

Service tenders floated for Sultan Haitham City project

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning floated three service tenders within the Sultan Haitham City project, first phase (2024-2030). The tenders relate to construction of roads, service roads, culverts and pavements. They also cover the establishment of networks for electricity, water and wastewater services, in addition to broadband, communication and cooling networks and the three electrical substations. **SEE P15**

SUNRISE - 05:40 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR - 04:21 AM

DHUHR - 12:10 PM

ASR - 03:37 PM

MAGHRIB - 06:36 PM

ISHA - 07:50 PM



VISIT STEMS FROM FRATERNAL BONDS AND GOOD NEIGHBOURLINESS

HM begins state visit to UAE today



MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik begins a state-visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on Monday, during which he will meet Shaikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates.

A statement issued by the Diwan of Royal Court to this effect reads as follows: “In affirmation of the deep-rooted and historical relations bidding the Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik will go on a state-visit to the UAE with effect from Monday, during which he will meet Shaikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates. The visit stems from the fraternal bonds and good neighbourliness between Oman and the UAE. It also reflects the keenness of the two countries’ leaderships to enhance joint ties and push them towards wider horizons.”

During the visit, His Majesty the Sultan will be accompanied by a high-ranking official delegation.

The deep-rooted historical relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates have their special character, and are based on brotherhood and good neighbourliness.

The fraternal relations are considered a model for the region and are characterised by features that place them in the rank of special distinguished ties at various levels, in addition to economic and trade partnerships between them based on constructive cooperation, investment and exchange of knowledge and expertise in multiple fields.

The nature of the relationship between the Emirati and Omani peoples is characterised by being familial, as the two countries have deep historical relations, and the most prominent pillars of this relationship are religion, language, lineage, the single roots of tribes and families, neighbours with long common borders, a common history and a unity of interests.

These relations are not limited to areas of common interest, but they have always been relations of a special nature, distinguished by sincere brotherhood, rapprochement, and geographical overlap that brings the two countries together, based on good neighbourliness and close social and family ties, which enjoy great importance among the two brotherly peoples and are supported by ties of history and common Islamic, Arab and Gulf affiliation.



Effect of low pressure from Tuesday

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
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The National Multi-Hazard Early Warning Centre predicts a low pressure system to affect the Sultanate of Oman from Tuesday to Thursday.

Formation and inflow of clouds formation is expected with chances of scattered rains of varying intensity and occasional thundery downpour accompanied by downdraft wind and solid precipitation on the governorates of Al Buraimi, Al Batinah North, Al Batinah South, Al Sharqiyah North, Al Dhahirah, Muscat, Musandam and Al Dakhiliyah.

The aerial image on Sunday afternoon shows formation of clouds over the eastern and central Hajar mountains and on the coast of the Al Sharqiyah South Governorate, with chances of scattered precipitation later. Low

clouds or fog formation over the governorates of Al Sharqiyah North, Al Wusta, Dhofar, and parts of the coast of the Sea of Oman.

Along the Sea of Oman coast winds will be northerly to northeasterly light to moderate becoming variable light at night, while over the coastal areas of Arabian Sea it will be southerly to southeasterly light to moderate occasionally fresh and over the rest of the governorates wind will be northeasterly light to moderate.

The sea state is expected to be slight to moderate along the Arabian Sea coasts with maximum wave height 2.0 metres and slight along most of the coasts of Oman with maximum wave height 1.25 metres.

Mahout, Haima and Marmul area recorded maximum temperatures with 39 degrees Celsius, while Jabal Shams was the coolest place with a maximum of 14 degrees Celsius.



Dams in Mahadha retain 3.3 million cubic metres of water following recent rains.

Majlis Ash’shura ratifies draft Media Law

MUSCAT: The Majlis Ash’shura on Sunday approved the draft Media Law and referred it to the State Council.

The meeting saw intensive discussions on each of the articles of the draft law as well as the amendments proposed by the Media, Tourism and Culture Committee. Abdullah bin Hamad al Harthy, Chairman and Rapporteur of the Committee, reviewed the committee’s report, the articles proposed for amendments and the reasons that necessitated the amendments.

This came during the 7th regular meeting of the first annual session of the tenth term (2023-2027) of the Majlis, held under the chairmanship of Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ash’shura.

Dr Ahmed bin Ali al Saadi, Chairman and Rapporteur of the Legislative and Legal Committee, reviewed the committee’s views on the draft law and the amendments proposed by the Media, Tourism and Culture Committee.

The draft media law was based on the changes that occurred in the media profession and the rapid developments resulting from multiple means of media given the long period since the issuance of the laws governing the media field which requires unifying them into a single law.

The new media law will result in the



The Majlis Ash’shura members during the session on Sunday.

abolition of the existing laws governing the media field namely: the Printing and Publishing, the Law of the Private Facilities for Radio and Television and the Censorship of Artistic Works Law.

The draft law encompasses eight chapters divided into (61) articles while the related executive regulations specify the procedural details. The first chapter of the law includes general definitions and provisions while the second chapter deals with procedures for obtaining a permit to practice media profession. The third chapter includes controls for practicing media activities. The fourth chapter deals with the rights and obligations of the mediaperson. The fifth chapter presents articles on the right of reply and corrigendum. **TURN TO P4**



A SPECIAL AND UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP

BALQEES AL ORAIMI

MUSCAT, APRIL 21

The deep-rooted historical relations between the United Arab Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman have their special character, and are based on brotherhood, good neighbourliness, and familial and interpenetration.

The fraternal relations are considered a model of what relations between brothers should be like, including meeting the aspirations of the two brotherly peoples. The relations between the two countries are characterised by features that place them in the rank of special distinguished ties at various levels, in addition to the economic and trade partnerships between them based on constructive cooperation, investment, and the exchange of knowledge and expertise in multiple fields.

These relations began with the first meeting between Late Sultan Qaboos bin Said and Late Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, with agreement on common issues for peoples in various fields.

The nature of the relationship between the Emirati and Omani peoples is characterised by being familial, as the two countries have very deep relations historically, and the most prominent pillars of this relationship are religion, language, lineage, the single roots of tribes and families, neighbours with long common borders, a common history, and a unity of interests.



The relations between the two countries are characterised by features that place them in the rank of special distinguished ties at various levels

These relations are not limited to areas of common interest, but they have always been relations of a special nature, distinguished by the sincere brotherhood,

rapprochement, and geographical overlap that brings the two countries together, based on good neighbourliness and close social and family ties, which

enjoy great importance among the two brotherly peoples and are supported by ties of history and common Islamic, Arab, and Gulf affiliation.

On the cultural side, the two countries have closely and continuously strengthened cooperation in this important field through participation and

holding events and activities, including the UAE Cultural Week in the Sultanate of Oman, which was held on December 11, 2006, on the occasion of the Sultanate of Oman's celebrations in Muscat as the Capital of Arab Culture for the year 2006, and included four specialised exhibitions.

In Arabic calligraphy, coins, plastic arts, books, and cultural publications. Oman, represented by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and the Ministry of Information, participates in book fairs in the United Arab Emirates in Abu Dhabi and Sharjah annually, while various cultural and media institutions in the United Arab Emirates participate in the Muscat International Book Fair annually.

The UAE has land borders with the Sultanate of Oman, and there are five land ports linking the two countries, including Al Wajjah port between the Sultanate of Oman and the Emirate of Dubai, Wadi Al Jizzi and Hafeet ports between the Sultanate of Oman and the city of Al Ain, Khatmat Milaha port between the Sultanate of Oman and the Emirate of Sharjah, and Tibat port.

Omani-Emirati relations are based on historical ties passed down through generations of the two brotherly peoples, drawing different features for the future, based on their formation on what confirms the continuity of communication in all fields, especially in light of the visions and ideas that stem from the principles of language, religion and ties.

Suhar-Abu Dhabi railway — Connecting the wider GCC



The 303-km railway will link Suhar to Abu Dhabi with passenger trains designed to reduce travel time to 1 hour 40 minutes



VINOD NAIR

@vinot_nair

The eagerly awaited and prestigious Suhar-Abu Dhabi international railway line will enter the implementation stage this year, which was revealed recently by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) media briefing.

According to the agreement between Oman Rail and Etihad Rail, a joint venture, Oman and Etihad Rail Company (OERC), will lay the groundwork for the project, including its financial mechanisms, design, development and operations.

The 303-km railway will link Suhar to Abu Dhabi with

passenger trains designed to reduce travel time to 1 hour 40 minutes. Travel time between Suhar and Al Ain will be reduced to 47 minutes, travelling at a maximum speed of 200 km/h.

The freight trains will run up to 120 km/h.

OERC and Mubadala Investment Company (Mubadala) have signed a cooperation agreement for the project, which will have a total investment value of \$3 billion.

The cooperation agreement includes the formation of working groups and a joint committee to benefit from common capabilities and knowledge, and joint work to develop an economic and financial feasibility study.

The trains will have a capacity to ferry 12,000 passengers per day and 250,000 containers at the start of the line's operation.

OERC also invited bidders to pre-qualify for a tender to build stations, freight facilities, and a rolling stock maintenance depot, which followed tenders to pre-qualify for the civil works Tetraturk International Engineering and Consultancy Company has been awarded the infrastructure design contract.

As per the deal, Tetraturk will design road projects, track works, road and railway line drainage work, hydrology and flow assessment reports, scour analysis on bridges and culverts, and tender documents.

The railway project took

off during the visit of UAE President Shaikh Mohamed bin Zayed al Nahyan's visit to the Sultanate of Oman in September 2022.

The wider GCC railway network will be operational by December 2030, which is the target date agreed by the Committee of GCC Ministers of Transport and Communications last year.

The GCC Railway Network has regained its momentum with Saudi Arabia completing 200 kilometres of the track laying within its territory.

Several steps have been achieved in the project so far, including the completion of several studies, estimates on the number of passengers and

goods, and the establishment of the Gulf Railways Authority.

Work is underway to complete the implementation of the project, the cost of which was estimated by the economic study at around \$15 billion, in member states to train the nationals to operate the project and to cooperate with international organisations with expertise in railways.

The decision to establish a railway project linking the member countries was approved by the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries to facilitate the movement of goods, citizens, and residents within the region, which will also boost the economies.

The planned railway would

begin at Kuwait City, pass through Dammam and Al Batha Port in Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi, and Al Ain in the UAE, and then enter Oman through Suhar before terminating at Muscat. From Dammam, branches will link to Bahrain through the proposed King Hamad Causeway, and to Qatar via Salwa port. The proposed Qatar-Bahrain Causeway between Bahrain and Qatar will provide additional connectivity.

The total length of the track is estimated at 2,117 km, according to the website of the GCC, and the speed of passenger trains is scheduled to be approximately 220 km per hour, and freight trains between 80 to 120 km per hour.



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HIS MAJESTY 'S VISIT TO UAE SPARKS ECONOMIC COOPERATION OPPORTUNITIES

MUSCAT: The private sectors in Oman and the United Arab Emirates are optimistic for His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's upcoming visit to the UAE on Monday. They expect new commercial and investment opportunities to open up, contributing to increased trade and investment exchanges between the two brotherly countries. Business owners anticipate enhanced economic and joint investment cooperation, reinforcing the existing economic partnership and taking advantage of competitive business environments and investor incentives provided.

Omani businessman Mustafa bin Ahmed Salman, Chairman of the United Securities Co, sees His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's visit as a culmination of the distinguished fraternal relations between the two countries, emphasising the depth of Omani-Emirati relations. He hopes the visit will lead to the signing of several agreements and memoranda of understanding. He also highlights the strategic partnership of the UAE as a major trading partner with Oman.



Mustafa bin Ahmed Salman, Chairman of the United Securities Company.



Lujaina bint Mohsin Darwish, Chairperson, Mohsin Haider Darwish Business Group.



Shaikh Muslim bin Ham al Ameri, Chairman of the Bin Ham Group.



Emirati businessman Khalid bin Saif al Maamari.



Successful investments in various sectors, such as real estate and tourism, demonstrate continuous growth.

The establishment of a railway network connecting Oman with the UAE is expected to increase goods and cargo transportation, boost trade between the two countries, and facilitate re-

exports via Omani ports. This project aims to reduce shipping costs, accelerate cargo delivery, and attract other companies to benefit from it.

Omani businesswoman

Lujaina bint Mohsin Darwish, Chairperson of the Board of Directors of Mohsin Haider Darwish Business Group, praises the economic relations between Oman and the UAE, emphasising

mutual cooperation that allows investors in both countries to benefit from investment opportunities and establish joint projects.

Emirati businessman Shaikh Muslim bin Ham al Ameri, Chairman of the Bin Ham Group, anticipates broader avenues of commercial and investment cooperation between the two countries, fostering more successful economic and investment partnerships between the private sectors of both nations. He highlights the bilateral and strategic relationships between Oman and the UAE, receiving great attention and support from the leaderships of both countries.

The investment environment in Oman is described as promising and conducive to attracting foreign investments due to the facilitation and incentives provided to investors. Successful investments in various sectors, such as real estate and tourism, demonstrate continuous growth thanks to government policies and facilitations.

Emirati businessman Khalid bin Saif al Maamari believes His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's visit affirms the strong fraternal ties between the two countries. He expects the visit to increase trade between Oman and the UAE to meet the aspirations of both peoples, businessmen, and investors, describing Omani-Emirati relations as historical and deeply rooted.

The amendments to Oman's business environment, especially investment laws, are expected to attract and compete for investors, showing positive economic performance indicators and the rise achieved within the framework of Oman Vision 2040.

— ONA

Announcement

The Tax Authority would like to call the attention of income tax taxpayers whose fiscal year ends on **December 31, 2023**, to file their tax returns and pay their tax dues as follows:

- ▶ Taxpayers paying (15%) of income tax should file their tax returns no later than **April 30, 2024**.

All tax returns should be submitted according to the forms set for that purpose using the Tax Authority's online portal at **www.taxoman.gov.om**

We hope all taxpayers comply with filing their tax returns on the deadline.

omantax taxoman 1020

The private sectors in Oman and United Arab Emirates expect new commercial and investment opportunities to open up



Economic relations between both countries allow investors in both countries to benefit from opportunities and establish joint projects



The establishment of a railway network connecting Oman with the UAE is expected to increase goods and cargo transportation

Announcement

The Tax Authority would like to draw the attention of taxpayers who are subject to Excise Tax and VAT to submit their returns for the first quarter of 2024, according to the forms prepared for this purpose through Tax Authority's Portal: **www.taxoman.gov.om** not later than **30 April 2024**. We hope that all taxpayers will abide and commit to the deadline of submitting.

omantax taxoman 1020



Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information, and Mohammed bin Said bin Khalfan al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, presented prizes to winners in the ceremony in Muscat on Friday. — ONA

The Star of Eloquence winners crowned

MUSCAT: Mohammed bin Abdullah al Hamdani and Moaz bin Khaled al Masrouri were crowned as Stars of Eloquence on Friday. Around 21 contestants from across Oman took part in the finals of the second season of the TV show organised by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Information held in two categories: the junior category (6-12 years), and the youth category (13-18 years).

Al Hamdani, the junior star of Al Batinah South Governorate, won the grand prize in the junior category. Nada bint Nasser al Ghanbousiyah, the junior star of Al Sharqiyah South Governorate, won second place, while Asayel bint Saeed al Habsiyah, the junior star of Al Sharqiyah North Governorate, came third and Buthaina bint Issa al

Sulaimaniyah, the junior star of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, won fourth place.

Al Masrouri, the youth star of Al Sharqiyah South Governorate, won the grand prize in the youth category followed by Omar bin Ahmed al Shuaibi, the youth star of Al Buraimi Governorate, Al Baraa bin Amer al Awaed, the youth star of Dhofar Governorate, and Abdulaziz bin Saud al Busaidi, the youth star of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

Over 2,000 competitors from various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman went through multiple stages of qualifiers of this season.

The Star of Eloquence is a television programme that aims to enhance the values of national identity, the Arabic language and eloquence skills among young people. — ONA

MoSD, AGFUND inaugurate ‘National Guides for Childhood’

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
@afrahalbalushia

The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) on Sunday launched the ‘National Guides for Childhood’ as part of a project to improve services provided in nurseries in cooperation with the Arab Gulf Program for Development (AGFUND). The event was held under the auspices of Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, and attended by Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najar, Minister of Social Development.

A guide to national standards for nurseries and their classification in the Sultanate of Oman was developed to guide those responsible for nurseries on the standards that should be ensured and will contribute to improving the conditions of existing nursery institutions.

Dr Nasser bin Bakr al Qahtani, Executive Director, AGFUND, said: “Launching the national guides for childhood is a major move in the right direction. The project targets children based on a scientific perspective and it accommodates the needs of this basic segment of society. The childhood category is one of the most important groups targeted by the AGFUND programme with its development mission through the criteria it applies in selecting the projects to supports



The event was held under the auspices of Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, and attended by Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najar, Minister of Social Development.



The event coincided with the graduation of the second batch of the training programme for child supervisors working in childhood education institutions.

and finances so that they respond to the requirements of sustainable human development.”

