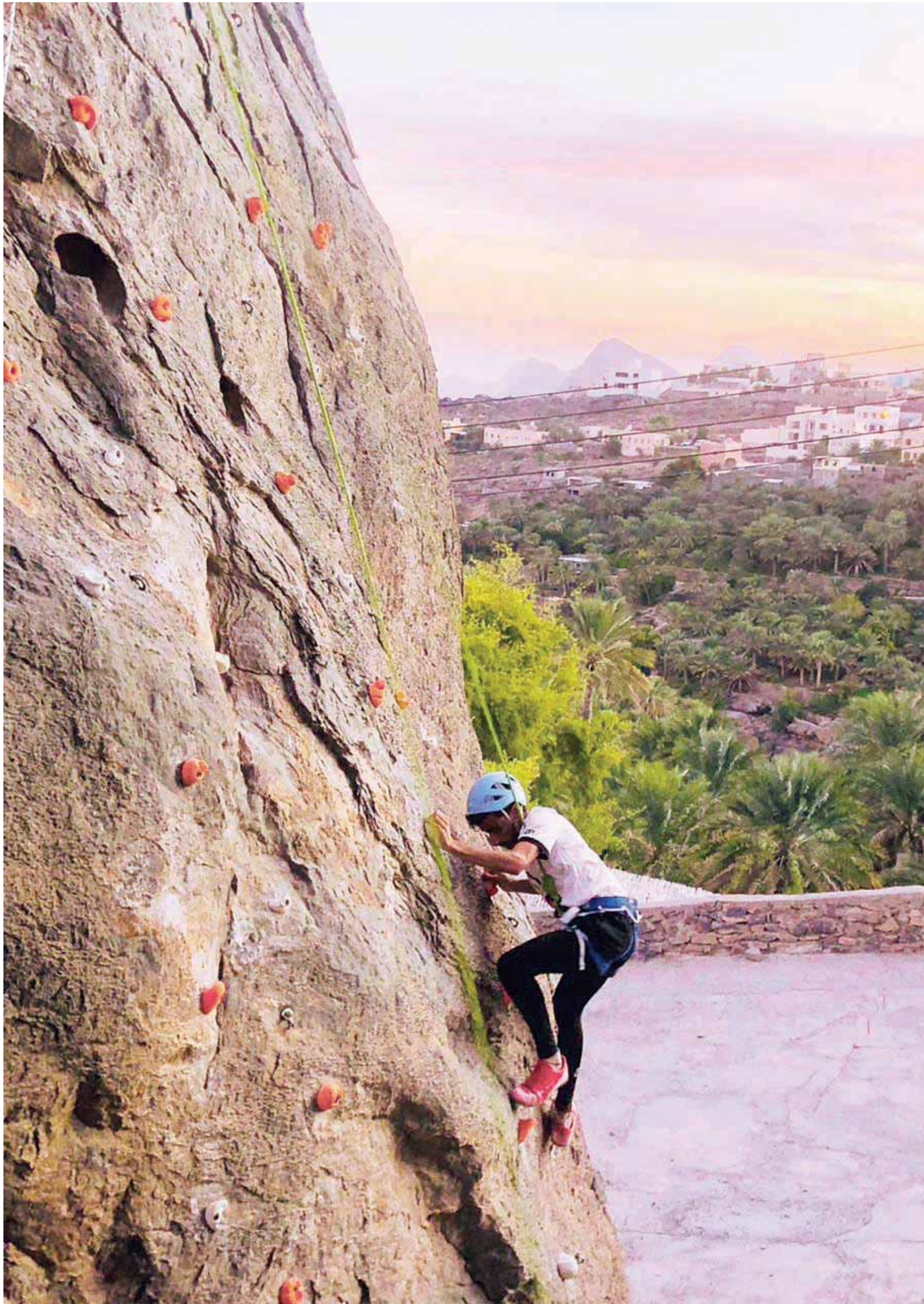


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Torture me no more!

