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OMAN'S FDI SURGES TO RO 22.961 BN, LED BY OIL AND GAS EXPLORATION



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ARSENAL GO TOE TO TOE WITH LIVERPOOL AND TOP TABLE



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FANTASY FAIR FEATURING DALI, BASQUIAT RETURNS TO LIFE IN CALIFORNIA



HM ISSUES ROYAL DECREE

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Sunday issued Royal decree No. (87/2023) on determining the specialisations of the Secretariat-General of National Celebrations and approving its organisational structure.

Article (1) states that the specialisations of the Secretariat-General of National Celebrations shall be determined in accordance with Annex (1) attached to this decree.

Article (2) states that the organisational structure of the Secretariat-General of National Celebrations shall be approved in accordance with Annex (2) attached to this decree.

Article (3) cancels all that contradicts this decree or contravenes its provisions.

Article (4) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue. — ONA

Theyazin opens Municipal Councils forum

MUSCAT: HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, on Sunday presided over the opening of the 2023 Municipal Councils Symposium, organised by the Ministry of Interior.

At the outset of the symposium, Shaikh Dr Shihab bin Ahmed al Jabri, Adviser to the Minister of Interior for Legal Affairs, Chairman of the symposium's Organising Committee, said: "To keep with global technical developments, automate services, integrate data and operations and align activities with the government's Digital Transition Programme, the Ministry of Interior has introduced a new application code-named "Tanmia" (or 'development'), which will be launched today to serve as a link between Omani society and municipal councils in governorates, thereby enabling the councils to spearhead the community's participation in domestic development."

Then, HH Sayyid Theyazin launched the Tanmia app, which will operate as the digital interface of municipal councils and enhance transparency and trust among individuals and institutions in a manner that consolidates sustainable development



On the occasion, Sayyid Theyazin launched the Tanmia app, which will operate as the digital interface of municipal councils. — ONA

and ameliorates municipal action.

In this context, Ahmed bin Abdullah al Maamari, Manager of "Tanmia" project at the Ministry of Interior, said that the application, in its first version, conducts municipal councils meetings

services provided through the app.

For his part, HH Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, Chairman of the Municipal Council in the governorate, underscored the role undertaken by municipal councils in community communication and empowerment, both when acting as representatives of the governorates or as central bodies in strengthening local administration.

On his turn, Mohammad bin Sulaiman al Kindi, Governor of Al Batinah North, Chairman of the Municipal Council in the governorate, said that the symposium stems from the Royal attention of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to promote decentralisation and confer on municipal councils their real role in development.

Held at Al Bustan Palace Hotel, the symposium also seeks to highlight the importance of integrating the roles of governors and members of municipal councils. It provides an opportunity to exchange experiences and develop future visions for the development of Omani governorates. — ONA

Oman welcomes United Nations road map to end Yemen war

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman has welcomed the statement issued by Hans Grundberg, UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy to Yemen, on securing a road map to resolve the Yemeni crisis. Oman hopes that the agreement will be signed as soon as possible.

In a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry, Oman reaffirmed its continuous strive to support UN efforts to reach a comprehensive and lasting solution in Yemen in a manner that meets the aspirations of Yemeni people for security, stability and prosperity.

Yemen's government has welcomed UN-led efforts to end the country's civil war after the warring parties committed to take steps towards a ceasefire

Meanwhile, Yemen's government has welcomed UN-led efforts to end the country's civil war after the warring parties committed to take steps towards a ceasefire.

A UN-brokered ceasefire

brought a sharp reduction in hostilities in April 2022. The truce expired in October last year, though fighting largely remains on hold.

On Saturday, the UN special envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, said the two sides had committed to a new ceasefire and to engage in a UN-led peace process.

The Yemeni government said later it "welcomed the statement issued by the Special Envoy... regarding the efforts made to reach a road map under the auspices of the United Nations to end the war."

13 dead, 46 injured in explosion at nickel plant in Indonesia

JAKARTA: At least 13 people were killed and 46 injured in eastern Indonesia on Sunday in an explosion at a Chinese-funded nickel-processing plant, the owner of the industrial park that hosts the facility said. The island of Sulawesi is a hub for the mineral-rich country's production of nickel, a base metal used for electric vehicle batteries and stainless steel, and Beijing's growing investment has stoked unrest over working conditions at its facilities.

The accident occurred around 5:30 am (21:30 GMT on Saturday) at a plant owned by PT Indonesia Tsingshan Stainless Steel (ITSS) in the Morowali Industrial Park in Central Sulawesi province, a spokesperson for the complex said in a statement.

"(The death toll) increased by one person, from 12 to 13," he said, also revising the number of injured



down one to 38. He identified the dead as eight Indonesians and five Chinese workers.

An initial investigation showed the explosion happened during repair work on a furnace when a flammable liquid ignited and the subsequent blast caused nearby oxygen tanks to explode as well, the official said. — AFP

MUSCAT

HOUSING MINISTRY SIGNS 26 USUFRUCT PACTS WORTH RO 6.5M

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning signed on Sunday a total of 26 usufruct agreements worth over RO 6.5 million. The contracts cover a variety of sectors, including commercial, industrial, agricultural, and educational, and are spread across several governorates of the Sultanate of Oman. The signing of these contracts is part of the ministry's efforts to promote sustainable economic development, create new job opportunities, and provide diverse investment opportunities for individuals and businesses.

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COUNTRIES HAVE NO REGULATIONS FOR THEIR HARMFUL PRODUCTS

SPOTLIGHT

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Registration opens to benefit orphans and widows

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@vinot_nair

The Social Protection Fund has announced online registration to benefit orphans, widows, and people with disabilities as per the Social Protection Fund (SPF) under the Social Protection Law issued by the Royal Decree 52/2023 in July.

Applicants have been requested to register only through the official website and refrain from following

any shared links. The benefits will be disbursed from the end of January 2024 with no deadline for registration.

As per the law, an applicant can be entitled to the child benefit and the benefits offered to those with disabilities. SPF said that the bank account is linked to the civil as well as the phone number, so providing updated details is necessary at the time of application.

Meanwhile, the registration service for the



benefit of children and the elderly has been temporarily suspended and will be restored soon, the Fund said in a statement. Article

(33) states that the benefit for orphans and widows is entitled to a maximum of RO 80 per month.

The regulations specify

the controls for entitlement to the benefit for orphans and widows and the benefit amount if there is more than one orphan or widow. The death of both or one of the parents, and if the orphan or widow is entitled to a pension or If a share of the pensions due from the social insurance branches is less than the value of the orphans and widows benefit, the difference between them will be paid from the orphans and widows benefit branch.



Youth embrace aquaculture

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The youth of Oman are increasingly drawn to the fisheries and aquaculture sector, a trend that has gained momentum, particularly in the post-pandemic era. Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, said there had been a surge in youth-led projects, particularly in technology, production, and value-added initiatives.

The minister attributed this growing interest to heightened concerns about food security and geopolitical dynamics. Additionally, the evolving technology landscape in the food industry, including the use of drones and innovative marketing strategies, has captured the attention of the youth, aligning with global trends.

Speaking to the Observer, the minister pointed out that the ministry and the bank will work closely to ensure that SMEs and investors will create easy access to this fund.

The RO 10 million portfolio, dedicated to value-added projects, aims to boost local initiatives. Dr Al Habsi emphasised the ministry's commitment to ensuring easy access to this fund for SMEs and investors, particularly in a sector where Oman has achieved almost 150 per cent self-sufficiency in



The RO 10 million portfolio, dedicated to value-added projects, aims to boost local initiatives

The evolving technology has been appealing to the youth as there has been a big shift in technology and the food industry
DR SAUD BIN HAMOUD AL HABSİ
Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources

fisheries.

“The evolving technology has been appealing to the youth as there has been a big shift in technology and the food industry, and this has been an attraction to this as a trading platform, whether it is the use of drones or new marketing strategies. And this is not just local, it is an international trend as well,” he said.

Dr Al Habsi encouraged aspiring entrepreneurs, stating, “We are looking for serious investors, and we encourage the youth to explore, understand the sector, and they will

get the support.” To further support this enthusiasm, the ministry recently signed a significant agreement with the Development Bank to finance national added-value projects in the fishery sector, offering opportunities for SMEs and investors.

The ministry and the Development Bank plan to collaborate closely to facilitate access to the fund. Dr Al Habsi highlighted the sector's potential for exporting seafood globally and emphasised the need to capture more value from the produced

quantity.

Acknowledging the Development Bank's continued support, Dr Al Habsi expressed gratitude for financing initiatives related to food security and agricultural projects. The increased financing ceiling and eased conditions for the 2023 Food Security Laboratory Output Projects demonstrate the bank's commitment.

Approximately 25 areas have been identified for development projects, including aqua farming, ready meals from fish products, food supplements, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, aqua feed, livestock feed, high-tech solutions for the fisheries sector, and fishing equipment.

Mohammed bin Abu Bakr al Ghassani, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Development Bank, highlighted the bank's role in enabling development in Oman. He sees the partnership with the ministry as crucial for financing industrial projects in the fish sector, fostering job opportunities, and contributing to economic growth.

Dr Abeer al Kalbani, Director of the ICV Department, emphasised a shift towards enhancing the value of products in sectors with self-sufficiency exceeding 70 per cent. With the fisheries sector surpassing 100 per cent, the focus is on attracting investors for major projects in Oman.

Agreement signed to design, construct Dibba-Khasab road

MUSCAT: To the tune of more than RO151 million, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology on Sunday signed a project agreement for the design and implementation of Dibba-Lima-Khasab road and the road link to Musandam Governorate's Lima district.

Concluded with Al Sarooj Construction Company, the agreement provides for designing and constructing a 70-km road starting from the Wilayat of Dibba to the Wilayat

of Khasab, via Lima.

The agreement was signed by Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology and Ghazi Al Helou, executive member of Al Sarooj Construction company's board.

The signing ceremony was attended by Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, and Sayyid Ibrahim bin Said al Busaidy, Governor of Musandam.

— ONA



The agreement was signed by Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology and Ghazi Al Helou, executive member of Al Sarooj Construction company's board.

— ONA

Cardiac department removes bacterial mass from patient's heart

A group of physicians and a team comprising highly skilled members of the technical and nursing staff at the Interventional Catheterisation Laboratory, as well as experts in surgical perfusion and nurses from the Cardiac Surgery Department, successfully removed a bacterial mass from a patient's heart using catheterisation and the AngioVac device.

The patient's medical condition originated from blood inflammation caused by the kidney dialysis catheter, progressing into a bacterial mass that persisted in growing inside the heart despite antibiotic treatment, eventually spreading to the tricuspid valve between the right atrium and right ventricle.

The AngioVac device is composed of a specialised suction tube connected to an external circulatory system, designed to filter blood from impurities and extracted masses before reintroducing it into



The patient's medical condition originated from blood inflammation caused by the kidney dialysis catheter.

the patient's central circulatory system. The team achieved the extraction without resorting to surgical intervention in the patient's heart, opting for a minimally invasive approach and avoiding the necessity for sternotomy.

It is noteworthy that the patient's condition is now stable, and due to the success of the procedure, the duration of antibiotic treatment was shortened, eliminating the primary source of inflammation.