The national childhood guides include six guides: the National

Standards Guide for Nurseries, the Nursery Activities Guide for the first level from birth to one year of age, the Nursery Activities Guide for the second level from

one to two years of age, and the Nursery Activities Guide for the third level from two to three years of age, the health care guide, and parental care guide.

Maryam al Obaidani, Head of the Early Childhood Department at the Ministry of Social Development, said, “The guides are in the application stage and will be given an opportunity to apply and then evaluation will take place. After the evaluation, the guides will be developed in accordance with international and global developments, and female workers have been selected for training in the programme in accordance with the standards and their preparation to contribute in improving the conditions and the quality of nursery institutions.”

The event coincided with the graduation of the second batch of the training programme for child supervisors working in childhood education institutions. 90 graduates from the second batch of the training programme for supervisors working in childhood education institutions were feted. The graduates were trained through the internationally accredited training program in early childhood care and education for female workers in childhood development institutions at the National Institute for Childhood in the Sultanate of Oman.

Seminar looks at response to tsunamis

MUSCAT: Represented by the National Multi-Hazard Early Warning Centre at the Civil Aviation Authority, the Sultanate of Oman hosts a regional workshop titled ‘Modelling inundation from tsunami waves and preparing evacuation plans for the northwest Indian Ocean’.

The 5-day workshop, which began in Muscat on Sunday, is being attended by 70 participants from northwest Indian Ocean countries and representatives from the National Committee for Emergency Management (NCEM), the Civil Defence and Ambulance Author-

ity (CDAA), academics from Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) and international experts and observers.

The workshop is conducted in pursuance of a programme of discussions on tsunamis, early warning methods and public awareness. The programme of tsunami workshops falls within the purview of the Northwest Indian Ocean Enhanced Tsunami Warning project, which is undertaken by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Indian Ocean (Unescap) and the Unesco’s Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission

(Ioc-Unesco). The workshop, sponsored by the Unesco’s International Oceanographic Commission and the Indian Ocean Economic Commission, seeks to devise inundation reference maps and draft preliminary evacuation plans. The workshop also lays emphasis on effective community response to the dangers of tsunamis, with the prime aim of realising the objectives of the Unesco’s “Decade of the Oceans” tsunami programme. The programme, which targets communities exposed to tsunami, envisages 100 per cent preparedness by 2030. — ONA

Majlis Ash’shura ratifies draft Media Law

FROM P1

The sixth chapter includes publications and the regulations of printing. The seventh chapter deals with artistic works whereas the eighth chapter deals with penalties.

The session began with a speech by the Majlis chairman who said: “Over the past few days there has been a tragedy that shocked the Omani society and its impact has saddened all the people in Oman. Brothers and friends interacted with it and it received direct follow-up from various state agencies. Many lives were lost including a number of school students as a result of the extreme weather condition the Sultanate of Oman has witnessed recently.” The chairman added: “The Majlis Ash’shura through the Law of the Council of Oman will spare no effort and will do everything within its powers on this incident.”

Jamal bin Ahmed al Abri, Chairman of the Education, Scientific Research and Innovation Committee, delivered an urgent statement regarding the death of a number of

students as a result of the weather conditions the Sultanate of Oman experienced. He pointed out that the painful incident that occurred in the Niyabat of Samad Al Shaan in the Wilayat of Al Mudhaibi where school students were swept away in a wadi, is an appalling tragedy.

The report of the Economic and Financial Committee regarding the draft agreement on eliminating double taxation and preventing tax evasion and avoidance between the government of the Sultanate of Oman and the government of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, was also reviewed. The committee approved the agreement without making any amendments to it.

The Majlis approved a request for discussion presented to the Minister of labour regarding temporary employment. Another request for discussion to the Minister of Education concerning the outcome of the weather condition and its impact on the schools of Al Sharqiyah North Governorate, was referred to the Legislative and Legal Committee. — ONA

Dams collect over 179mn m3 of water from 4 days of rains

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

Dams are considered ancient engineering achievements made by humans and the results of advisory studies to ward off the risks of floods carried out by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman came with a proposal to construct 56 dams, rehabilitate the wadi streams, prepare flood maps for Al Batinah North and South governorates, and implement several projects and tenders for establishing dams for groundwater recharge.

The number of dams in the Sultanate of Oman reached 174, including 56 dams for underground recharge, 3 dams for protection against flood risks, and 115 dams for surface storage. “Floods are among the most costly natural phenomena in terms of

impact on infrastructure and loss of human lives,” a source in the ministry said.

The ministry has recently built 187 dams and rehabilitated wadi streams, through the outcomes of advisory studies to prevent flood risks in watersheds in various governorates, and these were implemented according to technical, economic, and social priorities and standards.

Following the recent rains, dams in Oman received over 179 million cubic metres of water following recent rainfall, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources said. This will help in reducing flood risk and ensuring water for irrigation and domestic use.

Heavy rains from April 14 to 17 filled or partially filled 49 dams in several governorates. The Wadi Dayqah Dam in the Wilayat of Qurayat, Muscat Governorate, reached full capacity,



Heavy rains from April 14 to 17 filled or partially filled 49 dams in several governorates.

holding 100 million cubic metres, while Wadi Al Sarin Dam in Al Amerat, along with other dams in different regions, also retained significant water. Lower Wadi Al Sarin Dam in Al Amerat recorded 1.07 million cubic metres, and its upper counterpart captured

0.373 million cubic metres. Al Khoudh Dam in the Wilayat of Al Seeb amassed 9.822 million cubic metres, heralding significant water security.

In Al Dhahirah Governorate, Al Salif, Wadi Al Kabir, Surur and Sudairiyeen dams all saw increases

in water storage. All dams in Mahadha also reported being filled, including Masilik Dam (1.72 million cubic metres).

In Al Sharqiyah North Governorate, the dams in Al Qabil, Al Mudhaibi and Ibra received substantial volume of water. Of particular significance are Qafifa Dam and Wadi Al Oyoum Dam.

Several dams in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate reached full capacity, including Imti Dam (0.63 million cubic metres) and Al Mu’aden Dam (2.5 million cubic metres). Wadi Ghul witnessed significant inflows, reinforcing the region’s agricultural potential. The south witnessed similar fortunes, with Al Farra’ Dam in Al Rustaq and Al Hawasna Dam in Al Khabourah reaching full capacities, ensuring sustained water availability.

In Al Batinah South Governorate, Wadi Al Maawil and Wadi Bani Kharous dams also captured significant volumes of

rainwater.

Dams like Al Jizzi (5.4 million cubic metres) and Ahan (2 million cubic metres) in Al Batinah North Governorate saw a rise in water storage.

Sarooj, Sahana and Khub Al Shamsi dams in Musandam Governorate reported full capacity, while Khasab Dam also captured a good amount of rainwater.

To benefit from these dams, there are three types of dams in the Sultanate of Oman, which are groundwater recharge dams, surface storage dams and protection dams.

The government has adopted plans to establish groundwater recharge dams according to well-studied scientific principles, to collect water from the wadis and benefit from it by replenishing groundwater reservoirs. It is used by farmers. Hydroelectric power generation is also achieved by water flowing.



Campaign to combat tobacco, e-cigarettes launched in Dakhiliyah

AMAL AL RIYAMI
MANAH, APRIL 21

Al Dakhilyah Governorate launched a community campaign to combat tobacco and electronic cigarettes on Sunday morning under the auspices of Dr Shaikh Faisal bin Ali bin Rashid al Zaidi, Wali of Manah.

The campaign aims to address the harmful effects of psychotropic substances like tobacco and electronic cigarettes on society, including health, social and economic impacts. These efforts for the campaign are consistent with Oman Vision 2040, which aims to improve the quality of life and people and a better future for Omani society.

Dr Sabrah bint Hamad bin Salim al Awfi, Chair of the Social Committee of the Municipal Council in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, explained that the campaign aims to raise awareness among youth, build a society resistant to psychotropic substances, enhance cooperation between sectors and implement projects to reduce substance-related harm.

Dr Abdulrahman bin Sulaiman bin Abdullah al Shehhi, Director-General of Social Development in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, gave the opening speech of the campaign. The programme included three working papers the first of which looked at the challenges of this Phenomenon presented by Dr Salim bin Abdullah bin Rashid al



The campaign aims to address the harmful effects of psychotropic substances like tobacco and electronic cigarettes on society, including health, social and economic impacts



Shukaili, a visiting professor at the University of Nizwa.

Dr Salim mentioned that shops that sell tobacco and its derivatives are a danger that is destroying society. “This is the negative issue, and the percentage of smokers is increasing, even in schools,” he said.

He said that 80 per cent of those who started smoking are under the age of 17. He stated that school students aged 13 to 15 use tobacco at a rate of 6 per cent of

males and 3.9 per cent of females with one in every ten students has previously tried smoking. “The influence of role models and friends in adolescence on children is an important factor in increasing these rates,” he said.

The second working paper shed light on the reality of tobacco and electronic cigarettes in the school environment, presented by Saadiya bint Mohammed bin Abdullah al Saadi, social guidance supervisor

at the General-Directorate of Education in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. She said, “Although the fine for the trader and seller of e-cigarettes ranges from RO 500 to RO 1,000, there are many who trade them or use these cigarettes.”

“The reason is that these cigarettes are sold for a small nominal amount, so students can easily buy them through websites. Also, the shapes and smell of these cigarettes do not suggest that they are cigarettes, so it is easy to trade them,” she added.

She stated that a number of e-cigarettes have been monitored in schools, but no statistics have been conducted on the exact number yet. “I advise all parents and officials to educate themselves about these e-cigarettes, communicate with their children, be a role model for a smoke-free home, and set clear limits and rules that prevent their children from handling or consuming them because of their long-term effects,” she said.

Dr Mohammad bin Yahya bin Sufyan al Rashdi, from the Department of Endowments and Religious Affairs, presented a working paper entitled Instilling Islamic values and self-control in the souls of children while Nihad bint Ghalib bin Khasib al Rashdi moderated the dialogue session to gather attendees’ suggestions for reducing the phenomenon through electronic scanning of barcodes. The proposals will be analysed, and recommendations will be submitted to the authorities.

Movie buffs excited over ‘Goat Life’ release

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef



Talib al Balushi's contribution to the film, released across five different languages in India, has already garnered widespread acclaim

It is now official!!! The Goat Life, ‘Aadujeevitham’, translated in Arabic as ‘Hayah Al Maaiz’ will be shown on Vox cinemas from April 25.

Talib al Balushi, acclaimed Omani actor who donned the role of Arbab in the well-read novel, along with thousands of south Indians in Oman, kept their fingers crossed to watch the movie in Oman since it first released on March 28.

“Me, just as any other cast and crew of ‘Aadujeevitham’ have been hopeful of the release of the movie in Oman and all my brothers and sisters in Oman are now able to watch the movie which is the visual version of the famous novel. By and large, the movie is a masterpiece one and we are more optimistic as along with the UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar, the audience here would receive the movie in good spirits,” Talib told the Observer.

Upon his arrival at Muscat International Airport on Saturday to a rousing welcome organised by the film lovers and Muscat Arts, an organisation of art aficionados in Oman, he said having more countries passing the censorship of Aadujeevitham gives better hope for him to let the people in other countries watch the movie in their respective countries.

Talib al Balushi's contribution to the film, released across five different languages in India, has already garnered widespread acclaim. His portrayal captivated audiences and critics alike, earning him accolades for his nuanced performance.

The movie, which is a collaboration of many award-winning artists, released on March 28 in India and the US.

The film, ‘Aadujeevitham’ (Goat Life), is an adaptation of the much-celebrated

novel in the same name by Benyamin and directed by Blessy, which stars acclaimed Malayalam actor Prithviraj Sukumaran in the lead while Dr Talib is cast opposite to him.

Talib said that Aadujeevitham is his second film in Malayalam and he is the first Omani to act in the largest international film. The film is the story of an Indian man travelling to work outside his country to earn his living, and instead of working in an oil company, falls into a Bedouin life.

The film began to shoot in 2019, faced many trials of time and nature while shooting in Wadi Rum in Jordan during the pandemic. During one of their schedules in Jordan, as many as 255 artistes comprising students, tourists and business people were stuck in Jordan when the country announced total lock down and suggested home quarantine.

They were later airlifted in two special planes, thanks to an understanding between the two governments to airlift the citizens, after spending 70 days in quarantine at one stretch. The film is, by now, a highly anticipated creative work for two Oscar winners, AR Rehman and Resul Pookkuttu, handle the background score and sound effects respectively for the movie, which is co-produced by Blessy himself, Jimmy Jean-Louis and Steven Adams.

SCHOOLS FOR MOTORBIKE TO BE ALLOWED

Lieutenant General Hassan bin Mohsen al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, has revised some provisions of the executive regulations of the Traffic Law issued by Royal Decree No 93/28 and the executive regulations of the Traffic Law issued by decision 98/23. This decision will be published in the Official Gazette and will come into effect the day following its publication.

A new chapter, dedicated to schools for motorbike riders, will be added to Chapter Four of the Executive Regulations of the Traffic Law. The prerequisites necessary for obtaining a license to establish a motorbike riding school include

submitting a request to the administration using the provided form and the applicant must be of Omani with good moral character and have no prior convictions.

The driving school area should not be less than 2,500 sqm, and a drawing of the school building approved by the competent authority must be attached to the application. The school must provide licenced bikes for teaching and testing with engine power ranging from 150 to 250 cc, meeting the technical specifications determined by the administration. Suitable halls must be provided for implementing training programmes for driving instruction.



85,000 passengers use public buses during Eid Al Fitr

MUSCAT: Mwasalat buses ferried more than 23,000 passengers on the second of Eid Al Fitr, including 14,800 passengers on the Ruwi-Mabela route. Overall 85,000 passengers used the buses during the holidays.

‘SABIS STARS 2024’ CONCLUDES WITH EXCITEMENT

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

The SABIS Stars 2024 Awards ceremony concluded on Saturday evening at the Choueifat School Theater under the auspices of Sayyid Khalid bin Hamad al Busaidy.

Armen Manoukian, Principal of Choueifat School, emphasised the importance of the SABIS Stars Awards as a symbol of dedication and excellence in SABIS schools worldwide, and as a platform for its students to showcase their skills and talents in various fields.

Dr Abdulmonem al Hassani, a member of the jury, delivered a speech on behalf of the 48 judges of this global competition. “We are very proud of all of you, not just the top three, but everyone who has made their mark on this competition. As you bask in the glow of your accomplishments, remember to be proud of yourselves



The competition was not just a celebration of talent, but an opportunity for students to build self-confidence and express their opinions

and appreciate those who supported you along the way,” he said.

For his part, Victor Saad from SABIS pointed out that the competition was not just a celebration of talent, but an opportunity for students to build self-confidence, express their opinions, showcase their knowledge and creativity, develop communication and teamwork

skills, and seek innovative solutions to current global challenges. “Such competitions help shape students into confident, multi-skilled global citizens who can excel in a variety of fields,” he said.

SABIS Sun School students from Azerbaijan won first place in the “Our World Our Concern” category, while Samar Kheriba from Emirates School won first place in

the “Junior Painting” category. Vala Al Jaf from Kurdistan School won first place in the “Senior Painting” category and Mayon John from Kenya School won first place in the “Photography” category. Anna Rizk from Lebanon School won first place in the “Creative Writing” category.

The Sharjah International School team also won the “Science



Incubator Junior” category award, while the Sulaimaniah School team from Saudi Arabia won the “Science (Adults)” award. The SABIS Sun School team from Azerbaijan won the “Advertising” category title, while, Diva Menghrajani from Dubai School won the “Public Speaking” category title.

Sulaimaniah School from Saudi won the “Debate” category

award, while Mira Merchad from Lebanon School won first place in the “English Poetry RECITING” category, and Habib Joukhadar from Lebanon won first place in the “Arabic Poetry” category.

The competition concluded with Sarah Bayrakdar from Lebanon School winning first place in the singing category.



Palestinian children sit next to the site of an Israeli strike on a house, in Rafah. — Reuters

Palestinian presidency condemns US military aid to Israel

RAMALLAH: The Palestinian presidency said that the US House of Representatives' approval of billions of dollars in new military aid to Israel marked "an aggression against the Palestinian people". The money would "translate into thousands of Palestinian casualties in the Gaza Strip" and the West Bank, said Nabil Abu Rudeina, spokesman for Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, calling it a "dangerous escalation".

Meanwhile, Palestinian movement group Hamas on Sunday condemned the US House of Representatives' approval of billions of dollars in new military aid to Israel, much of which is to strengthen Israeli air defences. "This support, which violates international law, is a licence and a green light for the extremist government (Israel) to continue the brutal aggression against our people," Hamas said in a statement.

"We consider this step a confirmation of the official American complicity and partnership in the war of extermination waged by the fascist occupation army against our Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip."

On Saturday, the US House of Representatives approved \$13 billion in military assistance to America's historic ally Israel in its war against Hamas in Gaza.

Washington is already Israel's largest military supplier. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the "much appreciated aid bill" showed strong support for Israel and "defends Western civilisation".