The following are translations of poems by the Omani poet Hilal al Hajri (1968-) from his first collection titled: "Night Is Mine", (Muscat: 2006):

Letters to the Woman of 10: 30 pm Torture me no more, You my darling, The sand And the moon. This sacred colour pierces me to slavery. And when I come close To your eyes' pure water You will be Luscious and shiny Like the saliva of a candle. Only is the desert wide enough For my shivering fingertips While I pluck the sweat of delight From your forehead. When you stroke my forests of madness With your soft hands An old sorrow and a rootless gasp Seep from my heart. Like a tent Of chieftains and the weary old I bowed on your bloody dunes Perhaps Seeking my ancient childhood Or my nipple-like salient future. I bowed then With enough innocence and defiance To seduce this night. But I'm encircled by the blue spear Hurled by the fires Of rejection and desire Coming from your lungs. After I return desperate Like Jesus From the primordial soup Of love and loss I plead with the voice of Fairouz To find a warm bower Amidst the gliding tears On your virgin cheeks.	Pale Like a shadow. My forehead trickles Anguish and gloom From the depths of alienation. I resort to you with fear Like a Bedouin to his sword To rub off A fluff of sadness That floats on my heart Like thickets on hills. Guide me To your body's peak. The flood's coming again The flood Coming Again. I don't want To die Drowned in tears And daydreams. Your golden cheek, Your seed of wheat Is no longer My first concern. From now on I'll swim like an Omani sailor Down to East Africa, To your red-dew wetted hair, To Your bosom rebellious Like the pirates' coast! I am The grandson Of thwarted desires And the passions of Bedouin Away from their wives Since the first conquests. I won't read to you Any of my poems Today You won't hear the melody Of your grace in my poems. I'll rather keep my eyes wide all night. Grinding my teeth. Like a dead person With my tears I'll count the sand grains I placed beneath your left breast In the middle of a night!
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THE CLIMBING WALL..

A NEW CHALLENGE FOR ADVENTURER

BY MAI AL ABRI

How to dream big? And how to make them come true? Some new lessons that everyone should learn about the youth of the Wilayat of Al Hamra in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. Their momentous endeavours to make their Wilayat one of the significant places in the country are notable in the sector of tourism. Many projects have seen the light recently and the majority are made by individuals. For years, those individuals have watched the tourists flocking to the wilayat to enjoy the exceptional weather in the summer and the cold winter.

It was necessary, in addition to the lovely atmosphere, that the wilayat enjoys some other services and methods of entertainment. From there, some creative ideas sparkled and lit the flame of innovation spread in the whole wilayat. Of the most unique examples of being aware of the diverse visitor, Al Wadi Adventures Company installed the first-ever challenging climbing wall in the Governorate of Al Dakhiliyah, specifically in Al Misfah in the Wilayat of Al Hamra. People who have never before been able to thoroughly enjoy the beauty of Al Misfah can now visit the place to enjoy the nature and also experience some challenges and new experiences climbing the wall that extends for eight metres.

Abdulrahman al Abri, a co-founder of al wadi co, says that the idea of this whole experience is produced by the youth of the wilayat who supervise and run the project. "the youth have received a complete programme for safety and security procedures concerning the operation of this risky, yet thrilling project. "This climbing Wall provides the perfect introduction to rock climbing for all. With three tracks to choose from you'll be able to test yourself physically and mentally, develop your climbing skills in a safe environment and of course, have a thrilling time", shares Abdulrahman. He explains that there is a specific track to children, another for armatures and one for professionals. All tracks extend for

eight meters which is enough for experiencing. "The wall was designed and implemented by a company specialized in this field, and is operated and managed by Omani youth from the Wilayat, after passing a training course in the field", he stresses. It is hoped that the project will attract many adventure lovers. The site is near the internal parking spaces of the town, when the tourists need a break, a complete town that includes cafés, hotels and other services surrounds the area. There are many farms where the tourist can enjoy the beauty of nature and spend some self-entertainment. Abdulrahman have assured that the project has started

receiving visitors on December 10, 2021. "there is a good turnout from residents and other visitors to the wilayat. Yet, the project requires intensive promotion camping so that people know about it and consider it the first destination when travelling. "Climbing is becoming mega popular among people of all ages across the world and is a great activity for kids to enjoy. The climbing wall isn't just a kid's climbing wall, though... For all ages, it develops physical strength and flexibility, helps you learn how to plan ahead, and develops thinking skills, confidence and courage. If you've never climbed before, the climbing wall is a brilliant introduction to the skills you need to climb safely and efficiently", he adds.