Dr Hatem bin Ali al Lawati, Senior Consultant in Interventional and Structural Cardiology, and Dr Alaa bin Hassan al Lawati, Senior Consultant and Head of the Cardiac Surgery Department at the National Center for Cardiology and Heart Surgery, conducted the procedure in collaboration with the cardiac imaging and fluoroscopy team led by Dr Kamla bint Khalifa al Wahibiyah, Consultant Cardiologist and Head of the Heart Imaging Lab

for Interventional Imaging.

The precise catheterisation was carried out under the supervision of the specialised cardiac anesthesia team led by Dr Ishaq al Amri, Senior Consultant and Head of the Anesthesia Department at the centre.

The medical and technical team included Salim al Maqbali, Interventional Catheterisation Lab Technician, Maria al Balushi from the Cardiac Perfusion team, and from the nursing team, Ahlam al Balushi, Ahmed al Busaidy, and Jamal al Maharbi.

It is worth highlighting that the National Center for Cardiology and Heart Surgery is at the forefront of centres in the region offering advanced catheterisation treatment, marking a significant and unique advancement in addressing challenging cases that traditional surgical methods find difficult to manage.

Humpback whale sighted in Masirah



MUSCAT: A field study for tracking the Arabian Sea Humpback Whale via satellite in Al Wusta Governorate registered 11 sightings of a humpback whale, 4 sightings of a Bryde's whale and 1 sighting of an Indian Ocean humpback dolphin.

The study, conducted by a team from the Environment Authority, aims to assess the risks of bycatch and reduce ship accidents as well as learning more about whale migration paths and habitats.

The study was carried out in Masirah Bay via satellite during the mating season of the current year in cooperation with a group of internationally accredited experts to install tracking chips. The Ocean

Alliance took part in the study by installing tracking devices with visible sensors. Experts from Environment Authority and experts from Future Seas Company which is undertaking fieldwork and data analysis.

The team installed a tracking chip on Arabian Sea humpback whales which is one of the whales that was sighted for the first time in November last year in the same area. This helped understand the behaviour and movement of the whale for a period between one month and 6 months while determining its location with an accuracy of up to hundreds of metres up to 5 times per day.

— ONA

GCC Inmates Week: Wide effort to rehabilitate prison inmates

KABEER YOUSUF
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Efforts are being made to rehabilitate inmates in Oman who are not victims of circumstances and not serious criminals, according to a senior ROP official from the Oman Prisons Department.

Speaking to the Observer on the sidelines of the opening of the weeklong GCC Unified Inmates Week with the theme 'Let us give them hope and work' at the Mall of Oman, the official added that celebrations like this are part of the rehabilitation programmes.

“Helping the inmates lead a normal life after serving the jail term is paramount ... nurturing and giving a venue to showcase their innate skills is part of the efforts to



Helping the inmates lead a normal life after serving the jail term is paramount ... nurturing and giving a venue to showcase their innate skills

guide him to live a life of decency,” the official added.

Hundreds of crafts and artworks in wood, cloth and metal are on display at the huge pavilion next to the Snow Oman in the Mall. The display allows the public to

participate in the rehabilitation initiative by purchasing these paintings, sculptures, woven dresses, handmade Komma (Omani cap), pottery, ceramic and many more, thanks to the Training Department functioning in the Prisons.



Many of Oman's ministries and public authorities, including the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, are participating in the Unified GCC Inmates Week till

Thursday.

The Unified Gulf Inmates Week, observed in all Gulf countries from Sunday to Thursday, lists many events aimed at communicating with prison inmates and associating them with building a better future for

themselves and society. The GCC-wide celebrations also highlight the role of government agencies and civil society organisations in reforming and rehabilitating inmates and providing support and assistance to their families.

Members of all GCC countries commemorate Inmates Day because prisons are fundamentally reformatory institutions that train and educate the inmates to qualify them for a better life and improved living conditions.

The inmates receive training in several subjects, including soft skills development, IT, and personality development, the medium of which is the English language, and they obtain training certificates that enable them to get jobs in public and private establishments.



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Unparalleled Skill, Unmatched Care:
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ARABIC LANGUAGE DAY MARKED



The ceremony was held under the auspices of Dr Faisal bin Ali bin Rashid al Zaidi, Wali of Manah



AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, DEC 24

Al Dakhiliyah Governorate commemorated International Arabic Language Day recently with a vibrant celebration at the Oman Across Ages Museum, with the theme 'Arabic is the language of

poetry and the arts.' Organised by the General Directorate of Education in Al Dakhiliyah, in collaboration with the Sultan Qaboos Institute for Teaching the Arabic Language to Non-Native Speakers and the Oman Across Ages Museum, the event brought together educators, students, and esteemed guests.

The ceremony, held under the auspices of Dr Faisal bin Ali bin Rashid al Zaidi, Wali of Manah, featured a speech by Salim bin Said al Kindi, emphasising the profound significance of the Arabic language. Al Kindi highlighted Arabic's literary richness and called for collective efforts to

instil a love for the language in the younger generation.

A captivating presentation titled 'The Birth of Arabic Calligraphy from the Omani-Yemeni to the Jazm Calligraphy' by Dr Asmahan bint Said bin Abu Bakr al Jarro showcased the evolution of Arabic calligraphy. The event also featured a student opera titled 'Arabic Sings for the Homeland' and a dialogue session with poet Dr Ghalia bint Mohammad bin Issa al Zubaidiyah.

The celebration included poetry presentations, with Bushra bint Abdullah bin Khalfan al Rajhiyah and Abdulrahman bin Ahmed bin Suleiman al Harrasi earning top honours in the poetry writing competition for teachers and students. The Literary Fragments magazine's third edition and displays on employing artificial intelligence in teaching the Arabic language were unveiled.

The festivities extended to linguistic competitions, where the audience showcased their cultural proficiency in Arabic. Winners were duly recognised, and the event concluded with the inauguration of the art exhibition 'Echo of Letters' featuring 40 diverse calligraphic works by students, teachers, and calligraphy enthusiasts. Al Dakhiliyah's International Arabic Language Day celebration served as a testament to the community's commitment to preserving and promoting the rich heritage of the Arabic language through various artistic and educational endeavours.



OMAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION HOLDS MEETING

MUSCAT: Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC) on Sunday held its 1st meeting of the 1st annual convening of the 5th term, under the chairmanship of Dr Rashid bin Hamad al Balushi, Chairman of OHRC. The meeting discussed a spectrum of topics, namely steps implemented to upgrade the commission's ranking to reach "A" Status in the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions. It also highlighted the awareness programme implemented by the commission in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Development, among other topics.

— ONA

Gathering looks at managing digital content

MUSCAT: The Government Communication Centre, in cooperation with the Media Training Centre at the Ministry of Information, organised on Sunday the 22nd government communication gathering.

The gathering included a training programme on 'Managing Digital Content and Optimal Way of Dealing with Algorithms'.

Moreover, the programme aimed at grooming the skills of participants in the field of digital content management, planning for media content and means of developing a sustainable strategy for



Gathering also touched on means of dealing with algorithms. — ONA

content. It also touched on means of dealing with algorithms, among other topics.

The event was attended by directors and representatives of communication and media departments at various government units. — ONA

A visual masterpiece takes readers on an unforgettable journey

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Embark on an enchanting journey through the heart of Oman with 'Splendors of the Sultanate - Scent of the Past, Vision of the Future,' a captivating book by Hani J Samaha, adorned with mesmerising photographs by Albert Saikaly.

Published by the Ministry of Information, this multicoloured masterpiece invites readers to delve into the rich tapestry of Oman's diverse landscapes and cultural heritage.

The book, comprising 312 glossy pages, serves as an open invitation for those who yearn for the call of the wild, presenting Oman as a destination steeped in natural beauty and historical significance.

From the azure blue waters of Musandam in the north to the southern region of Dhofar, the book's pages unfold a visual feast of Oman's treasures and narrate tales that date back to the era of the Queen of Sheba.

Each chapter intricately explores Oman's eleven governorates, seamlessly blending the past and the present. The narrative unfolds



The book, comprising 312 glossy pages, serves as an open invitation to Oman which serves as a destination steeped in natural beauty and historical significance

the incredible story of a modern renaissance, aligning with the visionary aspirations of Late Sultan Qaboos and continuing under the reign of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik. The book captures the essence of Oman's journey, where historical sites are skilfully restored and merged with contemporary civic marvels, reflecting the nation's progress.

The visual narrative takes the reader through diverse landscapes, from tranquil 6-star resorts nestled by brilliantly coloured coral reefs to the imposing castles and forts that dot the ancient silk routes. Verdant wadis, pink lagoons, and rose-coloured dunes offer a stark contrast, revealing unexpected pockets of nature's beauty.

The mighty Al Hajar Mountains



range, adorned with the fragrant scents of Damask roses and peach blossoms, weaves its way through the nation. Cascading waterfalls and enchanting nights at the Royal Opera House unfold alongside Bedouin secrets and the majestic Arabian oryx, creating a mesmerising silhouette from page to page.

Author Hani J Samaha

encapsulates Oman's allure: "Whatever a visitor is looking for in a new-found destination, whether it be tranquillity, culture, dramatic views and exotic adventure, the Oman of the 21st century has it all. Bound in the timeless heritage of its majestic past and the unmistakable promise of its carefully planned destiny," The book also delves into Oman's historical significance,

once famed for its trade in precious frankincense and copper. The stunning 3,000-kilometre coastline, caressed by the azure blue waters of the Indian Ocean, once carried Omani mariners on difficult journeys. Today, it beckons modern tourists with opportunities for water activities and encounters with wild dolphins and whales.

A chapter unfolds the beauty of Oman's wadis, rejuvenated by 'khareef' (monsoon) rains in Southern Dhofar, creating breathtaking waterfalls and nature trails. The vivid imagery depicts bird songs, colourful butterflies, and herds of wild camels grazing along fertile banks.

The collaborative effort of Hani J Samaha and Albert Saikaly, both with backgrounds rich in artistic pursuits, brings a unique blend of storytelling and visual artistry to "Splendors of the Sultanate." Samaha's heritage of publishing works in Beirut seamlessly merges with Saikaly's photographic expertise, creating a visual masterpiece that invites readers on an unforgettable journey through Oman's past, present, and the promising future that unfolds.



Menace of e-cigarettes

16,000 FLAVOURS

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KABEER YOUSUF
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THERE has been a growing challenge of youngsters smoking e-cigarettes and vaping. The challenge calls for urgent action to control the same to protect children and non-smokers and minimise health harm to the population.

Oman is among the countries that have banned the import or usage of e-cigarettes. Thirty-three countries have banned the sale of e-cigarettes, 88 have no minimum age at which e-cigarettes can be bought, and 74 countries have no regulations for these harmful products. According to a note from the World Health Organisation (WHO), alarming evidence has emerged on adverse population health effects as e-cigarettes have been allowed on the open market and aggressively marketed to young people. E-cigarettes as consumer products are not shown to be effective for quitting tobacco use at the population level.

Speaking on the lethal effects of e-cigarettes and vaping, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, said that kids are being recruited and trapped at an early age to use e-cigarettes and may get hooked to nicotine.

“I urge countries to implement strict measures to prevent uptake to protect their citizens, especially their children and young people,” he said.