The US bill said that more than \$9 billion will also be earmarked to address "the dire need for humanitarian assistance for Gaza as well as other vulnerable populations around the world".

The boost for Israel's defences comes after almost all of the more than 300 missiles and drones that Iran launched towards the country a week ago were intercepted, according to the Israeli military. — AFP

ISRAEL ESCALATES WAR WITH MORE STRIKES ON GAZA

GAZA: Israel carried out deadly strikes in Gaza, first responders in the war-battered Palestinian territory said on Sunday.

The latest bombardments came as lawmakers in Israel's top ally, the United States, approved \$13 billion in new Israeli military aid even as global criticism mounts over the death toll and dire humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

However, fears of wider war breaking out in the Middle East have eased somewhat after Iran downplayed Israel's reported retaliation over its unprecedented missile and drone attack on the country a week ago. Attention has turned back towards the war in Gaza, which Israel hit with several

strikes overnight, according to the Palestinian territory's Civil Defence agency.

The bodies of 13 people, mostly children, were recovered after an Israeli strike hit the home of a family near the southernmost Gaza city of Rafah, the agency said. Other people were believed to be under rubble.

A separate Israeli strike on a home in the Rafah area killed at least three people and wounded others, Civil Defence said.

Resident Umm Hassan Kloub, 35, said her children screamed when they "woke up to a nightmare of an explosion".

"Every second we live in terror, even the sound of Israeli aircraft

doesn't stop," she said. "We don't know whether we will live or die. This is not life."

The bodies of 13 people, mostly children, were recovered after an Israeli strike hit the home of a family near the southernmost Gaza city of Rafah

Around 1.5 million of Gaza's 2.4 million people are now estimated to be sheltering in the city. However, Israel has for two

months threatened to invade the city in its mission to destroy Palestinian groups. The G7 group of developed economies said that it opposed a "full-scale military operation" there, fearing "catastrophic consequences" for Rafah's civilians. Israel has faced growing global opposition to the war, which has turned vast areas of Gaza into rubble while a siege has left residents without enough water, food, medicines and other vital supplies.

The population "faces famine, malnutrition, and infectious disease outbreaks", the International Rescue Committee charity warned this week. The attack that triggered the

war resulted in the deaths of 1,170 people, mostly civilians, according to a tally based on Israeli official figures. Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed at least 34,097 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the territory's health ministry.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has also come under pressure within Israel, including to reach a deal for the release of captives still held in Gaza.

Israel estimates 129 captives remain in Gaza, including 34 who the military says are dead. Families of the captives were among thousands attending an anti-government protest in Tel Aviv on Saturday night. — AFP

Two Palestinians killed by troops in the West Bank

RAMALLAH: Israeli forces shot dead two Palestinian teenagers in the occupied West Bank on Sunday, the Palestinian health ministry said, as the army confirmed it "neutralised" two attackers who fired at soldiers.

The incident, after numerous deaths during an Israeli raid further north in the Palestinian territory, added to a two-year surge of violence in the West Bank that has accelerated since the war in Gaza began on October 7.

The Palestinian health ministry in Ramallah said the deaths of the two Palestinians were "caused by occupation (Israeli army) bullets". It identified the two as Muhammad Majid Musa Jabareen, 19, and Musa Mahmud Musa Jabareen, 18.

The official Palestinian news agency Wafa reported that the latest incident occurred at the entrance to the village of Beit Einun near the

city of Hebron. Quoting two Palestinian security sources, Wafa reported that the men succumbed to their wounds after they were fired on.

Following the incident troops stormed Beit Einun and raided several homes, the agency reported. The military said two assailants attempted to stab and shoot troops near the village.

"One of the Palestinians attempted to stab IDF (Israeli army) soldiers that were in the area, who responded with live fire and neutralised him," the military said in a statement.

"At the same time, the other one opened fire at the soldiers," the army said, adding he too was "neutralised".

Israel has carried out near daily raids in the West Bank in what it says is a bid to thwart Palestinian groups.



Women react as they watch the funeral procession of a man killed in an Israeli raid in the Nur Shams camp for Palestinian refugees in the occupied West Bank. — AFP

At least 14 people were killed this week in an Israeli raid on Nur Shams camp in the northern West Bank, according to the Palestinian Red Crescent. The Israeli army said troops had killed 10 Palestinians during the operation, which it said started on Thursday.

At least 483 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli soldiers and settlers in the territory since October 7, according to the Palestinian health ministry in Ramallah. According to the Shin Bet internal security agency, at least 19 Israelis have been killed in Palestinian attacks over the same period.

On Saturday, an ambulance driver was killed in clashes between settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank village As-Sawiya, the Palestinian Red Crescent and the health ministry said. — AFP



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In brief

■ PRISTINA



SERB-MAJORITY NORTH KOSOVO TOWNS VOTE ON ALBANIAN MAYORS

Polling stations opened on Sunday in four towns in Kosovo's Serb-majority north holding an extraordinary local vote on whether to oust their Albanian mayors in a territory riddled with deadly tensions. The vote could pave the way for the election of Serbs to the mayoral posts after the appointment of the Albanians sparked violence.

But by 0900 GMT, four hours after polling stations opened, only 85 out of some 45,000 eligible voters cast ballots. The figures suggested a boycott of the vote that would fail if the trend continues. For the election to be valid turnout has to be above 50 per cent. — AFP

■ COLOMBO



UN PUSHES JUSTICE FOR SRI LANKA'S EASTER ATTACK VICTIMS

The United Nations on Sunday urged Sri Lanka to bridge its "accountability deficit" and ensure justice as the country commemorated the 279 victims of its worst-ever attack against civilians five years ago.

The UN's top envoy to the country, Marc-Andre Franche, told a remembrance service in Colombo that there should be a "thorough and transparent investigation" to uncover those behind the Easter carnage in 2019.

"Sri Lanka suffers from a continuing accountability deficit, be it for alleged war crimes, which must be addressed if the country is to move forward," Franche said. — AFP

■ TOKYO



ONE DEAD, SEVEN MISSING AFTER JAPANESE HELICOPTERS CRASH

One died and seven people were missing on Sunday after an accident overnight in which two Japanese military helicopters apparently collided before crashing into the sea, officials said.

A spokesman for Japan's Self-Defence Force (SDF) confirmed the late on Saturday incident and said that one person was rescued but later confirmed dead.

Defence Minister Minoru Kihara said rescuers "spotted what are believed to be part of the aircraft in the sea, and we believe that the two helicopters crashed." The helicopters appear to have crashed during night-time training. — AFP

Russia claims advances near Chasiv Yar

KYIV: Russia said on Sunday its forces had gained territory near the key battleground town of Chasiv Yar in east Ukraine, highlighting the pressure facing Kyiv as it gears up to receive \$61 billion in new US aid.

After nearly a year-and-a-half delay, the United States House of Representatives finally approved the aid package in a vote on Saturday, giving a morale boost to Ukrainian forces on the defensive.

Russia's defence ministry said on Sunday that it had taken control of Bogdanivka, a small frontline village less than three kilometres northeast of Chasiv Yar.

"Units of the southern grouping of troops have completely liberated the settlement of Bogdanivka," the ministry said.

Chasiv Yar, which had a population of about 13,000 before the conflict, has been largely destroyed by fighting and most residents have fled.

The Kremlin has sought to play down the impact of the new package of US aid, which the Russian foreign ministry said would deepen Washington's "immersion" in the war.

"Feverish attempts aimed at saving Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's regime are doomed to failure," Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

Ukrainian presidential aide Mykhailo Podolyak said the new US aid would lead to "de-escalation" and "punishment" for Russia.

"That is why we are pleased to hear today the unconditional whining, hysterical, panic in Russian official statements," he said. Ukrainians also hailed Washington's approval of the new assistance, which comes as Kyiv's



Ukrainian servicemen fire towards Russian troops, in Donetsk region. — Reuters

Russia's defence ministry said that it had taken control of Bogdanivka, a frontline village less than three kilometres northeast of Chasiv Yar

outgunned and outmanned troops cede ground on the frontline.

"It will help a lot," 50-year-old nurse Oksana said in the capital. "The most important thing is to have something to defend ourselves with. It will save our lives," she said.

Ukrainian officials have said the delay in aid has left civilians vulnerable and forced it onto the back foot on the battlefield, as

Russia seeks to press its advantage.

But most were relieved, regardless. "Of course, it's not too late," 19-year-old barber Dmytro said. "In any case, we need help. If it was either later or earlier, it will help in any case," he said.

Kyiv's forces said earlier this month that the situation around the frontline town of Chasiv Yar was "difficult and tense", and that Russia was unleashing constant

fire. It has also reported increased civilian casualties. On Sunday, prosecutors said Russia shelled the town of Ukrainsk in the eastern Donetsk region, killing an 82-year-old woman.

Russia separately "fired ballistic missiles" at the southern region of Odesa, targeting logistics and port infrastructure as well as defence forces in the south of the country. — AFP

Southern China braces for 'once a century' floods

BEIJING: Landslides in southern China injured at least six people and trapped others, state media reported on Sunday, as the region braced for severe floods "seen around once a century".

Torrential downpours across swathes of Guangdong province since Thursday have swollen rivers in the Pearl River Delta and triggered deluges in mountainous areas.

State broadcaster CCTV said on Sunday that rains had sparked landslides affecting six villages in the northern Guangdong town of Jiangwan, "causing people to become trapped".

Photographs published by CCTV showed waterfront homes destroyed by a wall of brown mud, and people in fluorescent-coloured ponchos sheltering in a soaked public sports court.

No deaths were immediately reported and the total number of trapped people was not specified.

But CCTV said six people who were "trapped and injured" in the landslides had been airlifted to the nearby city of Shaoguan.

Emergency workers were racing to restore communications to the stricken area "as soon as possible", CCTV said.

It added that more than 80 rescuers were working "through the day and night" to assist people in the disaster zone.

The Pearl River Delta is China's manufacturing heartland and one of the country's most densely populated regions, with Guangdong alone home to around 127 million people.

Aerial footage by CCTV on Sunday showed murky floodwaters lapping close to street level in some towns, leaving riverside promenades and pavilions inundated and a pagoda protruding from the deluge. Authorities have launched a level-two emergency response in the Pearl River Delta, the second-highest in a four-tier system.

The national weather office imposed weather alerts across central Guangdong and warned of major storms in coastal areas

through Sunday evening and into Monday.

Citing the provincial hydrology bureau, CCTV said three monitored locations in the Bei River basin would "experience flooding seen around once a century... due to the impact of heavy precipitation".

Floods of up to 5.8 metres above the warning limit would strike the areas starting early on Monday morning, according to CCTV. Several other monitored tributaries in the basin would endure the kind of floods seen once every 50 years, it said.

Parts of the neighbouring provinces of Jiangxi and Fujian were also forecast to see severe rainstorms. — AFP



Pedestrians, holding umbrellas, cross a street amid a rainstorm in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, China — Reuters



People attend a candlelight vigil for the victims of the Bondi Junction Westfield shopping centre in Sydney. — AFP

Crowds join Bondi Beach memorial for stabbing victims

SYDNEY: Crowds gathered at Sydney's iconic Bondi Beach on Sunday for a candlelight memorial to the six people killed by a knife-wielding assailant at a nearby shopping mall.

Many hundreds sat on the grass in a beachside park to grieve for the five women and a Pakistani male security guard who died in the April 13 attack at the Westfield Bondi Junction shopping complex.

The killings stunned many Australians who are largely unaccustomed to such violent crime. "When I heard this I cried. Because it is new to us. We don't have this happen often. It's a shock," said

The mentally ill knifeman, 40-year-old Joel Cauchi, was tracked down, shot and killed by police inspector Amy Scott, who attended the service.

As waves crashed into the beach at dusk, a choir sang the hymn "Keep Your Loving Arms Around Me".

An Indigenous didgeridoo was played as people lit candles in the breezy evening.

"Bondi is tough and this is a strong community, and we will get through this," said New South Wales Premier Chris Minns.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese offered the condolences of the nation for the six lives "snatched away on that hardest of Saturday afternoons". "We mourn for all the joy they should have known," he said.

Cauchi's parents say he was diagnosed with schizophrenia at 17 but stopped taking medication, later leaving their Queensland home and dropping out of treatment.

His women victims were a designer, a volunteer surf lifesaver, the daughter of an entrepreneur, a Chinese university student, and a new mother.

The 38-year-old mother, Ashlee Good, handed over her bleeding nine-month-old girl Harriet to two strangers in desperation before being rushed to hospital where she died.

The baby was also taken to hospital and is said to be doing well. — AFP

Israel holds Palestinian economy captive

MAJEDA EL BATSH

The Gaza war is speeding up Israel's "annexation" of the Palestinian economy, say analysts, who argue it has been hobbled for decades by agreements that followed the Oslo peace accords.

While the war raging since October 7 has devastated swathes of Gaza, it has also hit the public finances and wider economy of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Israel is tightening the noose on the Palestinian Authority, by withholding tax revenues it collects on its behalf, economist Adel Samara said.

Palestinian livelihoods have also been hurt by bans on labourers crossing into Israel, and by a sharp downturn in tourism in the violence-plagued territory, including a quiet Christmas season in Bethlehem.

Samara said that "technically speaking, there is no Palestinian economy under Israeli occupation — our economy has been effectively annexed by Israel's".

The Palestinian economy is largely governed by the 1994 Paris Protocol, which granted sole control

over the territories' borders to Israel, and with it the right to collect import duties and value-added tax for the Palestinian Authority. Israel has repeatedly leveraged this power to deprive the authority of much-needed revenues.

But the Gaza war has further tightened Israel's grip, Samara said, with the bulk of customs duties withheld since the war began on October 7 after an attack on Israel.

"Without these funds, the Palestinian Authority struggles to pay the salaries of its civil servants and its running costs," said Taher al Labadi, a researcher at the French Institute for the Near East.

In February, Norway reportedly transferred to the Palestinian Authority about \$115 million from Israel following a deal to release some of the frozen taxes. Almost all Palestinian workers have also been forbidden from entering Israel for work, driving up unemployment across the territories.

The Palestinian prime minister Mohammed Mustafa bemoaned an "unprecedented financial crisis" during which his government's deficit had soared to \$7 billion, more than a third of the territories' GDP according to the latest

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budgetary figures.

The Paris Protocol, like the 1993 and 1995 Oslo agreements they were signed under, were meant to be in effect for five years, until the creation of a Palestinian state.

But the absence of a long-term peace deal means it is still governing nearly all aspects of the Palestinian economy.

Investment is also being stifled by the protocol, said Samara, who explained that Israel "controls the land, resources and water sources" of the Palestinian territories.

Before any factory or shop requiring access to these resources can be built in the West Bank, Israel must grant authorisation, he said. Israel's stance has become even tougher under far-right Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, he said, both of whom are settlers in the West Bank.

Critics accuse them of holding Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to ransom by threatening to withdraw the support that gives him a wafer-thin governing majority. Israeli political analyst Michael Milshtein echoed his take. — **AFP**

Women journalists bear the brunt of cyberbullying

ANNE PASCALE REBOUL

Women journalists face greater threats online in the course of their work, and the trend is increasing, one expert told an international conference in Italy this week.

There is significant potential for online violence to escalate to offline harm," said Julie Posetti research director of the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ).

"Women tend to face greater threats online," she told delegates at the Perugia International Journalism Festival on Saturday. And, she added, "the kind of threats they face are increasing".

That toxic environment was being "facilitated by Big Tech companies", she added, accusing them of "a failure to take responsibility".

In a joint Unesco/ICFJ study in 2022, nearly three-quarters of women journalists interviewed said they had experienced online violence or abuse in connection with their work. They interviewed 900 journalists from 125 countries. Attacks online include insults, sexist comments, and physical threats, including death threats to journalists and their families, the conference heard. Increasingly sophisticated attacks include blocking accounts, hacking, publishing private photos and creating "deep fakes" — fake images of people without their consent.

Violent threats tend to increase when combined with discrimination linked to skin colour and religion.

Posetti and two other researchers have built a guide and toolbox on the topic targeting journalists, together with the Organisation for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE).

Filipino journalist Maria Ressa, the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize winner, was a victim of online abuse, as she explained in the ICFJ-Unesco report.

"I was a CNN war correspondent for two decades, but nothing in the field prepared me for the orchestrated, misogynistic attacks on me and our women-led news outlet, Rappler," she said.

BBC disinformation specialist Marianna Spring received an avalanche of abusive tweets last year, threatening to kidnap her or slit her throat. Much of the abuse followed her investigation into the takeover of social media network X, then known as Twitter.

A fifth of women surveyed said they had suffered attacks or insults in real life that were linked to online abuse.

The consequences can be far-reaching, with some journalists potentially dissuaded from covering sensitive topics and some choosing to opt out of the industry altogether. — **AFP**

Building resilience together...



Dr Khalfan Hamed al Harrasi

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In the aftermath of the tragic events at Al Hawari Basic Education School in the Al Sharqiyah North Governorate, and in other governorates of Oman, our hearts go out to the families who lost loved ones in the devastating floods caused by a severe air depression that has passed through our country during these days. Offering our deepest condolences, prayers, and support to all those affected by this unimaginable loss, we stand together in mourning and solidarity. It's crucial to reflect on preventive measures to avoid similar tragedies in the future and ensure the safety of our communities.

The torrential rains that swept most of the governorates of Oman these days, especially the Wilayat of Al Mudhaibi of the Al Sharqiyah North Governorate, resulting in loss of lives, particularly among school students, serve as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for proactive measures to mitigate the impact of natural disasters.

Drawing from insights and recommendations from various sources, including meteorological experts, community leaders, and disaster management agencies, here are key strategies to bolster our resilience against such calamities. We shall acknowledge the proactive measures and emergency protocols implemented by stakeholders, institutions, agencies, and pertinent governmental bodies. As we offer our insights and suggestions, we encourage more emphasis on averting, reducing, or mitigating the detrimental consequences of potential catastrophes.

Experts emphasise the critical importance of investing in robust infrastructure to withstand the onslaught of heavy rains and flooding. Enhanced drainage systems, reinforced embankments, and robust road networks are essential components of a comprehensive strategy to mitigate flood risks. By bolstering our infrastructure, we can minimise the potential for devastation and safeguard our communities.

Timely information can mean the difference between life and death in emergency situations. Implementing effective early warning systems, supported by advanced meteorological technologies and community outreach initiatives, is paramount. By providing timely alerts and actionable guidance, we

empower individuals and families to take proactive measures to protect themselves and their loved ones.

Strong communities are built on a foundation of preparedness and collective action. It is imperative that we prioritise community engagement and empower residents with the knowledge and resources to respond effectively to emergencies.

Developing and rehearsing evacuation plans, establishing neighbourhood support networks, and fostering a culture of solidarity are essential steps in building community safety.

Similarly, education is a powerful tool for empowerment and risk reduction.

BY LEVERAGING DIGITAL
TECHNOLOGY AND ONLINE
TEACHING RESOURCES,
EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS
CAN ADAPT SWIFTLY TO
ADVERSE WEATHER CONDITIONS,
ENABLING STUDENTS TO
CONTINUE THEIR STUDIES
FROM THE SAFETY OF THEIR
HOMES. IT ALSO UNDERSCORES
THE IMPORTANCE OF
INNOVATION AND FLEXIBILITY
IN MAINTAINING EDUCATIONAL
CONTINUITY AMIDST
UNPREDICTABLE CIRCUMSTANCES

Public awareness campaigns, targeted at both adults and children, play a key role in disseminating vital information on flood safety measures, evacuation procedures, and emergency response protocols. By equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills to navigate hazardous situations, we empower them to make informed decisions and protect themselves and others.

In addition to physical infrastructure and preparedness measures, exploring the possibility of utilising remote learning platforms during times of floods and heavy rains could offer a lifeline for continuity in education while ensuring the safety of school students. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation deserve recognition for

successfully implementing remote online education.

By leveraging digital technology and online teaching resources, educational institutions can adapt swiftly to adverse weather conditions, enabling students to continue their studies from the safety of their homes. This approach not only mitigates the risk of accidents during hazardous weather events but also underscores the importance of innovation and flexibility in maintaining educational continuity amidst unpredictable circumstances.

Government leadership is instrumental in coordinating comprehensive disaster risk reduction efforts. While acknowledging the challenges posed by limited resources and competing priorities, it is imperative that authorities prioritise investments in flood mitigation measures and infrastructure upgrades. Strengthening building codes, enforcing zoning regulations, and integrating climate considerations into urban planning are essential steps in safeguarding our communities against future disasters.

In the wake of this tragic events, it's important to address the role of parents in ensuring the safety of their children during emergencies. Parents play a pivotal role in disaster preparedness by adhering to school guidelines and respecting established protocols. Had parents respected the school's rules and not attempted to pick up their children during the height of the flooding, the outcome might have been different.

By following instructions from school authorities and emergency responders, parents can help minimise risks and ensure the safety of their children. Clear communication channels between schools and parents are essential to relay timely information and instructions during emergencies, emphasising the importance of cooperation and compliance for the well-being of all involved.

As we mourn the lives lost in the tragedy that befell us, let us also honour their memory by taking decisive action to prevent similar catastrophes in the future. By harnessing the collective wisdom of experts, communities, and government stakeholders, we can build a safer future for all. Together, let us forge ahead with determination, compassion, and a steadfast commitment to protecting lives and livelihoods.

When rains bring tragedy not joy..

Weather is not always predictable as sometimes brings awfully surprises! Rain, for instance, is random with its associated disturbances like winds, storms, floods, or over-flowing wadis or even hailstorms. Such impacts are anticipated usually when it rains cats and dogs! It happens on some days of the year in our country where when it rains heavily wadis flow all over blocking roads.

Though, rain usually signifies happiness, hope, love and relief. It comes to refresh both people and land as it revives life on the land and hopes of people. However, sometimes it brings a sign of stress and frustration for some people as they get trapped in their homes or neighbourhoods, especially those living near mountains or valleys. All of a sudden when it rains, their homes get surrounded by water as if they are staying on an island.

As a precautionary measure, some people sacrifice the joyous moments of rain to leave their homes to avoid getting stuck in floods. Such incidents bring hardships or even tragic experiences, which people are experiencing and properties are severely affected too. People are getting scared as over-flowing wadis or floods near their homes. It is heartbreaking when we see people are affected by such harsh weather conditions.

Though it is very rare when rains bring fear, but lately people have experienced tough times during rains. The recent incident where 10 school children were drowned in a wadi and many other young and elderly people lost lives in different parts of the country. Unfortunately, drowning in wadis is happening very often and the lesson is not being learnt even the hard way!



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An author, columnist, creative writer, translator and a communications professional

THOUGH, RAIN USUALLY SIGNIFIES HAPPINESS, HOPE, LOVE AND RELIEF. SOMETIMES IT BRINGS A SIGN OF STRESS AND FRUSTRATION FOR SOME PEOPLE AS THEY GET TRAPPED IN THEIR HOMES

However, losing 10 children in one incident is very tragic indeed.

They had to experience a miserable way of fighting with death as they had been rolled over in their car in a flooding wadi. A relative who took them in a car struggled to save them but in vain.

Possibly, his reckless decision and driving was the reason behind the car being pulled away by the overflowing waters.

Other school students were also sent by school buses to their homes but some were blocked by wadis on the way. Therefore, students were kept in Masjids until late afternoon. This was very horrifying and panicking experience for students who were left alone with no food and beverages the whole day.

Likewise, parents were stressed looking for their children who left their schools and did not reach home!

That first day of the week-long adverse weather condition was very terrible and heartbreaking. With students and other victims found dead, others still lost in the wadis, parents roaming around here and there looking for their children, the day was a tragedy for all.

The terrifying experience and hard times were particularly experienced by a certain part of the country. However, the heartbreak was felt by everyone in the nation!

Can someone imagine how painful that was?! Undoubtedly, it is beyond expectation; losing children in such a freaking way, school students and teachers were in a horrible situation.

Another pitiful scenario was seeing many cars belonging to school teachers floating in the wadi while they were struggling to save their lives and students too during the storm in a school building.

Teachers and students alike experienced a day in the life like in a Hollywood movie! Whose responsibility was this?!

WATER WOES!



A woman speaks on a mobile phone while carrying water bottles at Lamtaput village in the Koraput district of India's Odisha state on Sunday. Many states are reeling under severe water crisis. – AFP

What a climate-aligned IMF would look like

Last week, the board of the International Monetary Fund approved current Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva for another five-year term. It is a welcome development that comes at a critical moment. Her second term will finish just before the end of this “make-or-break” decade for reining in climate change and delivering on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Georgieva has made significant progress in aligning the IMF with these goals. She was instrumental in the IMF's decision to acknowledge climate change as a critical macro issue under its institutional mandate. Under her leadership, the IMF launched its first-ever climate-change strategy; created the Resilience and Sustainability Trust (RST), its primary climate-finance instrument; and fostered global dialogue on the issue through its flagship publications and research.

But now even bolder leadership is needed. As the only multilateral institution charged with maintaining global financial and fiscal stability, the IMF's role is critical for addressing climate change. Georgieva can build on the progress made in her first term by doing four things: committing the IMF to align with the Paris agreement; ensuring that it has ample financial firepower; elevating the voices of climate-vulnerable emerging-market and developing economies (EMDEs); and mobilising international support for climate mitigation and adaptation efforts.

The first task is the most important. All the IMF's programmes – not just those that are explicitly climate



Mohamed Nasheed

The writer is a former president of the Maldives, is Founder and Secretary-General of the Climate Vulnerable Forum



Rakesh Mohan

The writer is a former deputy governor of the Reserve Bank of India, is a member of the Economic Advisory Panel to the World Bank President Ajay Banga

focused, like the RST – need to start promoting low-carbon development. Critically, that means avoiding scenarios that lock in fossil-fuel-intensive growth paths that will leave countries stranded in a net-zero future. All the IMF's work must be consistent with models of inclusive growth and development, including those where value is generated from natural capital and biodiversity. Equally, the IMF's surveillance efforts (which involve all countries, not just borrowers) should help governments identify how best to achieve their development and climate goals.

But aligning IMF financing and operations with the Paris goals will not be enough. With governments negotiating anew climate-finance goal this year, the IMF should help policymakers identify potential sources of financing and better understand the macroeconomic dimensions of the issue. This will require fresh thinking, because the evidence shows that carbon pricing will not be enough to generate the resources needed to support the net-zero transition.

Robust analytics from the IMF can help to foster a global consensus on how best to generate international and domestic public finance – whether through taxation, revenue from carbon border adjustment mechanisms, or other channels.

Second, Georgieva must ensure that the IMF itself has ample financing firepower. As she has previously warned, the world is

increasingly prone to a wide range of shocks, many of which would have profound macroeconomic consequences. In this fraught new setting, the IMF's operations and balance sheet must be calibrated against what member states need to remain resilient. While the IMF Board approved a 50 per cent increase in member states quotas (contributions) last December, that is far below the 267 per cent increase required to meet the gross external financing needs of the most vulnerable members.

Similarly, the transition to net-zero will radically alter the economic terrain for many countries, especially those that have long relied on exporting or taxing fossil fuels. The IMF should track these trends and prepare to support countries that need help pursuing an orderly, low-carbon transition.

Third, Georgieva has a special

responsibility to ensure that climate-vulnerable economies are involved in the IMF's decision-making. These economies are more likely to seek IMF help, so it is all the more important that they have a say in how the IMF works. Yet, as of October 2022, the Vulnerable Group of 20 (V20) commands only around 5 per cent of the voting power at the IMF, despite being home to 17 per cent of the world's population.

One major V20 demand is to “make debt work for the climate.” That means revising the IMF's debt-sustainability model to incorporate urgent investment and spending needs, and to determine what it will take for each country to meet them. Implicit in this approach is a move away from conventional austerity-based measures, and towards strategies focused more on resource mobilisation.



Georgieva can build on the progress made in her first term by doing four things.

To be sure, the recent addition of a third African chair on the IMF Executive Board was a welcome development. But at the end of the day, last year's 16th General Review of Quotas was a missed opportunity to rebalance voting power. Given that the IMF has never had a non-European managing director, it will take fundamental governance reforms to convince climate-vulnerable economies that it truly represents their interests. To that end, Georgieva should offer her support for ongoing efforts to recognise the V20 as an official inter-governmental group at the IMF.

Finally, since Georgieva cannot undertake these efforts alone, the IMF Board must support her in hiring and funding additional staff from diverse disciplines and backgrounds. Additional resources would allow the IMF to scale up its direct country engagement and ensure that national policies are tailored to local contexts. Coordination with other international institutions is also essential. The World Bank, for example, can help leverage the RST's limited resources to mobilise more money, especially toward resiliency programmes like Climate Prosperity Plans.

In her first term, Georgieva won the argument that climate change is central to the IMF's mandate. Now, she will have to show that the institution can rise to the challenge posed by the climate crisis at this “now or never” juncture.

sport

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OMANI SAILORS GRAB SEVEN MEDALS IN GCC YOUTH GAME



WALEED AL JAHWARI
DUBAI, APRIL 21

Oman national sailing team showed a great achievement when they snatched seven medals at the closing day at Abu Dhabi Aquatics Club from April 17 to 21. The competition is part of the first edition of GCC Youth Games, hosted by UAE and will continue until May 2, with participation of all GCC countries including Oman.

Oman sailing team snatched gold medal in optimist team category while Omani sailor Tamim al Balushi claimed silver

medal after tough competition among 16 players in general optimist category.

Also, Tamim al Balushi won silver medal in male optimist category and Tartil al Hasani won bronze in female optimist category. While Abdullatif al Qasimi won gold medal in ILCA4 class, Faris al Hashimi finished sixth out of seven players.

Elyas al Fedhaly snatched gold in ILCA6, and Hatim al Erami claimed bronze in same category that saw seven participants from all GCC countries.

National junior handball team lost to Saudi Arabia 24-38 in the

second match that was held at Al Batha Club hall in Sharjah. Oman handball did not perform as expected after first match against the host UAE team.

The first half of the match ended with the Saudi lead 20-13, the match remained unchanged in the score for Oman, to end with Saudi Arabia win.

Oman junior volleyball team lost their second test to Kuwaiti in three games on Sunday, with scores of 25-12, 25-16, 25-13. Volleyball competition takes place in Dubai from April 20 to 25.

In Monday's test, Oman team



will play the third match against Qatar national team in the afternoon at Al Nasr Club.

Oman table tennis all set to compete in table tennis competitions from April 23 to 27 at Shabab Al Ahly Club hall in Dubai after they completed regular training at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher under the male coach, Omid Shams Shahrabaki, and female coach Fatimia Keifani.

Oman team will take part in men's singles, women's singles, men's teams, men's doubles, and women's doubles. The technical committee meeting will be held

on April 23, during which the match schedule and technical regulations will be determined during the technical meeting on April 23.

National team includes six players: Ahmed bin Salem al Riyami, Ali bin Munir al Rawahi, Luqman bin Sultan al Farsi, Nasser bin Abdullah al Zaabi, Salma bint Yasser al Nasiriyah and Taliyah bint Munir al Rawahiyah.

Oman under-17 football team will be looking for three points in the third test against Bahrain on Monday at Al Nahyan Stadium in Al Wahda

club in Abu Dhabi, as part of the football competitions during April 17 to 22.

Oman team, coached by the national head coach Anwar al Habsi, snatched three points in the first appearance against the host UAE with a score of 2-1 on Wednesday, but they suffered a shock 1-0 loss against Kuwait on Friday despite excelling in an outstanding technical performance.

Oman's chances to claim the gold or Silver medal after winning the third match are possible, but related to other results in the concluding round.

Al Nahdha players fit and raring to go against Lebanon's Al Ahed

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

Al Nahda will aim to present a different show as they face Lebanon's Al Ahed in the second leg match on Tuesday at the completion of the first-leg game. Al Buraimi-based team had two training sessions at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex under watchful eyes of the domestic, experienced coach Hamed al Azani.

Al Nahdha players reported back to the training session after they returned from Iraq following the completion of the first-leg game. Al Buraimi-based team had two training sessions at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex under watchful eyes of the domestic, experienced coach Hamed al Azani.



Al Nahda head coach Al Azani is confident of better concentration from his players on Tuesday. "The players lacked focus and concentration during the previous game especially in the first half. The performance was not at desired levels though we fared better in the second half," he said.

Oman's chances are still high as

Al Nahdha would like to rekindle memories of the Seeb's club as they had lifted the AFC Cup trophy in 2022. Coach Al Azani is optimistic that Al Nahdha will secure a slot in the final against either Abdysh-Ata Kant of Kyrgyz Republic or Australia's Central Coast Mariners.

"There are minor details in the knockout stage, and the team did

not work properly to exploit those details in the right way. Al Ahed had managed to score after they received two chances while we had, at least, three real chances to score. We were still capable of staging a comeback and winning the second leg," said Al Azani.

On the other hand, the Lebanese side arrived in Muscat and commenced their training ahead of the scheduled match on Tuesday. It is going to be a very tough game for both teams as they will target to reach the AFC Cup final. Al Nahdha Club requested the fans to support the domestic club as they are representing the nation in this essential tournament. It is expected that the fans will turn up in large numbers to support Al Nahdha in this crucial tournament as they are one step away from the AFC Cup final.

UAE rout Oman to be crowned ACC Premier Cup champions

MUSCAT: UAE dashed the dreams of Oman's maiden Asia Cup berth as they put up a masterclass performance to outplay the hosts by 55 runs in the final of the ACC Men's Premier Cup at the Oman Cricket Academy ground on Sunday.

Put to bat first, UAE skipper Muhammed Waseem slammed a century (100) as they put up a solid total of 204/4.

Oman's chase never gained momentum, courtesy of pacer Junaid Siddique's devastating opening spell (3/11), leaving them struggling at 11/3.

The defeat was the first for Oman after five successive wins in the ongoing tournament but it ended the hopes of their maiden berth in the ACC Asia Cup while UAE booked their spot in the coveted event.