E-cigarettes with nicotine are highly addictive and are harmful to health. Whilst long-term health effects are not fully understood, it has been established that they generate toxic substances, some of which are known to cause cancer and some that increase the risk of heart and lung disorders. The use of e-cigarettes can also affect brain development and lead to learning disorders for young people. Fetal exposure to e-cigarettes can adversely affect the development of the fetus in pregnant women. Exposure to emissions from e-cigarettes also poses risks to bystanders.

Experts in lifestyle diseases in Oman opined that the tobacco industry profits from destroying health and is using these newer products to get a seat at the policy-making table with governments to lobby against health policies for private gains.

“By and large, the tobacco industry funds and promotes false evidence to argue that these products reduce harm while at the same

time heavily promoting these products to children and non-smokers and continuing to sell billions of cigarettes worldwide. What we require here is a set of strong, decisive action to prevent the uptake of e-cigarettes based on the growing body of evidence of its use by children and adolescents and health harms,” said medics.

Dr Ruediger Krech, Director for Health Promotion at the WHO, revealed that with at least 16,000 flavours, e-cigarettes target children through social media and influencers.

“Some of these products use cartoon characters and have sleek designs, which appeal to the younger generation. There is an alarming increase in the use of e-cigarettes among children and young people with rates exceeding adult use in many countries,” said Dr Ruediger Krech, adding that more children among 13–15-years age brackets are using e-cigarettes than adults in all WHO regions use. In some countries, e-cigarette use among 16–19-year-olds has doubled between 2017–2022, while in countries like the United Kingdom, the number among youth has tripled in the past three years.

Even brief exposure to e-cigarette content on social media can be associated with increased intention to use these products, as well as more positive attitudes toward e-cigarettes. Studies consistently show that young people who use e-cigarettes are almost three times more likely to use cigarettes later in life.

Urgent measures are necessary to prevent the uptake of e-cigarettes and counter nicotine addiction alongside a comprehensive approach to tobacco control and in light of national circumstances.





UN Security Council voices ‘alarm’ in Sudan

WASHINGTON: The UN Security Council expressed “alarm” at growing violence in war-torn Sudan, after it reported that seven million people have been displaced by the conflict.

In a joint statement, the Council “strongly condemned” attacks on civilians and the spread of the conflict “into areas hosting large populations of internally displaced persons, refugees, and asylum seekers.”

“The members of the Security Council expressed alarm at the spreading violence and deteriorating humanitarian situation in Sudan,” the statement said, reflecting the worsening situation in the country.

In addition to the seven million internally displaced people, the UN said on Thursday another 1.5 million had fled into neighbouring countries.

Since fighting broke out on April 15 between army chief Abdel Fattah al Burhan and his former deputy, Rapid Support Forces (RSF) commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, the city of Wad Madani, 180 kilometres south of Khartoum, had become a haven for thousands of displaced people during the conflict.

But the Security Council said fighting



Refugees fleeing the conflict in Sudan queue with their jerrycans to collect drinking water from the Doctors Without Borders (MSF) distribution point at the Ourang refugee camp in Adr. — AFP file photo

had spread there too, causing refugees to flee once again.

“According to the International Organization for Migration, up to 300,000 people have fled Wad Madani in Al-Jazira state in a new wave of large-scale displacement,” UN secretary-general’s spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

As the rival security forces battle for the city’s strong-points, shopkeepers boarded up their stores this week to ward off looters while women disappeared from the streets for fear of violence.

The Council called on the warring parties to allow for “rapid, safe and

unhindered humanitarian access throughout Sudan.”

It condemned a December 10 attack on a convoy belonging to the International Committee of the Red Cross and called for “the scaling up of humanitarian assistance to Sudan.”

Sitting outside her makeshift shelter in eastern Chad, Sudanese refugee Mariam Adam Yaya warmed up tea on some firewood in a bid to quell the pangs of hunger.

The 34-year-old from the Masalit ethnic group crossed the border on foot after a four-day trek with no provisions and her eight-year-old son clinging to her back.

Thousands have fled for neighbouring Chad and found refuge in overcrowded camps such as Adre where Yaya has settled.

In the western Darfur region, paramilitary operations have left civilian victims belonging to the non-Arab Masalit group in what the United Nations and NGOs say is a suspected genocide.

In the West Darfur town of Ardamata alone, armed groups killed more than 1,000 people in November, according to the European Union. — AFP

Beijing records most hours of sub-zero temperatures since 1951



Workers conduct repair work at the site where a thermal pipeline that supplies heating leaked, during winter solstice in Beijing. — Reuters

BEIJING: China’s capital Beijing has broken its record for hours of sub-zero temperatures in December dating back to 1951, after a cold wave swept swathes of the country and brought blizzards in its wake, sending temperatures towards historic lows.

Northern and northeastern parts of the country have experienced a record-breaking chill since last week, with some areas in the northeast hitting minus 40 Celsius and below as biting cold air flowed down from the Arctic.

As of Sunday, a weather observatory in Beijing had recorded more than 300 hours of below-freezing temperatures since December 11, the most for the month since records began in 1951.

The capital has also endured nine consecutive days of temperatures below minus 10 C in this period, the Beijing Daily added.

Several cities in the central Chinese province of Henan, southwest of Beijing, are in the grip of a winter heating supply crunch, with thermal power suppliers in the city of

Jiaozuo under pressure to ensure supplies. Heating boilers at JiaoZuo WanFang Aluminium Manufacturing, one of the major suppliers in the city, have broken down, leaving some areas in urgent need of more heat supply, state media reported on Sunday.

The supplier is scrambling to fix the malfunction and expects to resume supply on December 26, state media reported, without specifying the number of boilers that have broken down.

The city will suspend heat supply for most businesses except essential service providers such as hospitals and senior centres to prioritise residential heat usage. However, some residential compounds will still be affected during the device maintenance period, the media reports added.

Two other cities in Henan - Puyang and Pingdingshan - have already suspended heat supply to government departments and administrative institutions to prioritise residential usage, the local governments said, citing extremely cold weather. — Reuters

■ VOTE FOR A NEW CHAMBER

A voter shows his ink-stained finger after voting at a polling station during the 2023 local elections in the locality of Mnhla in Ariana province on the outskirts of Tunis. Tunisians went to polling stations on Sunday in the first elections for a new second chamber of parliament under a constitution pushed through last year by President Kais Saied. The nine million strong electorate has been asked to choose more than 2,000 councillors from around 7,000 candidates, according to the Independent High Authority for Elections. — AFP



Calls for restraint in Democratic Republic of Congo after tense vote

KINSHASA: Western embassies in Democratic Republic of Congo urged restraint after leading opposition members called this week’s election a “sham”, some calling for it to be annulled.

Five opposition leaders called in a joint statement for a protest march next Wednesday.

One election officer meanwhile said late voting in a few places in the country’s far east had been authorised for Sunday.

In a joint statement on Saturday, 12 European embassies in the capital Kinshasa, and the Canadian Embassy, called for calm.

“So long as the vote count is continuing, we call on all the parties involved... to show restraint,” they wrote.

Around 44 million people in the nation of 100 million were registered to vote, with more than 100,000 candidates running for various positions.

President Felix Tshisekedi, 60, is running for re-election against 18 opposition candidates.

The sheer scale of the DRC -- roughly the size of continental western Europe -- and its dire infrastructure make elections a



Leaders of the Carter Center election observation team address the press in Kinshasa. — AFP file photo

Massive delays and bureaucratic chaos marred the vote on Wednesday, with election authorities struggling to transport voting materials to polling stations

stark logistical challenge.

Massive delays and bureaucratic chaos marred the vote on Wednesday, with election authorities struggling to transport voting materials to polling stations on time. Some stations were unable to open at all.

Officially, the country’s electoral commission, Ceni, extended the vote only until Thursday for stations that had been unable to open on polling day.

But ballots were still being cast on Saturday in remote areas, according to some officials, in a

sign of continuing difficulties.

And Macaire Kambau Sivikunula, an election official in the North Kivu region in the east of the country, said that Ceni had granted special permission for five voting stations to open on Sunday for voting.

Failure to get voting up and running on schedule had led to him and his family and other election officials receiving death threats, he added.

Five opposition leaders said in a statement that they were organising a protest march for next Wednesday.

They included gynaecologist Denis Mukwege, the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize laureate; and former oil executive Martin Fayulu.

“We will protest against the irregularities noted during the voting operations,” they wrote in a letter to the governor of Kinshasa.

Five other opposition candidates, including business magnate and former provincial governor Moise Katumbi, released a separate statement calling for the vote to be annulled, saying it had been marred by “massive fraud”. — AFP



Ukraine says blockade ends at Poland border point

KYIV: Polish truckers on Sunday ended their blockade of a border checkpoint with Ukraine, Ukrainian authorities said, days after the countries discussed resolving a row that has soured ties.

Polish hauliers have blocked crossing points since early November to protest what they say is unfair competition from Ukrainian truckers.

The Ukrainian border guard on Sunday said that the protest at the Medyka-Shehyni checkpoint ended at 9:30 am, with the registration and crossing of trucks resuming “as usual”.

The European Union had waived a requirement for Ukrainian transport companies to possess entry permits in a gesture of solidarity after Russia’s attack in February 2022. The exemption has been extended to June 2024.

Polish truckers say the move undercut their earnings. Ukraine meanwhile heavily relies on the route for its exports and imports, especially as Black Sea ports have been blocked off due to the war with Russia.

The protests have triggered long queues of vehicles and strained ties. Poland has been one of Kyiv’s staunchest EU allies and has welcomed hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees.

On Friday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and other senior officials met new Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski in Kyiv to discuss ways a



A truck driver from Ukraine waves from his truck roof while waiting in a long queue to cross the Polish-Ukrainian border at the Dorohusk-Jagodzín crossing, in Okopy, Poland. – Reuters file photo

solution to the blockade.

New Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has repeatedly emphasised his support for Ukraine and pledged to find an agreement with his country’s disgruntled truckers.

Earlier the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba

addressed the issue.

“The first thing to do is to unblock the border, because the situation in which our friendly relations find themselves -- in the shadow of the blocked border -- is unacceptable and harmful,” Kuleba told his Polish counterpart. “We hope that this problem will

The Ukrainian border guard on Sunday said that the protest at the Medyka-Shehyni checkpoint ended at 9:30 am, with the registration and crossing of trucks resuming “as usual”

be solved by Christmas, before the end of this year,” Polish deputy infrastructure minister Pawel Gancarz said at a briefing later on, speaking alongside Sikorski in Kyiv.

Ahead of Polish elections in October, the then-governing Law and Justice party lobbied for votes by leveraging fatigue over the conflict.

Poland became embroiled in a row with Ukraine over grain imports, and the outgoing government said it would restrict arms deliveries to Kyiv.

Poland’s new foreign minister on Friday urged the West to rally around Ukraine, choosing the war-torn country for his first visit abroad in a sign of support as other allies waver on aid.

“If the West mobilises, I have no doubt who will win, but it must finally start mobilising,” Poland’s Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski said in a press conference wrapping up his trip. — AFP

Deal struck to end Geneva airport strike



Strikers hold a picket line outside Geneva International Airport, after dozens of ground staff went on strike, in Geneva. – AFP

GENEVA: A deal has been reached to end hours-long strike by ground staff at Geneva airport, which had caused numerous flight delays and cancellations during the holiday rush.