Coached by former Indian cricketer Lalchand Rajput, who took charge of the side in February this year, the UAE

will feature in next year's Asia Cup for the second time, having previously participated in 2016.

Oman, however, along with UAE and third-placed Hong Kong secured their spots in the ACC Emerging Teams Asia Cup, which will be played later this year.

UAE's win also avenged the loss to the hosts in the group stage when Oman won by nine wickets on April 15.



WASEEM

MESSI DOUBLE KEEPS MIAMI ON TOP IN MLS

FORT LAUDERDALE: Lionel Messi scored twice and created another for Sergio Busquets as Inter Miami beat Nashville 3-1 on Saturday to maintain top spot in Major League Soccer's Eastern Conference.

Miami suffered an early setback when their defender Franco Negri deflected a corner from Daniel Lovitz into his own net in just the second minute of the game at Chase Stadium.

Gerardo Martino's team have now failed to keep a clean sheet in each of their last 11 games and it could have been worse when three minutes later Josh Bauer blasted a shot against the bar.

But Messi soon had Miami on level terms — the Argentine set free by a clever flick from Diego Gomez saw a shot parried out by Nashville keeper Elliot Panico, but after Luis Suarez directed the loose ball back to him Messi slotted home to make it 1-1 in the 11th minute.

Two minutes later, Messi took advantage of some sloppy play from Nashville but his low right-foot shot came out off the post.

Everything Miami was creating was coming through Messi, who flashed a snapshot wide before moments later whipping in a cross for a Gomez header which was saved by Panico's feet.

Six minutes before the interval, Messi's former Barcelona team-mate Busquets found the net for the first time in MLS, meeting the World Cup winner's corner with a fine glancing header at the near post.

But there was a blow for the home side just before the break when Paraguay international Gomez was stretchered off with an ankle injury, the latest in a series of injuries for Miami.

His replacement, Brazilian born youngster Leonardo Afonso, had the ball in the net but his effort was ruled out for offside.

Nashville came out strongly after the break but despite dominating possession for the opening 20 minutes of the half, they had little to show for their efforts other than a couple of off-target long-range efforts from German Hany Mukhtar.

Nine minutes from the end, Miami were able to put the game to bed when Afonso was ruled to have been brought down inside the box by Bauer and Messi slotted home the penalty.



Lionel Messi celebrates after scoring — AFP

The goal was Messi's ninth goal in as many games in all competitions this season for Miami.

Martino was unhappy with the way his team had started so slowly.

"Regardless of how fortunate their goal was, we didn't start well in the first few minutes. They were more focused, more intense, they handled the ball better, they pressed," he said.

"There are a lot of things we need to correct, but I'd like to do it with the full squad. We have seven or eight players out which is a lot in a league as strict as MLS with the roster and budget issues," he said.

Miami have 18 points from

their opening 10 games and Martino said that was a decent return considering the depleted squad he is working with.

"All this happens to us and we have still collected 18 points, which is significantly more than last year at this stage, we will be looking to accumulate points now so that the second part of the year is not as demanding and dramatic as last year," he said, referring to the ill-fated late chase for a playoff place.

Elsewhere in MLS on Saturday, champions Columbus Crew had to come from behind twice to earn a 2-2 draw with Phil Neville's Portland Timbers.

The leveller came in the 74th minute via a superbly struck

long-range blast from French full-back Steven Moreira.

Last season's regular season table toppers Cincinnati claimed an impressive 2-1 win at Atlanta United despite falling behind to a lovely, curling shot from Argentine midfielder Thiago Almada in the 59th minute.

The lead lasted just three minutes as reigning MLS Most Valuable Player Luciano Acosta led Cincy on a counter-attack and fed compatriot Luca Orellano to level.

Acosta completed a crazy five minutes when he grabbed the winner, tapping in after he was picked out by DeAndre Yedlin.

—AFP

Silva goal sees Manchester City in Final.

ANDY JALIL.
LONDON, APRIL 21.

With just six minutes remaining of normal time and thoughts of extra time and a penalty shoot-out coming to mind – for the second time in three days for Manchester City – City finally found the net to reach a second successive FA Cup final at the expense of Chelsea, who suffered their second consecutive final's defeat having gone down to Liverpool in the Carabao Cup in February.

A relieved City manager, Pep Guardiola, who saw his team crash out of the European Champions League at the quarter-final stage only three days earlier to Real Madrid, agonisingly after a penalty shoot-out, was furious at the FA for not scheduling this match a day later, said: "It's unacceptable. Because I've won I have the courage to tell you. For the health of the players, it's not normal. I don't understand how we survived today.

"Why play today and not tomorrow. Why not have one more day for the health of the players? Tell me how you prepare this final against Chelsea in the best moment of the season. How? It's impossible. There's no chance. It's common sense. I'm not asking for a special privilege. I know the FA in this country is special for many things but it's for the health of the players."

He added: "People cannot imagine what a punch in the face it was to be out of the Champions League in the way we went out (last Wednesday). What my team has done today is one of the greatest things I've seen from a group of players."

The game was a story of missed chances particularly by Chelsea. But City, putting early

pressure on their opponents could have taken the lead quicker when Kevin De Bruyne slipped a brilliant ball to Phil Foden who crossed after going around the goalkeeper but the shot was cleared off the line by Marc Cucurella.

Thereafter, Chelsea had several chances which fell to Nicolas Jackson who failed to convert any. The first came in the 29th minute when he was sent clear by Enzo Fernandes. Jackson went around goalkeeper Stefan Ortega but instead to going for the target he tried to pass to Cole Palmer and the ball was cleared by Nathan Aka.

Jackson missed further chances in the second half. Conor Gallagher did well to beat Rodri and passed to Jackson whose weak shot was saved. Jackson then had yet another chance when he received the ball at the back post from Palmer but he headed the ball down and the bounce allowed Ortega to save. Mykhailo Mudryk, on as substitute, missed a fine opportunity in the 68th minute when he shot wide of the far post from a pass by Palmer.

Chelsea had an appeal for a late penalty turned down when the ball clipped Jack Grealish's hand from a free kick. Finally, in the 84th minute, City found the winning goal. De Bruyne sent a low cross from the left which Djordje Petrovic initially saved with his left foot but the ball went onto the path of Bernardo Silva whose first-time shot was deflected into the net off a diving Cucurella's chest, leaving Chelsea to lament the missed chances.

Chelsea manager, Mauricio Pochettino, summed up his team's performance, saying: "We were not capable of being clinical."



Manchester City's Bernardo Silva celebrates scoring their first goal—Reuters

Rybakina beats Kostyuk to win Stuttgart Open

Stuttgart: Kazakh fourth seed Elena Rybakina defeated Ukrainian Marta Kostyuk in straight sets to win the WTA event in Stuttgart on Sunday.

2022 Wimbledon champion Rybakina beat Kostyuk 6-2, 6-2 in one hour nine minutes, ending the 21-year-old Ukrainian's giant-killing run at the tournament.

The world number four broke Kostyuk twice in the first set and twice in the second, fighting off three break points

from the world number 27 to lift her eighth career title.

Rybakina now holds a 2-1 record against Kostyuk.

"I want to congratulate Marta for a great tournament. You're playing really well and hopefully we play many more finals," Rybakina said.

"The crowd, guys, it was an unbelievable week. It was nice to play every match here and fight. Your energy gives a lot during these tough matches."

The title is her third of 2024,



Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina kisses her trophy —AFP

having already won in Brisbane and Abu Dhabi and it is the first time she has won three WTA titles in one year.

Sunday's victory was also the 24-year-old's third title win on clay in her career.

Rybakina needed to overcome world number one Iga Swiatek in Saturday's semi-final.

Rybakina took three hours to overcome the four-time grand slam winner and shattering her 10-match

winning streak at the tournament, which included capturing the last two titles.

Kostyuk also took the hard road to the final, beating top-10 opponents Zheng Qinwen, Coco Gauff and Marketa Vondrousova to reach Sunday's match.

"I want to congratulate Elena and her team. She's had an amazing couple of seasons and it's always a pleasure playing against you," Kostyuk said after the match. — AFP



Mega soccer carnival to offer a treat to Muscat footballers

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

MUSCAT: As many as 16 football teams from across the country will keep the ball rolling at the whistles on Wednesday and Thursday at the Basher Club Stadium, thanks to the first of its kind ‘Soccer Carnival-2024’, that aims to offer two days packed with adrenaline rush to the young footballers of the Sultanate of Oman.

Organised by an Indian Daily, Gulf Madhyamam’ which is the first international Indian newspaper and the only one being printed in Oman, in association with KMFA – Kerala Muscat Football Association, a body of footballers from both countries, the officials said that the Sevens Football tournament will be one of its kind which capital city hasn’t witnessed hitherto.

On April 24, the kick-off will take place at 10 pm for group-stage matches whereas on April 26, quarter finals are scheduled from 4 pm; semifinals and finals shall follow thereafter. Winners will take home RO 600 cash along with winner’s trophy and runners-up will receive trophy and RO 300 in cash. Outstanding players will be honoured and prizes shall be given away to them.

As an icing to the cake, an ace footballer and ex-Indian star Anas Edathodika will be the chief guest while Raj Kalesh, celebrity of family audience, will add flavour to the carnival with his non-stop spot games and events involving the spectators and their families. Special commentator Raashid Kottakkal’s presence will add great value to the carnival because his remarkable commentary skills for boosting the sevens football

matches are a sure bet, according to the Organisers.

Speaking to the Observer at a press conference held at the Foodlands Restaurant, to detail the mega soccer event, the organisers of the ‘Soccer Carnival-2024’ said that the two days will be a perfect mix of fun, frolic, gastronomy and entertainment besides the football fest raising itself to be a family event. Entry to the two-day Soccer Carnival is free.

“We are here to launch a first of its kind soccer carnival which is aimed at entertaining those who love the sports as well as those who are not as several games and entertainment programme for kids as well as families are in store. Audience will also have an opportunity to win a handful of attractive prizes. The fun zone will have quiz competitions, face painting and other fun-filled events for kids and ladies,” said K Mohammed Rafeeq, Global Head of Gulf Madhyamam Business Solutions.

The organisers unveiled the Soccer Carnival logo Arshad Peringala and committee member Mohammed Rafeeq controlled the team draw. The media announcement was also attended by Shakeel Hassan, Oman resident manager, Binod Kumar, Lulu Exchange marketing head, Sahil Moidu, managing director, Al Hajis Perfumes, Niyas Abduk Khader, managing director, United Cargo, Rafeeq Malayil, chairman, RFC, Abdul Hameed, managing director, Rubua Al Haram (Top Ten), KTK Sajeer, country sales manager for GEEPAS, KV Ummer, Director, Golden Tulip Headington, Joyson, managing director, Intelligent Events and Faisal Wayanad, KMFA core committee member.

AL HARTHY MAXIMISES QUALIFYING PACE TO TAKE THIRD ON GRID AT IMOLA

ROME: BMW M4 GT3 driver Ahmad al Harthy delivered his best performance of the season so far during qualifying for round two of the FIA World Endurance Championship in Italy on Saturday, by securing a fantastic third on the grid for today’s 6 Hours of Imola.

Having worked hard on qualifying and race performance of the No.46 Team WRT car throughout the three free practice sessions, the Omani and team-mates Maxime Martin and Valentino Rossi hoped for a stellar showing in the LMGT3 qualifying session.

Al Harthy certainly delivered, lapping with the sixth quickest time of 1m43.241 seconds (171.2 km/h) to progress into the all-important top 10 ‘Hyperpole’ shoot-out for the second time in as many FIA WEC race weekends. Then tasked with repeating the performance in Hyperpole immediately after the conclusion of initial qualifying, the OQ, Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Omantel and BMW Oman supported racer went faster still.

Posting a best time of 1m43.099 seconds (171.4 km/h), Al Harthy was the quickest of the BMW entries and claimed an impressive third on the grid for the six-hour second round of the season — a mere 0.041 seconds shy of the LMGT3 front row.

Thrilled with his own personal performance, the Omani was equally delighted with the handling and pace of the No.46 car. Having started the event on Friday, 19th April, with the fourth fastest time in opening practice, the squad worked hard on set-up and balance in sessions two and three to deliver a car which Al Harthy believes will be strong in race trim too.

AHMAD AL HARTHY: “I’m really delighted, it’s a huge step forward from Qatar. I think



we maximised everything we could for qualifying, from FP1 we continued working on the car – both long and short runs – to make sure we were strong in quali and the race. Getting into Hyperpole was the first target, going quicker then was the second, so I’m

absolutely delighted with that.

“Imola is a very tight track, a very fast track, and there was a lot of traffic with the other classes. I’m really looking forward to a positive start to the race, making sure I’m able to give my team-mates the best possible chance.

For sure, it’s great to maximise the qualifying performance of this new BMW.”

Round two of the FIA WEC season, the 6 Hours of Imola, is scheduled to begin at 13:00 local time today. Keep up to date with all of the action at www.fiawec.com

Oman’s 49er sailors aiming to achieve Olympic dream at Last Chance Regatta in Hyères

MUSCAT: Oman Sail’s 49er teams of Musab al Hadi and Waleed al Kindi, and Ahmed al Hasani and Abdulrahman al Maashari will aim to achieve their Olympic dreams at the Last Chance Regatta, being held as part of the Semaine Olympique Française, this week in Hyères, France. The four sailors will be part of nearly 1000 athletes from 90 countries taking part — three times the figure for the actual Olympic competition — with many looking to seal qualification and ensure Oman is represented at the Games this coming July.

After nearly two years of preparation and qualification events, Oman’s chances of qualifying for the Paris 2024 Olympic Sailing Competition rest on a week in France where up to 50 places will be on offer across all 10 events. The team will

be led by Hashim al Rashdi who has been working hard with both sailors to prepare for conditions in Hyeres and the pressures of high-level competition.

In the build up to the regatta, the team has been undergoing a training camp with the French national team in order to improve every aspect of their physical, technical, tactical and mental conditioning.

GREAT OPPORTUNITY Hashim al Rashdi, Oman Sail’s Olympic coach, said, “This is a great opportunity for our team to clinch qualification. We have had a challenging route to this regatta but in between events we have worked hard on and off the water to prepare and be ready when the first race begins. Qualifying for the Olympic Games would be a huge achievement for the nation,



for Oman Sail, and of course for the sailors themselves. They know that everyone is behind them and offering their full support, and we are confident they will perform to the best of their abilities.”

GREAT SIGNIFICANCE Musab al Hadi added, “This is a very important regatta, and the races carry great significance for all of us, as well as the entire nation. Our preparation has been good, and we are ready for the challenge. To be able to reach the Olympic Games would be a dream come true for us all personally and for the whole nation. We are very grateful for the support of Oman Sail, the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Youth and the Oman Olympic Committee. Now it is up to us to show our strengths and claim a place at the Olympics.”

In order to qualify, the Omani team will need to finish in the three remaining places available for the 49er event. Racing will take place over six days before heading into a Medal Stage from 25-27 April.

There are just two months to go until the Paris 2024 Olympic Games and all of the major national teams will be competing in Hyères as some look to finalise qualification and others gain valuable experience in a format that mirrors the Olympic Sailing Competition at a competition in Hyères Harbor for those nations already qualified.

The Olympic Sailing competition gets underway on 28 July until 8 August at Marseille Marina where 330 sailors – with equal distribution between men and women – will compete in all 10 events.



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FDI soars 26% to RO 4.6 billion in 2023: MoCIIP

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) highlighted its key achievements during the previous year at the annual media gathering held yesterday in Muscat.

Speaking to the press, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Investment Promotion, Ibtisam bint Ahmed al Faroojiyah, shared that FDI increased exponentially in 2023.

“We witnessed a significant increase in foreign investment in 2023, amounting to approximately RO 4.6 billion, with a growth rate of 26 per cent.

Indeed, in the past year, we were pleased with the participation in several initiatives undertaken by the Ministry In this regard, enhancing this indicator.

One of the most important initiatives was the opening of an investment lounge in Oman aimed at facilitating the inflow of investments to the Sultanate of Oman and also enhancing the investor’s journey.”

According to data released by the Ministry, the total amount



Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion officials and guests are seen at the annual media gathering held yesterday.

reached RO 25.050 billion by Q3 2023 compared to the corresponding quarter of the previous year. In the industrial sector, the volume of FDI amounted to RO 1.406 billion.

Additionally, Al Farooji shared that the Ministry is in the process of finalising a national investment strategy.

“Another important milestone that we have completed is the finalisation of the National Investment Strategy, and in 2024, we will begin its implementation.

Additionally, in 2024, we will also focus on the development of exports through the establishment and inauguration of an Omani



Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion for Investment Promotion, Ibtisam bint Ahmed al Faroojiyah.

Export Centre.”

Furthermore, Ministry officials revealed that the total trade exchange between Oman and the rest of the world amounted to RO 37.600 billion in 2023.

The total exports of the country amounting to RO 22.690 billion, of which RO 13.760 billion from the oil and gas sector and RO

7.442 billion from the non-oil sector, while the re-export sector contributed to around RO 1.487 billion.