“Victory!”, the SSP public sector union said on X, shortly before midday.

The workers began their strike about eight hours earlier, at 4 am, demanding “dignified working conditions and decent wages” from their employer.

The employees “have succeeded in repelling attacks on their retirement fund and in obtaining improved salaries, indemnities and overtime compensation”, SSP said.

Around 80 strikers had gathered in front of the airport before dawn, wearing bright yellow safety vests and brandishing union flags and posters with messages like: “Dnata is killing me” and “Precarious work means grounded flights”.

Geneva airport stressed Sunday that it had not been involved in the

dispute, and said it regretted that the strike had gone ahead while negotiations were ongoing.

The airport said six flights had been cancelled as a result, while some others had been delayed by more than an hour.

In addition, “a number of flights were operated without loading or offloading luggage”, the statement said.

Prior to the deal, airport spokesman Ignace Jeannerat said that some flights had faced problems.

It reportedly counts around 600 staff at the airport who handle various ground operations, including ticketing services and baggage handling, for a number of international airlines such as British Airways, Air France and KLM.

Jeannerat said dnata had been tasked with assisting 85 of the 417 flights scheduled for Sunday, a day when the Geneva airport was expecting 52,000 passengers to travel through. — AFP

Rains, mild weather raises flood risks in Germany

BERLIN: Days of heavy rainfall across much of Germany have increased the risk of flooding along many rivers and streams, the federal weather service warned on Sunday.

The rainfall is likely to continue until Monday, reaching up to 150millimetres of rain - or even more - within 48 to 96 hours, the Deutscher Wetterdienst warned.

The risk of flooding will exacerbated by heavy thaws in some areas, for example in the eastern Ore Mountains, it added.

In the northern state of Lower Saxony, the third-highest of four warning levels was reached at 30 measuring stations early on Sunday, according to state authorities.

The threshold was exceeded by the rivers Weser, Aller, Leine and



The fishmarket and surrounding streets on the Hamburg waterfront are flooded due to a storm surge, in northern Germany, on December 22. – AFP

Oker, among others. At level three, flooding of properties and larger areas as well as roads and cellars is

possible. Firefighters and volunteers used sandbags to protect parts of several districts.

In the northern city of Hanover, the fire brigade was working around the clock due to the rain and heavy

gusts of wind. A lot of water damage to buildings was reported and trees had to be removed, the fire brigade said on Sunday.

The emergency services secured transformer stations in the Rodenberg district east of Hanover. Sirens sounded overnight to warn residents.

District mayor Thomas Wolf said early on Sunday that the flood water was flowing over the weir. Volunteers had run from house to house to warn residents. The municipality had not experienced a flood like this in 25 years, he said.

In the neighbouring state of Saxony-Anhalt, the flood forecasting centre issued warnings for the Mulde, Aller and Havel rivers.

The flood situation also worsened

in parts of Saxony, with alert level 3 reached at several water gauges on Sunday morning, including in the city of Chemnitz. In parts of North Rhine-Westphalia, in north-western Germany, the authorities were preparing for flooding.

In a suburb of Münster, the fire brigade rescued a woman when her car got trapped in floodwater on Saturday. In the industrial Ruhr area, the continuous rain caused problems for the railway, washing out-tracks between Dortmund and Hagen. In Bavaria, some districts reached warning level 3, rising to level 4in the towns of Coburg and Kulmbach.

The regions of Franconia and eastern Bavaria were particularly affected, with several cellars flooded and roads closed. — dpa

COLOMBO

Police detain nearly 15,000 in drug crackdown

Sri Lanka’s police announced on Sunday the arrests of nearly 15,000 people during a week-long military-backed anti-narcotics drive, a crackdown denounced by rights activists.

Police said their operation, code-named “Yuktiya” or “Justice”, led to the seizure of almost 440 kilogrammes of narcotics, including 272 kg of cannabis, 35 kg of hashish and nine kilogrammes of heroin.

Authorities believe the Indian Ocean island is being used as a



drug trafficking transit point.

A police statement said 13,666 suspects were arrested while nearly 1,100 addicts were detained and sent for compulsory rehabilitation at a military-run facility. — AFP

MANAGUA

At least 19 die in Nicaragua bus accident

At least 10 children were among 19 fatalities when an overcrowded bus overturned on a bridge in a town north of Nicaragua’s capital Managua, a government website said.

Some 40 passengers were injured in the accident, it added.

Vice President Rosario Murillo, wife of President Daniel Ortega, said on state-run Channel 4 that around 70 people were crowded on the bus at the time.

She said the accident occurred



in Rancho Grande, apparently when the bus driver lost control on a bridge and the vehicle overturned.

“We are deeply moved by this misfortune,” she said. — AFP

CHISINAU

Moldova’s pro-EU president to seek second term

Moldovan President Maia Sandu on Sunday said she would seek a second term next year as she looks to steer the former Soviet republic to EU membership. Sandu has said this opened a “new page” for the country of 2.6 million people that borders Ukraine and EU member Romania.

“We still have important steps to take and I promise to continue if you give me your confidence for a new term in 2024,” she said.

She also asked parliament to “initiate the organisation of a



referendum on EU membership next autumn, in which the voice of the citizens would be decisive”.

Sandu is leading polls for the presidential vote to be held by late next year. — AFP



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Gaza

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7

GAZA WAR RAGES ON CHRISTMAS EVE AS BIDEN URGES CAUTION

GAZA: Israel pushed on Sunday with its military campaign over the October 7 attacks, as the focus of the deadly combat shifted to southern Gaza where most displaced Palestinians are trapped.

US President Joe Biden stressed the “critical need” to protect civilians, in a call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who vowed Israel would “continue the war until all of its goals have been achieved”, officials said.

As heavy fighting raged on, the Israeli army said it had struck another 200 targets in the past 24 hours in the besieged Palestinian territory where it is seeking to defeat the Palestinian groups and free remaining captives.

The army said 153 troops had died in Gaza since it launched its ground invasion on October 27. Ten soldiers were lost in battles on Saturday, one of the deadliest days for the Israeli side.

“This is a difficult morning, after a very difficult day of fighting in Gaza,” said Netanyahu. “The war is exacting a very heavy price... but we have no choice but to keep fighting.”

The army said soldiers had raided a northern Gaza compound near schools, a mosque and a clinic.

Palestinian groups rejected Israeli claims over raids as lies meant “to justify their massacring of innocent civilians and their destructive aggression that has affected the entire infrastructure... in the already blockaded Gaza Strip”.

Israel’s withering military campaign, including massive aerial bombardment, has killed 20,424 people, mostly women and children, according to the Palestinian territory’s health ministry.

Vast areas of Gaza lie in ruins and its 2.4 million people have



People inspect the rubble of a building destroyed by Israeli bombardment in Rafah. – AFP



Displaced Palestinians cook in a makeshift outdoor kitchen near their tent in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. – AFP



A boy sits by a hole in a wall covered up with canvas in a building overlooking another destroyed by Israeli bombardment in Rafah. – AFP

EIGHTY PER CENT OF GAZANS HAVE BEEN DISPLACED MANY NOW SHIELDING AGAINST THE WINTER COLD IN MAKESHIFT TENTS AND FORCED INTO THE SOUTH OF GAZA EVEN AS GROUND FIGHTING COMES CLOSER

endured dire shortages of water, food, fuel and medicine due to an Israeli siege, alleviated only by the limited arrival of aid trucks.

Eighty per cent of Gazans have been displaced many now shielding against the winter cold in makeshift tents and forced into the south of Gaza even as ground fighting comes closer.

On Friday, the United States allowed the passage of a UN Security Council resolution that effectively called on Israel to allow “immediate, safe and unhindered” deliveries of life-saving aid to Gaza “at scale”.

World powers had wrangled for days over the wording and, at Washington’s insistence, toned down some provisions — including removing a call for a ceasefire.

As the war rages on, Christians around the world celebrate Christmas Eve, and festivities are usually held in the occupied West Bank city of Bethlehem.

But this year the city is almost deserted, with few worshippers around and no Christmas tree erected, after church leaders decided to forego “any unnecessarily festive” celebrations, in solidarity with Gazans. — AFP

Israel reports mounting military losses

CAIRO: Israel bombed areas of Jabalia in the northern Gaza Strip overnight, with fighting throughout Sunday morning, residents and Palestinian media said, as the Israeli military announced a mounting death toll in clashes with Hamas militants.

Israel says it has achieved almost complete operational control over northern Gaza and is preparing to expand a ground offensive to other areas.

The Israeli military appeared to be meeting stiff resistance. It said on Sunday eight soldiers had been killed in the Strip, bringing to 154 its published combat losses since it began its ground incursion. The White House said US President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had discussed the Israeli campaign.

Biden “emphasised the critical need to protect the civilian population including those supporting the humanitarian aid operation, and the importance of allowing civilians to move safely away from areas of ongoing fighting”, the White House said in a statement.



An Israeli soldier looks on during the funeral of Staff sergeant David Bogdanovskiy, who was killed in the Gaza Strip during the Israeli army's ongoing ground operation, at a cemetery in Haifa. – Reuters

“The leaders discussed the importance of securing the release of all remaining captives,” the White House said.

Israel’s main ally has maintained its support while expressing concern over the casualty toll and humanitarian crisis in Gaza. US officials have said they expect Israel to shift soon to a lower-intensity phase.

Netanyahu, speaking at a weekly cabinet meeting on Sunday, dismissed reports that the United States had convinced Israel not to expand its military campaign. The Wall Street Journal reported that

Netanyahu was persuaded by Biden not to attack the groups in neighbouring Lebanon out of concerns it would launch an attack on Israel.

“Israel is a sovereign state,” Netanyahu said. “Our decisions in the war are based on our operational considerations, and I will not elaborate on that.”

The UN Security Council averted a threatened US veto on Friday, after days of wrangling, by removing from a draft resolution a call for an immediate end to the war and diluting Israeli control over aid deliveries. — Reuters

Workers wrap bodies in shrouds in bombed-out north

GAZA: On a patch of sandy ground between collapsed masonry, burnt out buildings and damaged cars, civil defence workers move from body to body, wrapping white shrouds around a group of people killed in Gaza’s 11-week-old war.

As Israel fights to wrest full control of northern Gaza from Palestinian groups, the scene in the Jabalia refugee camp reflects the deadly risk posed to Palestinians by relentless air strikes and shelling. The activity was captured in a video released by the Palestinian Civil Defence service, which also showed a worker digging by hand to try to recover an apparently burned corpse trapped under rubble.

The Palestinian death toll in the conflict has reached 20,258, the Palestinian health ministry said, with thousands more bodies believed trapped under rubble.

Almost all of Gaza’s 2.3 million people have been displaced in one of the world’s most densely populated areas.

Israel says it has achieved almost complete operational



Smoke rises over Gaza, amid the ongoing conflict in the Gaza Strip. – Reuters

control over northern Gaza and is preparing to expand a ground offensive to other areas, but Jabalia residents reported persistent aerial bombardment and shelling from Israeli tanks, which they said had moved further into the town.

Israel said on Sunday 154 of its soldiers have been killed since it launched its ground incursion in response to October 7 rampage

into Israel. Palestinians of Khan Younis in the south were seen searching among the rubble for their belongings following a recent airstrike.

Standing amid debris, Khan Younis resident Sami Barees said his house had been destroyed, and the airstrike had taken place in what was supposed to be a safe zone. — Reuters

Understanding the past year through books



Sandhya Rao Mehta

The writer is Associate Professor, Dept of English Language and Literature Sultan Qaboos University

It is no understatement that 2023 has been a tumultuous year of strife and tensions across the world. It has upended many comfortable notions that we had for a while: the benefits of economic stability and the hope of a peaceful world.

To understand the present world and its conflicts, whether environmental, human or cultural, we fall back, as always, on books.

Here are some bestsellers that help us to contextualise the events around us on a broad range of topics and ideas.

Although not recently written, some of these books have been reprinted on public demand.

Some are couched in moving fiction while others use history, philosophy and even motivation to make sense of our world today.

‘The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine’ is Rashid Khalidi’s magnum opus — a sweeping account of an ongoing war contextualised through original manuscripts, letters and official documents.

It is a moving and personal account of a tragic conflict that has been traced through the last century

and more.

Amitava Ghosh’s ‘The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parable for a Planet in Crisis’ outlines the way in which human greed leads to violence, all of it set in colonial times.

It is a much needed reminder, if one is needed, of the terrible price humans pay to satisfy our daily needs.

Historian Mary Beard’s latest non-fiction ‘Emperor of Rome’ is another powerful work from a world renowned authority on the Roman Empire.

It outlines the way in which power was effectively used to rule over vast areas of land, while also focusing on the common citizens of the empire.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘Whereabouts’ is characteristic of the author’s sparse and powerful prose. It explores identity, belonging and what it takes to grapple with one’s place in the world.

Written in Italian and translated by the author herself into English, its sparse prose reminds us of Hemingway’s style.

In such tense times, looking inward and seeking solace is essential for many of us.

‘Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and

FALLING BACK ON BOOKS WHICH OFFER SOLACE, HELPS US TO UNDERSTAND OUR WORLD BETTER CAN BE ONE OF THE MOST PRODUCTIVE EXERCISES OF ALL

Happy Life’ by Héctor Garcia and Francesc Miralles encourages us all to find our own reason and purpose in life. Using this Japanese philosophy, it points to practical ways through which to live a purposeful life.

Matt Haig’s ‘The Comfort Book’ consists of “reflections on hope, survival and the messy miracle of being alive.

It is a strange paradox, that many of the clearest, most comforting life lessons are learned while we are at our lowest”.

A collection of inspirational moments, it is uplifting and motivational at the same time.

Jokha Al Harthi’s ‘Narinjah: The Bitter Orange Tree’ is a loving testament to the traditional way of life in Oman in all its complexity.

The memories of this life intersperse with the modern world, making the meeting of both thoughtful and full of possibilities.

As every year, we see the one on its way out with memories, regrets and hope.

Falling back on books which offer solace, meaning and help us to understand our world better can be one of the most productive exercises of all.

War dampens Christmas spirit in southern Lebanon

In the Lebanese Christian border village of Qlayaa, the priest urged his parish to keep the Christmas spirit alive despite clashes between Hizbullah and Israel forcing many to flee. Nestled among lush, green fields and flowing olive groves, Qlayaa has echoed to the sound of bombing on an almost daily basis since October 7.

“Of course we are upset and bothered by the war... but we want to feel the joy of Christmas,” father Pierre Rai told a dwindling number of parishioners in Qlayaa’s Maronite Saint George Church.

“So long as we have decided to remain in this village, and in other southern Lebanon border villages, we must live and enjoy each thing in its right time.”

For nearly three months, Israeli rockets have been falling close to Qlayaa, which lies less than five kilometres from the border.

So far, however, the Christian villages in the area have been spared destruction.

Since hostilities began, more than 140 people have been killed on the Lebanese side, most of them fighters but also including more than a dozen civilians, three of them journalists, according to a tally.

On the Israeli side, at least four civilians and eight soldiers have been killed, according to officials.

Despite the violence, the church has put up lights, a life-sized manger and is planning recitals and activities for the community’s children.

A massive Christmas tree decorated with red ornaments sits in the village’s empty square, with reindeer statues nearby.

Lebanon’s south is home to a plethora of religious communities. The region was battered by a years-long Israeli occupation that ended in 2000 and again in the 2006 war between Hizbullah and Israel.

Residents along the border are used to “difficult times”, said father Antonios Farah, “but we have decided that this year we will celebrate Christmas as usual”. “This is our way to pray for peace,” he said, dressed in a black robe and sitting in the church.

The streets of the small village are usually bustling with visitors around Christmas, when many of those living abroad return.

But this year, “only about 60 per cent of the village population is still here” with none of the expatriates coming home, he said, adding that the streets were deserted after nightfall.

According to updated figures from the International Organization for Migration, the hostilities have displaced more than 72,000 people in Lebanon, most of them in the country’s south.

— AFP

How an Arctic influencer embraces months of darkness



Remy Tumin

The writer is an award winning journalist covering breaking news and other topics for NYT

Cecilia Blomdahl can still remember the first time she looked out at the Arctic Ocean on a winter night. The darkness was so dense she could not tell where land started and ended.

It was 2015 and Blomdahl had arrived on Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago near the North Pole, to work at a restaurant with friends. Polar night had just begun, and the sun would not rise again until February. But the thing that really struck her — and has stayed with her ever since — was the quiet.

“I don’t think I understood then how this would become my home,” she said in a recent interview. “I was only planning to stay for three months.”

Now Blomdahl, 34, lives in a cabin overlooking a fjord with her partner, Christoffer, and dog, Grim. She lives in the town of Longyearbyen, population 2,400, where she has managed to bring the unique extremes of the 78th parallel north to an audience of millions on TikTok and YouTube.

They come for what Blomdahl describes as a “cozy corner” of the Internet: gazing at the northern lights, coffee on the fjord, near encounters with polar bears, dog walks guided by headlight, snowmobile expeditions deeper into the Arctic. Viewers often post comments asking how she deals with the extremes of the polar night, how she gets supplies and whether she’s tempted to hibernate.

Yes, she is as every bit cheerful about winter on Zoom as she is in her videos. Yes, she really loves winter. Yes, she has a dozen pairs of pajamas.

Blomdahl grew up in Gothenburg, Sweden, a coastal city where winters were dark, with the sun setting about 3 pm. She attributes her love of winter to her parents, who encouraged Blomdahl and her two sisters to be outside.

“I just remember my entire winter being as much outdoors as summer,” she said. “Whenever winter came around, it was never something that ever was spoken about to us as something bad; it was just another season.

That’s what I’m carrying on now.”



Cecilia Blomdahl lives in a cabin overlooking a fjord with her partner, Christoffer, and dog, Grim.

BLOMDAHL LIVES IN THE TOWN OF LONGYEARBYEN WHERE SHE HAS MANAGED TO BRING THE UNIQUE EXTREMES OF THE 78TH PARALLEL NORTH TO AN AUDIENCE OF MILLIONS ON TIKTOK AND YOUTUBE

Too cheery for you? It’s not all cozy. Although Blomdahl primarily makes videos about Svalbard’s natural beauty, she also points out its dangers, including whiteout conditions and wild animals. In fact, she often has nightmares in the days leading up to polar night, a part of the year without daylight in the northernmost and southernmost points of the planet.

“I think it means that I respect the environment,” she said. “Yes, it’s fearful, but I think it’s good to have fear. If you stop being a little bit fearful, you might get reckless.”

There are a few tactics she uses to prevent winter blues: exercise, vitamin D supplements, body oil and regular visits to a nail artist. Planning out her day is key to staying positive, she said.

If she ever feels like the darkness is becoming suffocating, she goes for a hike and walks beneath a sky full of stars. Longyearbyen, the main town

on Svalbard, is a melting pot of more than 50 nationalities, she said. Svalbard itself has enjoyed a little boost from Blomdahl, who promotes the island “in such a responsible way,” said Anja Nordvålen, marketing coordinator for Svalbard’s tourism board. There has been a particular increase in visitors from the United States, she said.

“Everything here is kind of extraordinary, even though, ultimately, it’s our ordinary life,” Nordvålen said. “I think it’s intriguing for people to see everyday life and tell them, ‘Oh, you need polar bear protection when you leave your cabin.’”

Svalbard is about as far north as humans can live. Longyearbyen, its largest settlement, was named after an American mine owner, John Munro Longyear, who developed the Arctic Coal Co after visiting the islands. It is home to a university campus, a satellite research station, a global seed bank and a small but vibrant tourist industry that capitalises on outdoor adventures.

It was also once a prolific producer of coal for Russia. According to Longyearbyen legend, Santa Claus lives in an abandoned mine in the mountainside. On the first day of Advent each year, lights appear in the mine, including in the shape of a Christmas tree.

Svalbard is now transitioning the town away from coal production and toward diesel as it prepares to shutter the last remaining coal-fired plant in the region. But don’t expect Blomdahl to weigh in on that or any other geopolitical issues.

“There are a lot of dark views out there, so I kind of like to be a cozy corner,” she said of her page. “I think that’s also what people get out of it.”

Grim, her 8-year-old Finnish Lapphund, makes sure Blomdahl goes outside, no matter the amount of daylight. She feels safer with him, but even still, she carries a firearm with her just in case she runs into a polar bear.

Blomdahl said polar night forces her to shift her focus inward.

Winter, she said, “is something we get to experience rather than endure. We’ve all chosen to be here.”

— The New York Times

Chase your dreams to make them true

One might wonder whether a dream could come true or not! Is it possible that all our dreams become a reality someday? Probably yes. If you believe in your dreams, you can make them come true.

Yet, that is only possible if you believe in them from the bottom of your heart and work on chasing them. You are what you think, and you achieve what you believe in. Hence, if you have faith in your dreams, you will hold on to them tight to get them the breath of life.

Almost everyone has a dream, regardless of what it is. However, all that matters is how strong and serious one believes in that dream. Some people may assume that they have just ideas or daydreams, which could be shaped as dreams. Accordingly, people will get committed to those thoughts and chase them day and night to make them happen. Not all we think of can be a dream, but dreams always start with just a simple thought.

On the contrary, some people do not believe in their dreams or never believe in dreams. They only live in the moment and do not care about what they will do the day after. It is good to keep your life simple and smooth, but not to the extent that you do not even bother to plan for what you want to do the next day! What concerns those more is how to make a good living and enjoy life; as simple as that! However, those dream-chasing ones never say die to challenges, no matter how difficult they are! That is why one should remember there are always obstacles and challenges on your journey to achieve success. Just be positive and keep moving, as sometimes the smallest step in the right direction ends up being the



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biggest step of your life. Tip toe if you must, but take the step. All your dreams will come true if your persistence pushes them ahead and stimulates you to achieve them.

Life is meaningless, with no challenges and dreams to chase and fight for. Living without a dream, life would not be significant and living without love, life will not be valuable. Undoubtedly, dreams add a flavour to life as they become challenging and thought-provoking, but rewarding, of course. As Albert Einstein said, “Never give up on what you really want to do. The person with big dreams is more powerful than the one with all the facts”.