In regards to the industrial sector, MoCIIP revealed that it contributed RO 2.559 billion to the GDP at current prices in September of 2023. Industrial activities accounted for 16.7% to GDP at current prices, while manufacturing industries accounted for approximately 8.1%.

Additionally, officials shared that the investment volume of newly signed industrial project agreements amounted to RO 385 million last year.

Furthermore, the Ministry revealed that it issued 17 decisions and regulations during 2023.

Some of the most notable regulations include the unprecedented regulatory framework for e-commerce, which is part of a larger national E-commerce Strategy, in addition to the online and social media marketing by-laws, which regulate online promotional activities.

Other newly issued regulations included directives to combat hidden trade and the national product identity licensing regulations.

In 2023, the Ministry launched

three electronic platforms with the goal of achieving “comprehensive digital transformation and enhancing the investment environment”.

The first was the Oman Business Platform, previously known as Invest Easy, which offers government e-services to entrepreneurs and investors.

The second platform, Maroof, was launched following the release of the E-commerce regulatory framework and aims to provide a database of licenced e-commerce vendors in the country.

The third platform, Hazm, acts as a supervisory system to ensure the compliance of local products with standard specifications and technical regulations.

Looking ahead to 2024, the Ministry shared that it would focus primarily on digital transformation with the goal of converting all its services to online services.

Additionally, the Ministry unveiled a new initiative to address urgent investor concerns.

According to officials, the “Immediate Response Outlet” will be located in the Invest in Oman Lounge and aims to identify challenges faced by investors quickly and intervene directly to address them.

Oman’s GDP at current prices exceeds RO 41bn



Non-oil activities increased by 1.7 per cent, recording a value of RO 28.153 billion at the end of Q4 2023.

MUSCAT: The gross domestic product (GDP) at current prices of the Sultanate of Oman at the end of Q4 2023 recorded a decline of 2.8 per cent, reaching (at market price) RO 41.837 billion, compared to the end Q4 2022, during which the gross domestic product at current prices reached RO 43.042 billion, according to preliminary data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Oil activities decreased by 11.9 per cent, recording RO 14.971 billion at the end of Q4 2023, compared to RO 16.993 billion at the end of Q4 2022, as the contribution of oil activities amounted to 36 per cent.

Crude oil activities also decreased by 14 per cent, recording RO 12.788 billion,

while natural gas activities increased by 2.4 per cent, recording RO 2.183 billion.

Non-oil activities increased by 1.7 per cent, recording a value of RO 28.153 billion at the end of Q4 2023, compared to RO 27.671 billion at the end of Q4 2022.

The total industrial activities recorded RO 7.762 billion, compared to RO 8.234 billion at the end of Q4 2022, while agricultural, forestry and fishing activities recorded RO 966.400 million, and service activities recorded RO 19.424 billion.

The contribution of construction activity amounted to 7 per cent, compared to 8 per cent for wholesale and retail trade, 9 per cent for public administration and defence, and 40 per cent for other non-oil activities. — ONA

Port of Salalah leads the way with innovative water solution

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

The Port of Salalah is taking bold steps to combat freshwater scarcity through an innovative approach that is reshaping the maritime industry. Partnering with Maersk, the port has embarked on a pioneering project to optimise the use of freshwater generator systems aboard cargo ships, harnessing waste heat energy to distil seawater and produce potable water.

According to APM Terminals — which holds a 30% stake in the Port operating company Salalah Port Services — what sets this initiative apart is the strategic storage of excess water in tank containers during voyages, which is then delivered to the port upon berthing, transforming a previously underutilised resource into a sustainable water supply.

With two tanks optimised and strategically positioned on board, they can be filled with fresh water during an average sea voyage between two ports, totalling a capacity of 50,000 litres.

Freshwater scarcity is a mounting global challenge, with Unicef reporting that nearly four billion people, almost two-thirds of the world’s population, experience severe water scarcity for at least one month each year.

The implications of water scarcity are far-reaching, affecting not only access to drinking water but also sanitation, agriculture, and



By tapping into the excess freshwater generated by cargo ships, the port is not only addressing its own water needs but also demonstrating a commitment to environmental stewardship and corporate responsibility.

overall economic development. As populations grow and climate change intensifies, the urgency of finding innovative solutions to address water scarcity becomes increasingly evident.

At the Port of Salalah, the project’s impact goes beyond ensuring water availability for port operations.

A key aspect of the initiative is its potential to support communities facing water scarcity challenges worldwide.

By tapping into the excess freshwater generated by cargo ships, the port is not only addressing its own water needs but also demonstrating a commitment to environmental stewardship and corporate responsibility.

The recent success of the project has been bolstered by a comprehensive Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) study conducted by the Danish Technical University.

The study not only validated the project’s environmental benefits but also highlighted its efficiency compared to traditional water delivery methods.

This validation underscores the potential of the initiative to not only address freshwater scarcity but also set a new standard for sustainable water management practices in the maritime sector.

Salalah Port CEO Keld M Christensen, a staunch advocate for sustainability at the port, emphasises the broader

PARTNERING WITH MAERSK, THE PORT HAS EMBARKED ON A PIONEERING PROJECT TO OPTIMISE THE USE OF FRESHWATER GENERATOR SYSTEMS ABOARD CARGO SHIPS, HARNESSING WASTE HEAT ENERGY TO DISTILL SEAWATER AND PRODUCE POTABLE WATER.

implications of the project. “While committed to decarbonising operations at Salalah by 2040, we also recognise that sustainability is not only about decarbonising supply chains but also protecting our environment and its finite resources,” he states.

“With thousands of vessel calls each year at the Port of Salalah, this pilot opens the door for many more vessels to replicate this system and create an incredibly large supply of fresh water not only here in Jordan, but across the world, wherever it’s needed,” he added.

With a firm commitment to environmental conservation and a vision for a more water-secure future, the Port of Salalah’s pioneering project serves as a testament to the transformative power of innovation and cooperation in addressing global challenges.

Oman pioneers in digital banking, says BankDhofar head of retail banking

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

Oman began digitation march much earlier than many in the region and is on the right track in terms of digitising the economy at par with Oman Vision 2040 which envisions a digital society, according to Amjad al Lawati (pictured), Chief Retail Banking Officer at BankDhofar.

Speaking to the *Observer* in an exclusive interview, Al Lawati said Oman was the first one to introduce card payments at government sector well before many of the others in the region and the country is at par with the rest in the region and this is in line with the general direction of Oman Vision 2040 about digital economy,” adds Al Lawati who has



more than 25 years of experience in banking.

“Oman began the journey of digitisation of banking, specifically digitising payments before many countries in the region. Since then, we have been at par with the other regional banks. Oman’s digitising march started with a

couple of government entities where they stopped accepting cash, and hybrid transactions were happening” Amjad said adding that while the card to cash payments was hovering around 40:60 before the Covid-19 pandemic, the same became the other way round 60:40 post-pandemic.

With Dhofar-Pay, a cutting-edge service that redefines contactless payments for the Sultanate of Oman, customers can effortlessly tap and transact using their NFC-enabled Android phones, providing unparalleled convenience and security.

Dhofar-Pay allows users to securely add their existing Visa Debit and Credit Card details to their NFC-enabled Android phones. Once set up, the mobile

phone becomes a digital card, enabling contactless payment transactions with a simple tap on POS terminals.

This innovative solution eliminates the need to carry physical cards, offering a seamless payment experience for customers.

The new facility can be used by anyone who has a balance of RO 1 or 1 million and it simplifies the payment process while alleviating the payment hurdles.

Even if one uses the card, he or she can also use the service by simply following a two-step procedure.

The first step is to unlock the phone and the second step is to tap it on any of the POS where the purchase is made and the service is free and there’s no charges

attached to it. “We are the first one to launch this service in Oman, which the tech-savvy community has been waiting for quite a long time and it is now available.

All you have to do is to download the bank app or update the same if you’re already using it, enrol your card, put the OTP and unlock, tap and enjoy.”

“We always work towards making banking easier and better for our customers and Dhofar-Pay is a perfect example of that.

We are committed to use the latest technology to give the best banking experience possible for our customers. Our goal is to give easy and safe financial solutions that adapt to the evolving customer needs,” Amjad bin Iqbal al Lawati, Chief Retail Banking Officer at BankDhofar;

Treat yourself while giving back to others with Ooredoo vanity number auction



MUSCAT: Serving its customers and local communities is a key part of Ooredoo’s strategy and the telco is running another vanity number auction for charity. Have you always dreamt of having an easy-to-remember and unique mobile number? Are you passionate about supporting charities? If yes, start bidding online for one or more of the 100 Gold and Diamond mobile numbers that are up for grabs during the auction.

Registration starts on Monday, April 22 and bidding starts at 9 am on Tuesday, April 23. The online vanity number auction provides a great opportunity to get a mobile number that makes you stand out from the crowd while making a real difference to the lives of others, as Ooredoo will donate proceeds to not-for-profits and good causes. So, don’t miss out!

Those interested in bidding on one or more Gold or Diamond numbers can browse the online list on Ooredoo’s website.

First-time bidders must fill out a quick and easy registration form, while those who have participated in previous vanity number auctions can simply activate their account.

For more information on how to register for the auction, please visit their website: www.ooredoo.om/Personal/Mobile/DigitalServices/Auction.aspx.

Plenty of opportunities for all airports in the region: Aviation executive

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

The Middle East has the most vibrant and successful aviation sector compared to other regions, It was also one of the first to recover from the pandemic-era meltdowns. There are plenty of opportunities for all airports in the region, said the top official of one such hub in an exclusive interview with the *Observer*.

Elena Sorlini (pictured), managing director and CEO, at Abu Dhabi Airports, is a senior executive with wide experience in managing investments in the aviation and energy industries,

including in the Sultanate of Oman.

Between 2018 and 2021, Sorlini served in the positions of group corporate strategy director and the group vice president of strategic planning at the erstwhile Oman Aviation Group (OAG), where her role involved effectively developing and managing investments in infrastructure and services in the aviation sector.

When asked about having mega airports in short distances in the region, she said, “Having large hubs within short distances has never been an issue in places like Europe.

It shouldn’t be one in this area.



There are plenty of opportunities for all of us.

Zayed International Airport in Abu Dhabi was built to re-imagine the airport experience for passengers and partners alike,

and it is poised to capture rising tourism demand. We are located just an eight-hour flight from 2/3rd of the world population, we are one of the largest and most beautiful terminals worldwide, capable of welcoming up to 45 million passengers per year.”

On the role of low-cost carriers, she said, “The low-cost companies have been underserved not just in Abu Dhabi.

The uniqueness of their products and services has not just bridged a demand mostly underserved but has also been proven to stimulate it. Since their launch in 2020, airlines such as Wizzair and Air Arabia have

gained an overall 22 per cent share of our market in 2023, and they have ambitious growth plans going ahead.

Regarding the appointment of women to leadership positions in the aviation sector, she said, I’ve never felt there was an issue with leadership positions in the aviation sector. I’ve been working in aviation for over 20 years now and all my goals have been reached through hard work and dedication, regardless of gender. The Middle East has offered me exciting opportunities to advance in my career and I’m extremely grateful to the people who have believed in me.”

Bank Muscat wins best local bank in Oman award

MUSCAT: Confirming its leadership in the banking sector and in a continuation of its excellence in the field of banking services and facilities, Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the Sultanate of Oman, grabbed the Best Local Bank in Oman Award within EMEA Finance’s Middle East Banking Awards.

The award was received on behalf of the Bank by Mohammed bin Sultan al Habsi, Chief Representative, UAE Representative Office, Bank Muscat, at a ceremony held recently in Dubai and in the presence of a number of prominent figures at the level of the Middle East and the world.

Being continuously honoured by EMEA Finance, one of the prestigious institutions in honouring the leading entities in the markets in which it operates, is a confirmation of the Bank Muscat’s excellence in providing incomparable products and services catering to all segments of society.

It also reaffirms the trust of the international financial community in the Bank’s performance and launch of unparalleled products and sustainable services.



The award was received by Mohammed bin Sultan al Habsi, UAE Chief Representative

Bank Muscat is committed to translating its customer-centric vision through the introduction of new services and various innovative added value offers and enable customers to benefit from them based on their different needs. The Bank is keen to

develop its strategy to contribute to the implementation of the digital transformation plans of Oman Vision 2040, resulting to the launch of a variety of modern services with benefits that suit the needs of different categories, and in line with the latest global

trends in the sector.

Bank Muscat also provides a distinctive banking experience by offering a variety of options suitable for all segments.

Through its long-term strategy, the Bank seeks to solidify its presence by the expansion of branch network and the provision of top-notch services to customers across the Sultanate of Oman.

As of today, the Bank has a number of over 180 branches and more than 870 self-service devices including Automated Teller Machines (ATMs), Cash Deposit Machines (CDMs), Multi-Function Kiosks, Business Cash Deposit Machines (BCDMs), and Statement Printers. The Bank is also keen on developing products and offering exclusive deals and benefits that provide added value to customers such as Personal Finance, Auto Finance and Housing Finance.

Special attention is paid to the privilege banking customers and priority banking customers while developing these services to serve them better. Up to the end of 2023, the base of users using the digital Bank Muscat platforms hit 1.8 million, benefiting from a wide range of services and products online.

Bank Nizwa provides aid to families affected by recent adverse weather

MUSCAT: Reaffirming its dedication to corporate citizenship, and its commitment to community welfare, Bank Nizwa, the most-trusted Islamic bank in the Sultanate of Oman, has pledged RO 100,000 as aid for the families impacted by the recent adverse weather conditions.

This philanthropic gesture comes in response to the national call for support, and comes as a fundamental component of the bank’s corporate social responsibility framework that reflects its ongoing dedication to the welfare of the community.

The funds will be disbursed through the Omani Charitable Works Authority, a reputed organisation renowned for its impactful welfare initiatives dedicated to uplifting communities in need.

Bank Nizwa’s Chairman of the Board of Directors, Shaikh Khalid bin Abdullah bin Ali al Khalili, emphasised, “This initiative underscores the deep-rooted Islamic values and principles that guide our actions at Bank Nizwa.

Just as in principle where if one part of the body suffers, the rest of the body responds with vigilance and care, our



commitment to supporting the affected families reflects the essence and identity of our institution.

We firmly believe that addressing the challenges posed by climate extremes is a collective duty shared by all sectors - public, private, and charitable organisations alike. In these trying times, our hearts go out to all those impacted by the recent climatic conditions in the Sultanate of Oman.

We stand in solidarity with the community, hoping that our contribution will help alleviate their burdens and restore a sense of normalcy.”

Bank Nizwa’s philanthropic initiatives are integral to its corporate social responsibility framework, aligning seamlessly with its sustainability agenda.

Omani oilfield contracts boost SLB's Q1 performance

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

A series of substantive contracts in Oman's upstream hydrocarbon sector has buoyed the first quarter performance of oilfield services giant SLB (previously known as Schlumberger), the company said in a report of its Q1 2024 results.

SLB has a sizable presence in Oman's oil and gas industry, having established operations here nearly 65 years ago at the outset of the country's oil exploration quest in the 1950s.

Underscoring the company's upbeat performance in Oman and the wider region, SLB said: "Revenue in the Middle East & Asia of \$3.08 billion increased 29% year on year due to higher drilling, intervention, and evaluation activity in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, and across Southeast Asia and Australia."

A number of contracts helped boost SLB's Q1 performance. BP,

which operates gas-rich Block 61 in central Oman, awarded a contract extension for the provision of stimulation services, said SLB.

"The five-year extension reflects the strong partnership and mutual agreement to continue collaborating on efficiency and sustainability road maps.

These initiatives aim to reduce upstream stimulation services sector emissions, demonstrating our shared commitment to environmental stewardship and sustainable practices," SLB stated.

Likewise Medco Oman LLC awarded a contract to SLB for an automated drilling performance measurement and analysis service.

The service will leverage digital technologies to assess current rig performance to identify and mitigate dynamic risks, such as the potential for stuck-pipe incidents.

This initiative aims to enhance Medco's operational performance,



SLB bagged contracts from BP and MedcoEnergi, among other oil and gas companies during Q1.

reduce nonproductive time, and minimise lost time.

Additionally, MedcoEnergi has successfully started to deploy SLB's EcoShield low-carbon geopolymer cement-free system, paving the way to decarbonise the company's cementing operations

in Oman.

"The first deployment in Oman resulted in complete elimination of conventional Class G cement and the use of sustainable locally sourced materials during the cementing of surface casing. This job achieved an estimated

87% reduction in CO₂e emissions when compared to the conventional surface casing cementing job and represents a major milestone for MedcoEnergi and SLB in aligning with the industry's path to net-zero." In recent years, SLB has

expanded its presence across Oman's diversifying energy sector.

In November 2022, the company was tapped by Oman's Ministry of Energy and Minerals (MoEM) to chalk out a national strategy to develop the potential of the country's geothermal resources. Also collaborating in this endeavour is Oman Investment Authority (OIA).