Always a little determination results in getting more achievements. Whatever looks like a failure and disappointing might suddenly turn into a commendable victory. If you think you failed in achieving your dreams, change your techniques but not your principles. Similarly, trees change their leaves but not their roots. It has been said that a pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity, but an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.

There is nothing impossible to do, regardless of how difficult it is; you just need to roll the dice and make it happen. Successful people keep trying until they get it right; that is what one must do when things do not go right from the first shot.

The road to success and making dreams come true is never easy; it is full of challenges and struggles. Nobody is too old, bad, too late, and sick to start from scratch again. All you need is to have more self-confidence and courage and believe that your dreams are achievable.

FESTIVE MOOD



Member of a vintage car group Hiroyuki Wada (C), dressed as Santa Claus, gives Christmas presents to a child on a street in Tokyo's Marunouchi area yesterday. - AFP

Europe needs a new Ukraine strategy

It took European Union leaders eight hours – a relatively short time, by EU standards – to agree to start accession negotiations with Ukraine. While this decision represents a major victory for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, it came at a high cost, as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán blocked the disbursement of €50 billion (\$55 billion) in aid that Ukraine desperately needs to defend itself.

As the war approaches its second anniversary, Europe finds itself in a double bind.

The EU's Ukraine strategy rests on three main pillars. First, European leaders have committed to a definition of victory that implies the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity, and have pledged to support Ukraine until it reclaims all territory occupied by Russia during the war's early stages.

Second, Europe's Russia policy has been entirely focused on economic sanctions and international isolation. Western firms have fled Saint Petersburg and Moscow en masse, the G7 has imposed a price cap on Russian oil, and hundreds of Russian diplomats have been expelled from Western capitals.

Lastly, Europe's reliance on American support has reached levels not seen since the Cold War. Despite the United States' escalating rivalry with China, President Joe Biden's administration has committed substantial diplomatic, economic, and military resources to ensuring Europe's security and stability.

Consequently, Ukraine has managed to retain roughly 82 per cent of its



Mark Leonard

The writer is Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations and author of The Age of Unpeace: How Connectivity Causes Conflict

WITH UKRAINE STRUGGLING TO SECURE CRUCIAL AID, AND ITS COUNTEROFFENSIVE FAILING TO ACHIEVE ITS OBJECTIVES, IT IS TIME TO REDEFINE WHAT CONSTITUTES A UKRAINIAN VICTORY AND A RUSSIAN DEFEAT

pre-attack territory, while Russia has suffered significant losses in personnel and resources. Moreover, the transatlantic alliance – deemed all but dead during former US President Donald Trump's term – is now stronger than it has been at any point since the end of the Cold War.

But all three pillars have started to wobble. While procedural legerdemain thwarted Orbán's attempt to veto Ukraine's EU accession, the decision is more a symbolic victory for Ukraine than a practical one, given that it does not address the ongoing delay in crucial financial aid. On the battlefields of eastern Ukraine, the war has reached a stalemate that favours Russia as the Ukrainian counteroffensive, burdened from the start by unrealistic expectations, has failed to achieve its stated objectives.

Moreover, the effectiveness of the sanctions imposed on Russia has been called into question after a recent Politico investigation revealed that Western restrictions have been far less devastating than initially anticipated. As Russian President Vladimir Putin tours the Middle East and threatens to open new European fronts, there is an emerging consensus in Washington that the US would need to engage with Moscow after the 2024 presidential election.

America's waning interest in the Ukraine war poses the biggest threat to Europe's stability.

European leaders' biggest concern is Trump's potential return to the White House in 2025, as right-wing think tanks have already begun drawing up plans for a “dormant Nato” and advocating a shift from burden sharing to “burden shifting.”

But the problem goes beyond Trump.

Even the Biden administration, which has played an instrumental role in coordinating Ukraine's defence, appears to have changed its tune. In a recent press conference with Zelensky, Biden introduced a new phrase, saying that the US will support Ukraine “for as long as we can,” which replaced “for as long as it takes.” Zelensky, who travelled to Washington to plead with Republican legislators to approve a major aid package and failed to achieve a breakthrough, was visibly disheartened.



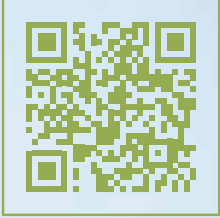
Biden's rhetorical shift highlights the dilemma facing Ukraine's European allies and underscores the urgent need for Europe to rethink its strategy. For starters, the definition of a Ukrainian victory should not be limited to the territory regained from Russia. The character and identity of postwar Ukraine, particularly its commitment to democratic principles, are equally important. Should Ukraine emerge from this war as a vibrant democracy and become a member of Nato and the EU, it would be a spectacular victory, regardless of specific territorial gains.

Consequently, Western countries should focus on supporting Ukraine in realising this vision. Europeans should help Ukraine reform its economy and defence industry so that the country becomes less reliant on

the vagaries of Western domestic politics. This would enable Ukraine to establish financially sustainable mechanisms to defend itself against Russian aggression. Instead of waiting for the war to end, Western governments must help Ukraine rebuild its economy and tax base while the conflict is still ongoing.

This redefinition of Ukrainian victory must go hand in hand with a new understanding of what constitutes a Russian defeat. Given that the war is unlikely to end with Putin and his cronies in the dock in the Hague, EU leaders must grapple with the long-term challenges posed by the multifaceted conflict between Russia and Europe, including an energy crisis, political upheaval, and geopolitical instability. A prolonged conflict with a rogue Russian regime requires a holistic strategy that involves establishing channels to understand and anticipate the Kremlin's intentions and tactics.

Regardless of who occupies the Oval Office in January 2025, Europe must reduce its dependence on the US. This means spending more on defence and developing an effective common strategy. Allowing a single member state to hijack the bloc's entire foreign-policy agenda, as Hungary has done, is unsustainable and incompatible with the EU's ambition to assert its influence in a multipolar world. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2023



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ROYAL CAVALRY GRABS OMAN DERBY CUP

The Rider Al Mutasim al Balushi crossing the finish line through the horse 'Zakir'.

Royal Cavalry clinched the Oman Derby Cup, through the horse 'Zakir', led by Al Mutasim al Balushi, who achieved a hat-trick in the tenth race of the season 2023-24.

The event organized by the Oman Equestrian and Racing Federation, at the Al Rahba track in Barka.

HH Sayyid Fatik bin Fahr al Said, the chief guest, in the presence of a crowd of horse owners, trainer and racing fans. The race includes eight rounds, six rounds are allocated to purebred Arabian horses, one for purebred crossbred horses, and one round for purebred Arabian horses (local production), the seventh round's competitions are devoted to the Oman Derby Cup. The horse 'SSR' won first place In Buraimi round for purebred Arabian horses, foe a distance of 1,200 metres, owned by Salim al Rashidi, and the horse 'RB Tussimdream' won the second place, owned by for HH Sayyid Saud bin Harib al Said.

The 'mare Raifa' was able to win the Dhofar round for purebred



Royal Cavalry celebrate after winning the Oman Derby Cup.

Arabian horses over a distance of 1,600 metres, owned by Said bin Nasser al Kalbani, and the horse 'Ziyad' achieved second place, owned by Hamad bin Saif al Nasiri.

The horse 'PF Dhafer' won first place in the Al Wusta round for Purebred Arabian Horses (local production), over a distance of 1,600 metres, owned by Hamoud bin Saif al Raqqadi, the second place was achieved by the horse 'Dhawi'

owned by Royal Oman Police.

"Tareeq Al Nayef" owned by Hilal bin Khalfan al Hasani snatched Al Dhahirah round for purebred Arabian horses, for a distance of 2,000 metres, and the second place was won by the horse 'Baher Muscat', owned by Sultan bin Ali al Sunaidy. 'Last Tradition' claimed the Musandam round for purebred hybrid horses over a distance of 2,000 metres, owned and trained by Ahmed bin



Abdullah al Marzouqi, while the horse 'Maqsoud' finished second, owned by Said bin Daoud al Balushi.

The 'RB Yas Man' was able to win Al Sharqiyah round, owned by HH Sayyid Saud bin Harib al Said, followed in second place 'Aseel Nahiz', owned by Zaher bin Amer al Ghunaimi.

The horse 'Zakir' owned by Royal Cavalry clinched the Oman Derby Cup at Muscat round for purebred Arabian



HH Sayyid Fatik bin Fahr al Said crowning the winner.

horses over a distance of 2,000 metres, followed in second place 'GS Athbah', owned by Jamal bin Salim al Shabibi.

The horse 'Djelnoor' concluded the tenth race by winning first place in the Al Batinah round for purebred Arabian horses for a distance of 2,200 metres, owned by Sultan bin Ali al Sunaidy, and the horse 'RB Blast F', owned by HH Sayyid Saud bin Harib al Said, finished second.

Red Warriors, China in friendly ahead of AFC cup



Oman National team in warm up sessions

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 24

Red Warriors are raring to go into their opening friendly game against China with the hope of gaining an encouragement victory when the match will take place on Friday at the Rajamangala Stadium in Abu Dhabi, UAE.

Oman team players are underway in their preparatory warm up gathering which is entering its tenth day as it is started in middle of December in Abu Dhabi, UAE. The initial warm up game will be followed with another tight gulf clash against the UAE on January 6.

Qatari club Al Kharaitiyat player, Jameel al Yahmadi, joined the national team's eternal camp recently. It will be the second straight attendance for al Yahmadi in the major Asian event before he made his debut in the previous edition of AFC Asian Cup as he had supported the national team to move into Round of 16. He is one of the key defenders and showing his

peak years of his career.

Daily morning and evening warm up sessions under watchful eyes of the head coach Branko Ivankovic, Oman national teams stars are under an intensive training program ahead of their major assignment in the Asian Cup Championship. The coaching staff performed different technical and tactical training to test the players performance and readiness ahead of the main assignment.

SUCCESSFUL RUN

Red Warriors will aim for a successful run in the forthcoming edition of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 as they will take on Saudi Arabia in the opener of group F. Then, they will face the confident Southeast Asian team Thailand on January 21 before concluding their group matches against Kyrgyzstan on January 25.

The 18th edition of the Asian Cup will be held from January 12 to February 10, 2024 in Doha city where 24 teams will vie for the title of the Asian event in the Fifa World Cup stadiums.

Pistons slump to record-equalling 26th NBA defeat

NEW YORK: The Detroit Pistons matched an NBA single-season mark for futility on Saturday, slumping to a 26th straight defeat in a 126-115 loss to the Nets in Brooklyn.

As reigning champions Denver and Eastern Conference contenders Boston and Milwaukee posted comfortable victories, the Pistons matched the league's longest single-season losing streak — set by the 2010-11 Cleveland Cavaliers and the 2013-14 Philadelphia 76ers.

Detroit, an iconic franchise that won NBA titles in 1989, 1990 and 2004 — hasn't won since October 28.

Mikal Bridges scored 29 points with six rebounds and seven assists to lead the Nets — who had seven players score in double figures.

Jaden Ivey scored 23 points and Cade Cunningham added 22 for the Pistons, who coughed up 14 turnovers leading to 22 Nets points.

Brooklyn out-scored Detroit 62-42 in the paint and held an 18-9 edge in second-chance points and never trailed after the first quarter.