SLB had announced at the time that it had completed a comprehensive project to evaluate data from more than 7,000 oil, gas and water wells distributed across the length and breadth of Oman.

The objective of that exercise, it noted, was to map out "sweet spots for geothermal prospects" in the country.

Early last year, SLB acquired a 10% stake in Omani drilling services company Abraj Energy, as one of three anchor investors that backed the Omani firm's Initial Public Offering (IPO) and eventual listing on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX).

Financing agreement worth RO 25m to support MSMEs



MUSCAT: The Joint Committee for the Management of the Small and Medium Enterprises Support Programme signed a financing agreement with the Development Bank for an amount of RO 25 million.

The agreement aims to finance micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and provide employment opportunities for Omani youth by providing easy financing for projects in economic and social development. This includes loans for small investor projects and craftsmen.

Signed by the Joint Committee for the Management of Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises Support Programme: Zaher bin Marhoon al Abri, Director General of Treasury and Accounts at the Ministry of Finance, the head of the

Omani side, and Saeed bin Mohammed al Qahtani, head of the Saudi side in the Joint Committee, representing the Saudi Development Fund. On behalf of the Development Bank, it was signed by Hussein bin Ali al Lawati, the bank's CEO.

The Joint Committee for the Management of the Small and Medium Enterprises Support Programme aims to finance institutions that provide financial services for small, medium, and micro enterprises in the Sultanate of Oman.

They work on monitoring and evaluating finance portfolios to ensure optimal use of the provided financing and its sustainability. It is worth mentioning that the Joint Committee signed an agreement worth RO 20 million with the Development Bank in September 2023.

— ONA



MSX index decreases by 0.28 per cent

MUSCAT: The Muscat Stock Exchange 30 (MSX) index closed yesterday at 4,704.08 points, down 13 points, or 0.28 per cent, compared to the last trading session, which reached 4,717.06 points.

The trading value amounted to RO 2,918, 437, a decrease of 34.4 per cent compared to the last trading session, which amounted to RO 4,450,759.

The report issued by the Muscat Stock Exchange indicated that the market value decreased by 0.067 per cent from the last trading day, and amounted to approximately RO 24.14 billion.

The value of non-Omani purchases on the stock exchange amounted to RO 724,000, representing 24.79 per cent, while the value of non-Omanis selling amounted to RO 306,000, equivalent to 10.49 per cent, while the net non-Omani investment increased by RO 417,000 or 14.30 per cent. — ONA

Tenders announced for service projects in Sultan Haitham City - Phase One

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning announced the launch of three service tenders within the Sultan Haitham City project — Phase One (2024 - 2030) — where construction works have begun.

The tenders are related to building main and secondary roads, bridges, sidewalks, and the construction of electricity, water, and sewage services networks, broadband and communication networks, district cooling, and the construction of 3 electricity substations.

The first tender of the fourth package includes the implementation of 31 water bridges, construction of main roads totalling 8 kilometres, secondary roads totalling 7

THE TENDERS ARE RELATED TO BUILDING MAIN AND SECONDARY ROADS, BRIDGES, SIDEWALKS, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ELECTRICITY, WATER, AND SEWAGE SERVICES NETWORKS, BROADBAND AND COMMUNICATION NETWORKS, DISTRICT COOLING, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF 3 ELECTRICITY SUBSTATIONS

kilometres, bicycle tracks of 30 kilometres, pedestrian paths of 30 kilometres, traffic lights, traffic signs, road lighting, to be implemented within 24 months, targeting companies of the premium category.

The second tender of the fifth package includes implementing

water networks of 105 kilometres, irrigation networks of 54 kilometres, rainwater drainage networks of 62 kilometres, sewage networks of 93 kilometres, communication and broadband networks, district cooling systems and networks, electricity network with a capacity of 100 megawatts of high, medium, and low voltage, to be implemented within 18 months by companies targeted from the premium category.

A tender has also been announced within the sixth package to build 3 transformer substations (11/33 kilovolts), covering an area of 7500 square metres in neighbourhoods 6,8,9, with an execution period of 15 months for targeted companies of the premium category. — ONA



The construction works of the Sultan Haitham City project Phase One have begun.

Atyab Food Industries converted into SAOC company



Atyab Food Industries' plant at Barka.

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, APRIL 21

In a disclosure filed with the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) on Sunday, Oman Flour Mills Company (OFM), a leading Omani food producer known for its "Dahabi" brand flour and "Barakat" animal feed, has announced a significant step in its growth strategy.

The company plans to transform its wholly-owned subsidiary, Atyab Food Industries Co, from a limited liability company into a closed

Omani joint stock company.

This strategic shift paves the way for Atyab Food Industries to list its shares on MSX's third market, with a capital injection of RO 7.5 million.

This initiative aligns with OFM's established track record of innovation and expansion. Founded in 1976, OFM has played a pivotal role in Oman's food security by consistently delivering high-quality flour, bakery and animal feed products.

Atyab Food Industries LLC (AFI),

owned 100% by OFM, operates Oman's largest industrial bakery at Barka with a capacity to produce around hundreds of different types of fresh and frozen bakery products.

Spread over an area of over 60,000 sq metres, the automated industrial bakery has a capacity to produce every hour 24,000 buns, 6,500 packs of sliced bread, 26,000 pieces of Arabic bread, and a wide variety of muffins, croissants, puff pastries, cakes, and other specialty products.

In addition, the plant houses

fixed production lines that produce specialty buns, baguettes, pizzas, frozen dough, and so on. AFI posted a revenue increase of RO 465k in 2023, representing a 3% growth. This upward trend was supported by a 0.38% reduction in the Cost of Sales, attributed to lower raw material prices.

Consequently, AFI reported a profit (before tax) of RO 304k, as opposed to the previous year's profit of RO 19k, parent company Oman Flour Mills stated in its 2023 annual report.

Embracing drone innovations for better weather monitoring in Oman



SALIM AL RIYAMI
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The Sultanate of Oman has long grappled with the task of monitoring and predicting weather accurately, which is critical given the area's susceptibility to extreme weather events such as cyclones and sudden floods.

Introducing drone technology could greatly improve our weather monitoring systems and emergency responses.

Understanding the challenge Oman's diverse landscape, which includes both sprawling deserts and steep mountains, poses significant challenges for standard weather tracking methods. While satellites and ground stations provide some information,

their data often lacks the detail necessary to predict small but critical weather changes.

This can lead to delayed responses to weather conditions, causing not just economic damages but also threatening lives.

Drones as a solution

Drones, also known as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), could be the key to overcoming these challenges. They can be equipped with high-tech sensors and sent into difficult-to-reach areas to gather precise data in real-time.

Here's what they bring to the table:

- *In-depth Weather Analysis:* Drones can navigate multiple

atmospheric layers, offering detailed and localised weather updates.

- *Improved Forecasting:* With better data, weather models become more accurate, enabling timely and reliable forecasts.
- *Rapid Deployment:* Drones can quickly be deployed to assess and report urgent weather changes to authorities and citizens alike.

Steps for implementation

To integrate drones into weather monitoring effectively, Oman could consider the following approach:

1. *Trial Phase:* Initiate the project in an area frequently affected by severe weather to gauge the effectiveness and adapt

the technology based on local needs.

2. *Collaboration:* Bring meteorological experts, emergency responders, and community leaders together to ensure the technology addresses real-world requirements.
3. *Develop Guidelines:* Draft and enforce regulations to manage drone usage, ensuring operations are safe and privacy is protected.
4. *Education and Training:* Offer extensive training to local operators on managing drones and analysing the data they collect.
5. *Expansion:* After assessing the trial, gradually extend the service across other regions.

Conclusion

Leveraging drones for weather monitoring could significantly boost Oman's ability to manage and respond to environmental hazards, potentially saving lives and reducing economic impacts.

This technology promises a safer, more resilient future for Oman. As we continue to refine these tools, their usefulness and efficiency will only increase, helping us face tomorrow's challenges with greater confidence.

We hope this article sparks conversation and interest among all stakeholders to explore how drones could transform weather prediction and emergency responses in Oman.

The urgency of sovereign-debt restructuring



JOSÉ ANTONIO OCAMPO

The author, a former United Nations under-secretary-general and a former minister of finance and public credit of Colombia, is a professor at Columbia University, a member of the UN Committee for Development Policy, and a member of the Independent Commission for the Reform of International Corporate Taxation.

debt owed to its 22 members – mainly OECD countries.

On occasion, multilateral lenders and foreign governments have adopted ad hoc responses to sovereign-debt crises.

For example, the United States-backed Brady Plan, implemented after the Latin American crisis of the 1980s, helped reduce some countries' debts and catalysed the development of a sovereign-bond market for developing countries.

In 1996, the IMF and the World Bank launched the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative to provide a much-needed reprieve for low-income countries; this was supplemented in 2005 with the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative, which cancelled eligible countries' debts to multilateral creditors.

Other reactive measures have aimed to improve the restructuring process. Following the Mexican crisis of 1994, the OECD's G10 proposed introducing collective action clauses (CACs) in bond contracts, enabling a qualified majority of bondholders to modify the terms and conditions, if necessary.

Moreover, in 2013, after the Greek debt crisis, the European Union mandated the inclusion of aggregation clauses for CACs in its members' bond contracts, facilitating joint renegotiation of several issues.

But despite these reforms, creditors can still build blocking majorities, owing partly to the lack of expanded CACs in roughly half of sovereign bonds issued by emerging and developing countries, and partly to the incompatibility between bond agreements and other debt contracts.

The IMF attempted but failed to create an institutional framework for sovereign-debt restructuring in 2001-03. The proposed mechanism would have allowed unsustainable external debts to be restructured through a rapid, orderly, and predictable process while protecting creditors' rights.

Moreover, the overseeing body would have been independent of the IMF's Executive Board and Board of Governors.

Ultimately, the US rejected the initiative, as did some developing countries (notably Brazil



People buy and sell vegetables at Mile 12 International Market in Lagos, Nigeria. – Reuters

IT SEEMS CLEAR THAT MANY LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES WILL CONTINUE TO EXPERIENCE DEBT STRESS, EVEN IF THEY ARE NOT AT RISK OF DEFAULT.

and Mexico), fearing that the mechanism would restrict their access to capital markets.

During the pandemic, when public-debt levels soared, the G20 and the Paris Club created the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) for low-income countries, which stopped debt payments for 48 of 73 eligible countries from May 2020 to December 2021.

Then, at the end of 2020, they endorsed the Common Framework for Debt Treatment to coordinate and provide debt relief to DSSI-eligible countries.

But, so far, only three countries — Ghana, Zambia, and Chad — have reached an agreement under the framework, while only one other — Ethiopia — has applied. Fears of credit-rating downgrades have reportedly deterred several other potential beneficiaries from participating.

There is obviously a need for a permanent solution: an institutional mechanism for sovereign-debt restructuring, preferably under the aegis of the United Nations.

The IMF could also house such a mechanism, but only if the dispute-settlement body remains independent of the Fund's Executive Board and Board of Governors, as proposed in 2003. The renegotiation framework should call for a three-stage process of voluntary renegotiation, mediation, and arbitration, each with a fixed deadline.

But even if agreed, a statutory mechanism would require long and complex negotiations. Thus, an ad hoc instrument is an essential complement.

To that end, the UN and other entities have proposed a revised Common Framework, which should set a clear and shorter time frame for restructuring, suspend debt payments during negotiations, establish clear procedures and rules, guarantee the participation of private creditors, and expand eligibility to middle-income countries.

To ensure post-restructuring stability, any agreement should include not only revised

maturities and interest rates, but also debt reduction if necessary. As I have previously suggested, an alternative could be a mechanism supported by the IMF, the World Bank or regional multilateral development banks (MDBs).

In addition to providing the renegotiation framework, the presiding institution would be able to facilitate financing, address the macroeconomic imbalances of the countries involved, and support the restructuring process.

If new bonds are issued, they should have a guarantee attached, similar to the Brady bonds. There is also the question of whether debts owed to MDBs and the IMF should be included in the restructuring processes, as was done for low-income countries in 2005.

Given that these institutions are responsible for a significant share of the debt owed by highly indebted low-income countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, it may be necessary to include them. If so, it would be essential to ensure a steady flow of development aid to cover their losses.

Moreover, the traditional separation between official

and private creditors has been complicated by new official lenders, notably China and the rise of various debt contracts, including guarantees to private investors, that are separate from bonds. Future "aggregations" must encompass all obligations.

Therefore, establishing a global debt registry covering all liabilities with private and official creditors is required to ensure equitable creditor treatment and enhance transparency.

Lastly, to mitigate future debt crises, the World Bank and others have suggested the widespread adoption of state-contingent bonds that adjust returns based on economic conditions or commodity prices.

This would alleviate pressure on sovereign balance sheets during downturns.

Over-indebted developing countries will never get the relief they need if the international community does not push the issue at the centre of its agenda.

Debt restructuring should be a top policy priority at this year's G20 summit in Rio de Janeiro and the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, which will be held in Spain in 2025.

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MOVIES

Uruguayan actor Enzo Vogrincic holds his award for Best Male Actor for "Society of the Snow" at the Platino Awards ceremony for Ibero-American cinema at Xcaret hotel in Playa del Carmen, Mexico. — AFP



LIFESTYLE

Customer Virginia Cuaresma tries on a flamenco dress at Luis Fernandez' workshop in Seville. Luis Fernandez's workshop in Seville's Old City is buzzing with customers who have come to try on his dazzling array of flamenco dresses. — AFP



CHANGING WORLD

Red Rebel Brigade climate gatherer at the Boston Public Garden during "The Funeral for Nature" with the climate activist group Extinction Rebellion (XR), in Boston, Massachusetts. — AFP



MUSIC

British-US singer Paul Banks of US rock band Interpol performs at the Zocalo square in Mexico City. — AFP



CULTURE

Greek 400 metres champion Periklis Iakovakis holds the Olympic flame in front of the ancient temple of the Parthenon atop the Acropolis hill during the Olympic torch relay in Athens. — AFP

art & life

MONDAY | APRIL 22, 2024 | SHAWWAL 13 , 1445 AH | OMAN OBSERVER | www.omanobserver.om | features@omanobserver.om



THE ASTONISHING MILKY SEA OF BASSA BEACH IN MUSANDAM

Just like in some parts of Oman, Bassa Beach in Musandam has been showcasing a phenomenon that mesmerises everybody who sees it. After a few days of visiting and finding the right condition, photographer Ali al Harbi was elated to have captured the experience on film... P20

MUSIC

Taylor Swift, tortured poet, exorcises demons with new double album

Taylor Swift's HOTLY anticipated "The Tortured Poets Department" is here along with a surprise second album — 31 tracks released on Friday in which the megawatt star purges her inner turmoil while scorching former lovers.

The first album was released as scheduled at midnight (04:00 GMT) but two hours later, an additional 15 tracks appeared -- giving legions of Swifties plenty to chew on.

By Friday evening, Spotify declared the album its most-streamed in a single day, with Swift also becoming the most-streamed artist in a single day.

The 34-year-old billionaire is one of music's most shrewd users of social media, employing her massive online presence as well as her songwriting to create a sense of intimacy with fans through so-called "Easter eggs" and hidden messages.

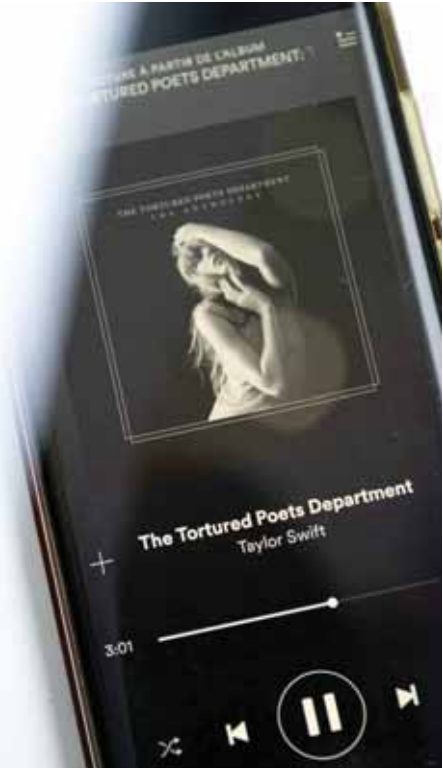
"I'd written so much tortured poetry in the past 2 years and wanted to share it all with you, so here's the second instalment of TTPD: The Anthology. 15 extra songs. And now the story isn't mine anymore... it's all yours," she posted in revealing the extra music.

Swift's album comes on the heels of a remarkably successful and busy year for the artist, whose "Midnights" won her a record-setting fourth Album of the Year Grammy.

She put on the first tour to break the \$1 billion mark and is on track to make a second billion by the time it's over.

Swift also released two re-recordings of her earlier albums to resounding success, and broke box office records with an Eras Tour film.

But she also ended a six-year relationship with the British actor Joe Alwyn, after



which she was linked to — and dramatically de-linked from — front man Matty Healy of the 1975.

Now she's dating NFL star Travis Kelce, whose Kansas City Chiefs just won the Super Bowl.

And all of the drama is immortalised in song.