Detroit will try to turn the tables when they play the Nets in Brooklyn again on Tuesday, when a defeat would land them with the single-season record — and put them one away from matching the longest losing streak ever, the 28-game slide of the 76ers that spanned the 2014-15 and 2015-16 seasons.

Pistons owner Tom Gores acknowledged the frustration of fans on Friday in a Zoom call with reporters.

"We've got a lot of work to do, but I apologise for folks who are paying for their tickets and not getting that win," Gores said, adding "we do have a plan, but the pain is there."

Nevertheless, Gores branded frustrated fans' calls to "sell the team" that rang out in Detroit on Thursday "ridiculous."



Nic Claxton (33) hangs on the rim after dunking against Isaiah Stewart (28) and Cade Cunningham (2) and Jaden Ivey (23).— USA TODAY Sports

"I understand a fan being upset, but it's a ridiculous thought," he said.

As the Pistons remained mired in misery, Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 28 points to lead Milwaukee to a 130-111 victory over the Knicks in New York, stretching the Bucks' winning streak to seven games.

The Greek star added seven rebounds and seven assists while Bobby Portis came off the bench to deliver 23 points and a team-high 11 rebounds for the Bucks, who improved to 22-7.

"Right now our team is just rolling," Portis said. "Everybody is playing with swag and confidence,

playing together."

Jalen Brunson scored a game-high 36 points and Julius Randle added 26 for the Knicks, who will try to snap a nine-game losing streak against the Bucks in their Christmas holiday rematch on Monday, also at Madison Square Garden.

Khris Middleton added 20 points for the Bucks, who out-rebounded the Knicks 53-40.

The Bucks remained second in the Eastern Conference behind the Boston Celtics, who improved to an NBA-best 22-6 with a 145-108 victory over the Clippers in Los Angeles.

Jayson Tatum returned from a one-game injury absence to score 30 points and Jaylen Brown added 24 for Boston, who ended the Clippers' six-game home winning streak.

- Nuggets sting Hornets -

In Charlotte, the Nuggets used a dominant third quarter to take control and held on for a 102-95 victory over the Hornets.

Michael Porter Jr. scored 22 points, Nikola Jokic had 18 points, 10 rebounds and nine assists before fouling out late and Denver out-scored the Hornets 30-9 in the third period on the way to a fourth straight win.

Jamal Murray added 20 points and 12 rebounds for the Nuggets, who trailed by six at half-time but opened the third quarter on a 25-1 run, the Hornets unable to make a basket until the final minute of the period. Miles Bridges scored 22 points to lead the Hornets, P J Washington added 20 off the bench but the Hornets dropped their seventh straight.

The Houston Rockets, fuelled by a career-high 37 points and 11 rebounds from Alperen Sengun, edged the Pelicans 106-104 in New Orleans.

Zion Williamson scored 28

points and Brandon Ingram added 19 for the Pelicans, who led by as many as six in the fourth quarter but were hurt by a pair of late turnovers.

The Memphis Grizzlies improved to 3-0 since Ja Morant's return from a 25-game suspension, beating the Hawks 125-119 in Atlanta.

Desmond Bane scored 37 points and Morant added 30 with 11 assists for the Grizzlies, who withstood a 30-point, 13-assist double-double from Atlanta's Trae Young.

It was Young's seventh straight game with at least 30 points and 10 assists, tying Oscar Robertson for the longest such streak. — AFP

ORSC discusses joint cooperation with BWF and Badminton Asia

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 24

Dr Abdulrahim bin Musallam al Droushi, Chairman of Oman Racket Sports Committee (ORSC), discussed with Badminton World Federation (BWF) and Badminton Asia to enhance the joint cooperation with the committee in order to achieve the goals for developing the game in the Sultanate of Oman.

Al Droushi visited the headquarters of the continental and international federations in the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur to open new horizons of joint work in the near future. The Chairman of the Committee met with officials during this visit as he presented the cooperation between both the parties beside reviewing the initiatives and agreements that could be benefited from and activated to contribute the growth and prosperity of sports in the Sultanate of Oman.

The chief of ORSC said, "This visit was based on an invitation from the Badminton Asia to attend a number of meetings and discussions with key people in both federations. The Badminton Asia officials expressed their happiness on the various programmes and activities done by ORSC couple months ago



The meeting with officials of the Asian Badminton Federation



The International Badminton Federation meeting

after formation of the committee in last July. Despite the short period, the committee was able to reach into large segment of interested people in badminton and implementing several training programmes, events

and targeted festivals for the junior groups," he added

Al Droushi affirmed that the support from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, beside the cooperation of commercial partners provided

us a proper environment to create a qualitative movement in boosting and development of Oman's badminton. "The diligent work of the committee's board of directors contributed successfully towards developing human resources by providing series of workshops for teachers, coaches, and referees, hosting and organising tournaments to select and attract potential talents," he said

Dr Abdulrahim al Droushi pointed out that these initiatives opened wide horizons for us to develop and spread the game in the Sultanate of Oman. "We need to approach and work together with international bodies and this will result positively by forming a strong badminton domestically and regionally. There are various types of cooperation and support provided by BWF and Badminton Asia namely Air Badminton, badminton time, and other programmes beside to benefiting from the expertise available in the Asian and international Federations by transferring the Knowledge and experience to local personnel to achieve maximum technical benefit. ORSC will announce the new initiatives, events and programmes soon in our official social media accounts," he ended.

India women beat Australia by eight wickets in historic Test

MUMBAI: India's women's cricket team cruised to their first-ever win against Australia in Test cricket on Sunday, beating the visitors by eight wickets in a one-off match in Mumbai.

India dominated play in the four-day match at the Wankhede Stadium, smashing 406 runs in the first innings to take a 187-run lead.

On the final day, Australia knocked out 261, with India's bowlers earning five wickets for just 28 runs, including right arm offbreak Sneha Rana — later awarded player of the match — taking two wickets in two balls.

Set a target of 75, India's skipper Harmanpreet Kaur's team chased down the runs in dramatic play in just under 19 overs for two wickets.

For India's women, it was their first Test victory against Australia after 11 attempts since 1977.

It follows India's victory

against England last week, also in Mumbai.

Jay Shah, the Board of Control for Cricket in India secretary, celebrated the back-to-back Test wins.

"They conquered it with brilliance," Shah posted on social media, praising skipper Harmanpreet Kaur. "History made today!"

India on December 16 thrashed England by 347 runs in another one-off women's Test, their first ever win at home against the rivals.

India's victory margin against England was the largest by runs in women's Test cricket and also their first Test win against England at home.

"Everything went very well for us," Kaur told reporters on Sunday.

"Hopefully after these two wins we will get many more Test games in upcoming games."

— AFP



India women team celebrates after the winning



ARSENAL laid down their title credentials with an impressive performance in an intense 1-1 draw at Liverpool on Saturday and will top the Premier League table at Christmas.

Mikel Arteta's team, last season's runners-up who have won five of their last seven matches but not tasted victory in a league game at Anfield since 2012, have 40 points from 18 games. Liverpool are second on 39 points, ahead of Aston Villa on goal difference.

"An unbelievable game of football, one of the most intense I've witnessed in 20 years in this league," Arteta told the BBC. "For many moments we were on top, in the last 20 minutes we wanted it more, but a draw is a fair result."

FEWER GAME

In 10 of the last 14 seasons, the leaders on Christmas Day have gone on to win the title. Champions Manchester City are fifth, but have played one fewer game.

"Oh my god, how strong are they? The good news is we are good as well," Liverpool manager Juergen Klopp said of Arsenal. "In a game like this, going down early to a set piece is tough, especially with the speed of Arsenal. But the game we played, how we started second half we should have scored.

"We pass instead of shoot, four or five times we do that, it's a lesson. But generally the game is great." Klopp had urged fans to crank up the volume at Anfield after a couple of uncharacteristically quiet games at the Merseyside stadium.

Although the fans obliged, Arsenal took an early lead when Gabriel outwitted Cody Gakpo to head in a floated pass from captain Martin Odegaard in the fourth minute.

"It was really loud from the beginning, they did their bit to generate that," Arteta said. "I love that our players could handle this, it's not easy."

Liverpool forward Mohammed Salah scored a brilliant equaliser in the 29th minute when Trent Alexander-Arnold found him with a pinpoint long pass. Salah stepped easily around Oleksandr Zinchenko before unleashing a fierce left-foot shot into the net.

Salah's goal was his 151st in the Premier League to put him 10th on the all-time list and the hosts had great chances to net the winner.

Liverpool were screaming for a penalty after what appeared to be a blatant hand ball by Odegaard and Salah led a full-speed counter-attack to set up Trent Alexander-Arnold whose shot struck the crossbar.

Arsenal forward Bukayo Saka curled a shot wide in the dying minutes that deflected off Virgil van Dijk's back, but both teams had to settle for a point, a good result for Manchester City.

Liverpool lost Kostas Tsimikas to what Klopp said was a broken collarbone in the first half when Saka barrelled into the defender near the touchline, taking down Klopp as well. Tsimikas walked gingerly off the pitch with the aid of medical staff clutching his shoulder. —Reuters

Liverpool suffer
Tsimikas injury blow

LIVERPOOL: Liverpool suffered another injury blow as left back Kostas Tsimikas sustained a suspected broken collarbone in the 1-1 Premier League draw against Arsenal on Saturday.

The Greek defender fell awkwardly in the 35th minute after a strong challenge by Bukayo Saka and collided with Liverpool manager Juergen Klopp who was standing on the touchline.

While Klopp quickly got to his feet, Tsimikas was clearly in pain and walked off holding his arm gingerly to be replaced by Joe Gomez. Liverpool are already without first-choice left back Andy Robertson, also with a shoulder injury.

"It was massively overshadowed by Kostas Tsimikas collarbone issue, definitely broken, so he is out for a long time," said Klopp whose side stayed second in the table behind Arsenal.

"The other issues we will have to see. It is hard for us to swallow with the Robbo (Andy Robertson) situation."

Talking to Sky Sports, Klopp added: "Of course it effected me. I had no pain but thought maybe Kostas was going to be fine.

"I would happily give my collarbone for him to be fit again. It is not cool when something like that happens in front of you and you are involved in that, I was not sure what even happened or if I fell on him. It is not nice to see."

Liverpool were second best against Arsenal early on as they trailed to a header by Gabriel. But Mohammed Salah equalised before halftime with a stunning strike and while both sides could have collected all three points, a share of the spoils was just about right. — Reuters



Arsenal's Gabriel Jesus in action with Liverpool's Kostas Tsimikas. — REUTERS

ARSENAL GO TOE TO TOE
WITH LIVERPOOL AND

TOP
TABLE

Arsenal's Gabriel celebrates scoring their first goal. — REUTERS





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The contracts were signed by the ministry's Under-Secretary for Housing, Eng Hamad bin Ali al Nazwani, and representatives of the companies and institutions investing in the projects.

Housing ministry signs 26 usufruct pacts worth RO 6.5 million

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 24

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MoHUP) signed on Sunday, December 24, 2023, a total of 26 usufruct agreements worth over RO 6.5 million. The contracts cover a variety of sectors, including commercial, industrial, agricultural, and educational, and are spread across several governorates of the Sultanate of Oman.