SENSATIONAL AND SORROWFUL

When she announced "TTPD," Swift said it would be "an anthology of new works that reflect events, opinions and sentiments from a fleeting and fatalistic moment in time — one that was both sensational and sorrowful in equal measure."

"This period of the author's life is now over, the chapter closed and boarded up."

Tying together the roots of 2020's "Folklore" with the heavier synths of her more pop-oriented work, Swift spills the tea on both Alwyn and Healy.

"So Long, London" offers a painful post-script to the breezy "London Boy" off her 2019 album "Lover."

"I stopped trying to make him laugh / Stopped trying to drill the safe," she sings in the former track, bidding farewell to her one-time home with Alwyn.

Alwyn and fellow actor Paul Mescal revealed in 2022 that they had a group chat

entitled "The Tortured Man Club," and some think the album title refers to that.

While her cuts against Healy are sharp — "And I don't even want you back / I just want to know / If rusting my sparkling summer was the goal," she sings on "The Smallest Man Who Ever Lived" — she portrays herself as a similarly messy character.

For the LA Times pop music critic, Swift's confessional style is raw and refreshing.

"In a time of stan culture run amok, it's thrilling to hear a superstar address her followers this way," the critic wrote in a review.

"Swift isn't seeking betterment in these songs about emotional trauma and its aftermath; if anything, she's taking a perverse satisfaction in her unwillingness to learn someone else's lessons."

Florence + The Machine makes a cameo on the album, as does Post Malone on the opening single "Fortnight" — complete with forthcoming video.

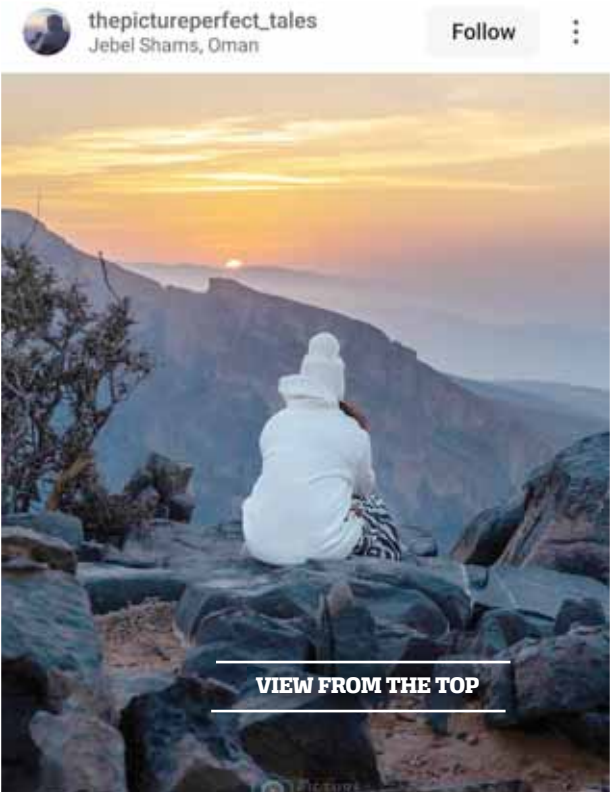
She also addresses her new highly publicised relationship with Kelce.

In "The Alchemy," she describes the dopamine rush of new love, saying "Honestly, who are we to fight the alchemy?"

"He just comes running over to me."

—AFP

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



A ‘healthy addiction’: sea saunas make waves In Ireland

FOR SHARON FIDGEON, a regular visitor to Ireland's increasingly popular beach saunas, her weekend sessions “have become a healthy addiction” that tap into a centuries-old Irish tradition of toning up by getting sweaty.

On sandy Clonea beach on Ireland's wind-battered Atlantic coast, the 52-year-old artist said that alternating between the sauna and freezing seawater makes her feel “so incredibly alive”.

“Once you get down in the sea up to your neck, it really sets off the endorphins in your body,” said Fidgeon after a dunk in the two-kilometre-long (1.2 mile-long) bay near Dungarvan in County Waterford.

“And having the sauna here lets me stay in the sea that bit longer,” she said, putting on a dry robe and sandals before briskly stepping into the barrel-shaped structure on wheels above the beach.

In Ireland the Covid-19 pandemic launched a surge in sea-swimming as a bracing escape from lockdowns.

Mobile saunas became a post-Covid “add-on”, according to Deirdre Flavin, who operates several along the Waterford coast, towing them to beaches by car.

“The market is growing and steadily increasing, awareness is spreading, and people are enjoying the experience and coming back for more,” she said as she fired up one of her

saunas.

Aside from their health benefits, Flavin, 40, said the cosy boltholes are ideal havens in Ireland's wild and often wet and chilly weather.

“People can more comfortably sea-swim all-year-round now as they can warm their body cores up after the dip,” she said while packing wooden logs into the sauna's stove.

CENTRED ON WELLNESS

Further along the southern coast in County Cork, customers at another sauna lauded the activity for stress relief as well as aiding recovery after strenuous sports.

“A lot of the lads in the hurling team would like to get into the water and the sauna, it's become a thing to do for teams,” said 20-year-old student Rory O'Callaghan, referring to the combative Irish field sport played with sticks.

Sauna owner Bronwyn Connolly suffers from arthritis and when indoor public spaces were shuttered during the pandemic she bought a small barrel sauna and towed it to Garrettstown beach.

“I was struggling a lot with pain, and the sauna and the cold water just eased it, a plunge in the sea after building up a sweat just seems to wash away all the worries,” she said.

As sports teams and corporate groups began showing more interest she set about designing a bigger one,



relying on books and YouTube videos for know-how.

With a large window on one side and gently curved tiered seating with a fire, a group sat chatting and marvelling at the view of ocean waves crashing below on the beach.

“It's really becoming a social thing, where friends or even strangers can meet. Irish people are shifting to less alcohol-driven things and more well-

ness-driven things,” Connolly said.

Back in 2021 her first mobile sauna was one of the first in the country but now “they are on every beach in Cork”, she said.

SWEATHOUSE

According to the new wave of operators, the trend harks back to an ancient Irish sauna culture dating from the 1600s that went out of fash-

ion early in the last century. the “sweathouse”.

Remains of hundreds of sweat-houses — igloo-shaped stone structures heated by turf fires and used for sweating out colds and fevers, and battling rheumatism and arthritic pain — are dotted around the Irish countryside.

Yoga instructor Carol Ni Stasaigh and her husband Dara Kissane, an exercise physiologist, called their sea sauna on the County Wexford coast “Sweathouse” in a nod to the old ways.

“In ancient times people would have gone in for medicinal, religious purposes, or even hallucinogenic reasons,” Ni Stasaigh said on Baginbun beach.

“We don't guarantee any hallucinogenic things in our sauna, just hot and cold therapy and the release of endorphins,” she laughed.

Back in Waterford, towelling down at the end of her session, Sharon Fidgeon said the link to the past was an important element of her sauna bathing experience.

“It's an old Irish tradition. It's really lovely to be part of something that is old and Irish. It's magical and quite close to my heart,” she said.

— AFP

ENTERTAINMENT

Studio Ghibli to receive honorary Palme d'Or at Cannes

LEGENDARY JAPANESE animators Studio Ghibli will receive an honorary Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in May, organisers announced on Wednesday.

The Oscar-winning studio, co-founded by Hayao Miyazaki 40 years ago, is beloved worldwide for its masterpieces like “Spirited Away”, “My Neighbour Totoro” and “Howl's Moving Castle”.

It will mark the first that Cannes gives an award to a collective, rather than an individual.

Miyazaki makes few public appearances and his long-time collaborator Isao Takahata died in 2018.



The other founder, producer Toshio Suzuki, said he was “truly honoured and delighted” to be receiving the award.

Ghibli's “characters populate our imaginations with prolific, colourful universes and sensitive, engaging narrations,” said the Cannes organisers in a statement.

“With Ghibli, Japanese animation stands as one of the great adventures of cinephilia, between tradition and modernity,” they added.

Miyazaki, 83, has announced his retirement more than once, but was back in cinemas last year with “The Boy and the Heron”, which won the Oscar for best animated film last month, his second after “Spirited Away” in 2003.

It was already announced that another huge figure in cinematic storytelling, George Lucas, creator of “Star Wars”, would also receive an honorary Palme at this year's festival, which runs from May 14 to 25. — AFP

FILM

16-year restoration of silent ‘Napoleon’ to screen at Cannes

AFTER A COLOSSAL 16-year restoration effort, Abel Gance's seven-hour silent classic “Napoleon” will finally return to the big screen at the Cannes Film Festival in May, organisers said on Thursday.

The project to restore the epic 1927 film began in 2008 when two film researchers discovered different versions of the film in Gance's archives at the Cinematheque Francaise in Paris.

Restoring the French director's original vision turned into a mammoth, multi-million-euro operation combining detective work, digital wizardry and extraordinary dedica-



tion.

The head of the restoration project, Georges Mourier, said in 2021 that it had become “an act of madness”.

It will finally see the light of day as part of the Cannes Classics section of the festival, which runs May 14-25 — the first time Gance's cut has been shown in 97 years.

Only the first part, running 3 hours and 40 minutes, will be shown

in Cannes. The full seven-hour extravaganza will be screened with a 250-piece orchestra in Paris in July, followed by screenings elsewhere.

The film has long had a near-mythical status among cinephiles, not least director Francis Ford Coppola who owns many of the rights through his company, American Zoetrope, and presented an earlier restored version to widespread acclaim in 1981.

As it happens, Coppola is also making a comeback at Cannes, with his long-awaited “Megalopolis” competing for the Palme d'Or, 45 years after he won it for “Apocalypse Now”.

The latest restoration effort was made fiendishly difficult because the original reels were scattered around the globe — some lost, some damaged, others mixed up or respliced, leaving up to 22 versions of the film in existence.

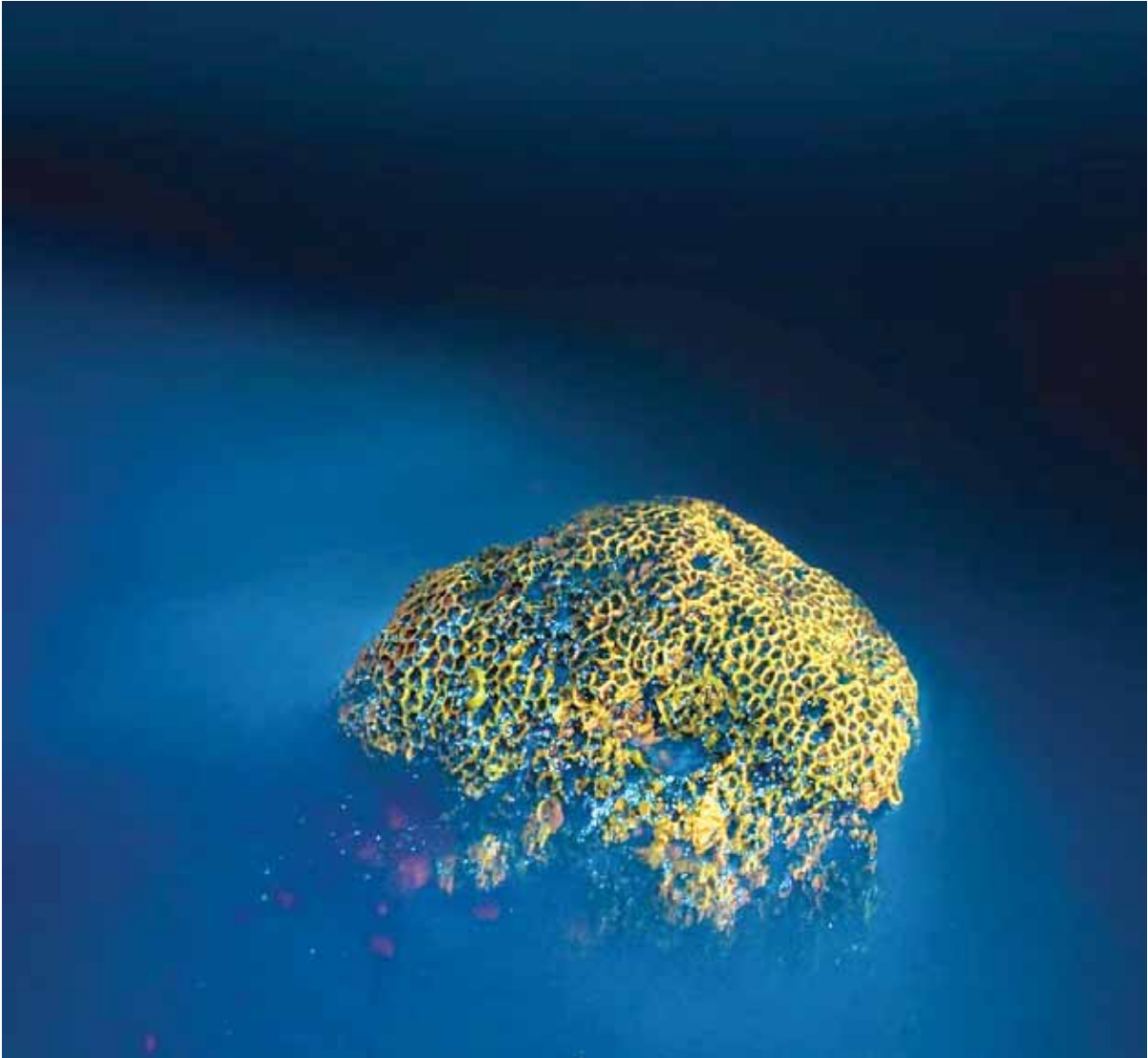
— AFP



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The astonishing milky sea of Bassa Beach in Musandam

BY ARWA AL HASHIMI
PHOTOS BY ALI HARBI

In the past, sailors were surprised by an extraordinary phenomenon where enormous patches of seawater glow astonishingly along the beach at night. They called it the "Milky sea" back then. This phenomenon, which awed people across centuries has also been happening in Oman and has become of great interest to photographers.

Scientifically, it's referred to as bioluminescence. This wonderful phenomenon is caused by living organisms that emit some kind of chemicals called Luciferin. These chemicals produce light because they combine with oxygen atoms in the water when they are released. Besides, a chemical catalyst called luciferase is released at the same time, which accelerates the oxidation of luciferin creating more bioluminescence. These chemicals are useful for many creatures in the ocean in terms of nutrition and defence, as well as communication and reproduction let alone it is breathtaking beauty.

The majority of bioluminescence that people encounter is created by a small planktonic organism called Noctiluca. These little creatures will appear in some dramatic light displays, including glowing waves, neon-high tide lines and electric colours that trickle through your fingers if you scoop a handful of them.

More surprisingly, the presence of these chemicals in the bodies of planktonic organisms is thought to be a deterrent to their predators such as invertebrates and small fish. Some animals have begun to use bioluminescent light for various purposes like targeting their prey using the glowing bioluminescent bacteria as bait.

Across Oman, this phenomenon has been recorded to occur from the shores of Muscat particularly the tri-areas of Sifah, Bandar Al Khairan and Yiti and has also impressed visitors of the Dimaniyat Islands. Whenever it happens, it's always become a hot trend on social media.

In the beautiful beaches of Musandam, the people of the area have also been mesmerised by the phenomenon.

The strange glow of the milky seas occurs on a wide-spread and constant scale on the edges of Bassah Beach in the Wilayat of Khasab with people reporting that it creates a wonderful scenery at night.

This phenomenon has become a great source of attraction for many adventurers and enthusiasts to dig deep into the details of how and why it occurs, that is in addition to

enjoying the stunning views and contemplating the beauty of the sea at night.

Photographer Ali al Harbi is one of them who has been fascinated by the glowing phenomenon at Bassah Beach.

"Capturing it on photos can be a bit tricky. I've heard numerous reports that it is

phenomenon can be very rewarding.

According to Ali, "You should watch bioluminescence for its captivating beauty and scientific significance. This mesmerising natural phenomenon, where marine organisms emit light, presents a rare and mysterious spectacle that



happening in Bassah Beach but once you visit the location, it is disappointing that it's not as vibrant as I hoped it would be," Ali shared.

"After observing and following up on the locations for six days, it was easy to get disappointed and the high light pollution due to the strong street lighting added more to the frustration," Ali said.

"I was invested in capturing the phenomenon so after waiting for days, I finally managed to come at the right time when the moonlight wasn't too strong and the blue lights by the sea were visible," he said.

Ali said that capturing the lights properly requires some special skills, especially in light photography. When you get the settings right, capturing the

enchants observers worldwide." Among the renowned locations to witness this spectacle are Mosquito Bay in Vieques, Puerto Rico, known for its brilliant displays of dinoflagellates; the Luminous Lagoon in Falmouth, Jamaica, offering boat tours amidst glowing waters; and Toyama Bay in Japan, where firefly squid light up the sea with their bioluminescence. From the shores of the Maldives to the beaches of San Diego, bioluminescent displays continue to enchant and inspire awe, reminding us of the beauty and wonder of the natural world. For Ali, he is thankful for the beautiful biodiversity of Oman and even in Musandam, they are also gifted to be able to see such a spectacle.