The signing of these contracts is part of the ministry's efforts to promote sustainable economic development, create new job opportunities, and provide diverse investment opportunities for individuals and businesses. It also reflects the importance of institutional cooperation and integration in achieving these goals. The contracts are concentrated in the Al Buraimi Governorate, with 13 contracts in the agricultural and livestock sector covering a total area of 755,000 square metres. In the Muscat Governorate, three contracts were signed in the education sector and one in the commercial sector, covering a total area of 13,000 square metres.

In the Al Batinah South Governorate, three contracts were signed in the industrial and agricultural sectors, covering a total area of 18,000 square metres.

In the Al Batinah North Governorate, one contract was signed in the industrial sector, covering a total area of 200,000 square metres. In the Al Dhahirah Governorate, two contracts were signed in the commercial sector, covering a total area of 55,000 square metres.

The contracts were signed by Eng Hamad bin Ali al Nazwani, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning for Housing, and representatives of the companies and institutions investing in the projects.

They were also attended by the Under-Secretary for Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, and the Chairman of the Authority for the Development of Small and Medium Enterprises.

Oman’s FDI surges to RO 22.961 bn, led by oil and gas exploration

In terms of FDI by country, the UK emerged as the top investor, witnessing a substantial 26.5% increase in investment value reaching RO 11.521 billion until end of Q3.

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 24

Oman's economy witnessed a significant boost until the third quarter of 2023 as foreign direct investment (FDI) showed remarkable growth, underscoring the country's increasing attractiveness as an investment destination.

Until the end of Q3 2023, Oman's FDI amounted to RO 22.961 billion, with a financial inflow of RO 4.821 billion compared to the investment volume of RO 19.615 billion during the same period last year. The latest monthly bulletin provided by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) highlights a surge in FDI, primarily spearheaded by the flourishing oil and gas exploration sector.

A standout performer, the oil and gas exploration sector experienced a staggering 41.5% increase in value compared to the previous year. The sector attracted substantial investment, amounting to a total of RO 17.672 billion until end of Q3 2023. This growth serves as a strong testament to the robustness and potential of Oman's oil and gas industry.

Despite challenges faced by various sectors, the financial intermediation industry recorded a positive 2.1% increase in FDI reaching RO 1.530 billion until the end of Q3. This sector encompasses activities such as banking and investment services, and it showcased resilience in attracting



A standout performer, the oil and gas exploration sector experienced a staggering 41.5% increase in value.

THE OIL AND GAS EXPLORATION SECTOR ATTRACTED SUBSTANTIAL INVESTMENT, AMOUNTING TO A TOTAL OF RO 17.672 BILLION UNTIL END OF Q3 2023. THIS GROWTH SERVES AS A STRONG TESTAMENT TO THE ROBUSTNESS AND POTENTIAL OF OMAN'S OIL AND GAS INDUSTRY.

foreign investors.

On the other hand, the manufacturing sector experienced an 18.1% decline in FDI during the third quarter of 2023. The investment in the sector amounts to RO 1.406 billion until end of Q3 2023.

Global economic uncertainties and disruptions in supply chains played a significant role in this decline.

The real estate sector witnessed a marginal dip of 0.5% in FDI compared to the previous year. This sector, with an investment volume of RO 1.035 billion until end of Q3 and specifically focusing on renting and business activities, exhibited resilience despite challenges in the global real estate market.

In terms of FDI by country, the United Kingdom emerged as the top investor, witnessing a substantial 26.5% increase in investment value reaching RO 11.521 billion until end of Q3.

The United States of America followed closely behind, experiencing a remarkable 54.2% surge in investment amounting to RO 3.881 billion until end of Q3 2023.

These leading global economies' interest in investing in Oman reflects the country's favourable business climate and potential for attractive returns on investment.

Furthermore, Oman's economic

ties with neighbouring countries were further deepened during Q3 2023. The United Arab Emirates demonstrated a 14.3% increase in investment with RO 1.275 billion, fostering economic cooperation between the two nations. Investments from Kuwait reaches RO 922.3 million. Bahrain recorded an astounding 93.2% growth in investment amounting to RO 732.6 million, showcasing the strengthening economic ties within the Gulf region.

Meanwhile, the value of investments from other countries: From China amounted to RO 594.5 million, from Qatar RO 442.3 million, from the Netherlands RO 374.7 million, from Switzerland RO 288.3 million and from India RO 277.8 million. The value of direct foreign investments from other countries reached RO 2.650 billion.

TURN TO PAGE 15

Knights Bay kicks off exploratory drilling in Oman’s Mineral Block 21

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 24

Exploratory drilling, targeting potentially prodigious nickel and cobalt ores in Mineral Block 21 in the Wilayat of Ibra, has commenced, according to the block's concessionaire.

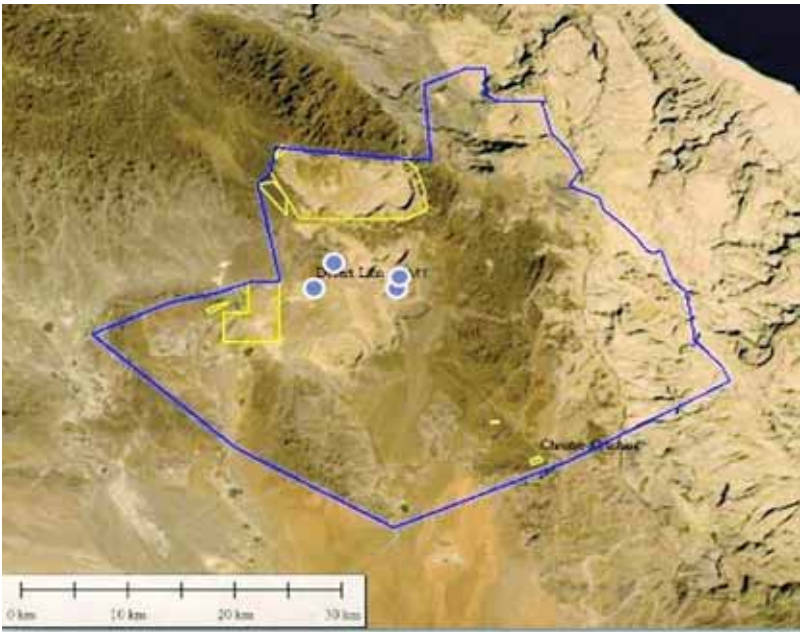
Knights Bay, a UK-based strategic mineral mining firm, said in a post on Saturday that the start of exploratory drilling in its sprawling concession in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate follows the completion of a geotechnical survey of the site.

Knights Bay's Investor Relations Director, Max Beck, noted in the post that the start of

exploratory drilling also comes on the heels of the relocation of the company's corporate office from the UK to the Sultanate of Oman.

Under an agreement signed with Oman's Ministry of Energy and Minerals in March this year, Knights Bay received concession rights to a massive 1,4000 square kilometre block, described as hosting "a new potentially world-class nickel laterite deposit with cobalt, chrome, and iron-ore credits".

"Initial surveying of 1,444 km2 within Mineral Block 21 has allowed (Knights Bay) to focus on approximately 280 km2 of well-developed nickel and



Knights Bay's concession in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate.

cobalt laterites beneath a cover of limestone," said Beck in the post.

"Knights Bay's plan is to drill 27 holes in two tranches and will represent the first phase of a drill programme that is in 4 phases to drill sufficient resources and reserves to allow Knights Bay to capitalise new treatment plants to recover Nickel, Cobalt, Iron and Chromium."

Further, in keeping with the company's commitment to reducing the carbon footprint of its mining operations in the Block, Knights Bay is pursuing an alternative method for treating the laterites excavated from the site.

This alternative method,

said Beck, will enable the "green low carbon primary extraction of nickel and cobalt in a pyrometallurgical (dry, heat based) method, and allows by-product iron and chromium", noting that the methodology "offers an improvement in the risk profile of precedent equipment and operations, capital and operating cost estimated".

Knights Bay's long-term production objective target is 111,000 tonnes per year of contained nickel in sulphates and 5,100 tonnes per year contained cobalt in sulphates at full production, per an earlier statement made by the company.



Yahya bin Said al Jabri accepted a special award from Shatha al Maskiry.

Renaissance Services achieves top rating in independent assessment

MUSCAT: In line with its commitment to excellence, Renaissance Services received the highest possible rating of “Generally Conforms” for its internal audit function during an independent assessment. The rating was given following an external quality assessment (EQA) conducted by an independent professional assessor.

It implies that the relevant charter, structure, policies and procedures of the internal audit department, as well as the processes by which they are applied, comply with the requirements of International Professional Practices Framework (IPPF) from the Institute of Internal Auditors (IIA) and the regulations of the Capital Market Authority of Oman (CMA).

The EQA was held as part of efforts to evaluate the conformance of Renaissance’s internal audit activities to the mandatory guidance of the IPPF, assess the effectiveness in carrying out its mission as outlined in the charter, identify opportunities to enhance its management and work processes.

Yahya bin Said al Jabri, Chairman of the Audit and Internal Controls Committee of the Board of Directors, Renaissance Services accepted

a special award from Shatha al Maskiry, Country Managing Director, Protiviti Oman on this occasion.

He said, “This remarkable achievement marks the company’s unwavering dedication to excellence and adherence to global best practices in internal auditing.

As the company continuously upholds these high standards, stakeholders can be assured of a professional and robust internal audit function that contributes significantly to our ongoing success.

The Board strongly believes that good corporate governance practices are pivotal to maximising long-term value while safeguarding the interests of all stakeholders.”

Stephen R Thomas, Chief Executive Officer, Renaissance Services, added, “The Internal Audit department ensures that our corporate governance, risk management, internal controls, and other vital functions meet the highest standards.

The independent expert’s top rating has enhanced credibility and showcases the effectiveness of Renaissance’s governance processes and controls. This rating sets the stage for the company’s continued success as it serves its prestigious clients in Oman and beyond.”

Infitech celebrates graduation of 42 skilled professionals

MUSCAT: In a ground-breaking initiative, the Infitech Training Institute, a subsidiary of Abraj Energy Services, Oman’s leading provider of oil and gas services, marked a momentous occasion with the graduation of a cohort of aspiring professionals from its one-year vocational programme in electricity and mechanics within the oil and gas sector.

This innovative programme, which includes hands-on employment opportunities, was generously funded by the Ministry of Labour and successfully equipped 42 recent graduates, holding bachelor’s and diploma degrees, with the qualifications necessary to excel in Oman’s thriving oil and gas industry.

The graduation ceremony was hosted at the Avani Muscat Hotel on Sunday, December 24, 2023, under the patronage of Sayyid Salim bin Musallam al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour for Human Resources Development.

Several executive members of strategic partners and stakeholders attended the event.

Speaking at the event, Sayyid Salim bin Musallam al Busaidy expressed his pleasure and congratulations, acknowledging the graduates’ readiness to



Graduates and guests pose for a photo after the graduation ceremony.

contribute effectively to the workforce and commending the Infitech Training Institute for their dedicated efforts in preparing job seekers for the labour market.

Furthermore, Al Busaidy emphasised that such professional training programmes are pivotal in empowering the nation’s workforce, creating quality employment opportunities, and recognising the exceptional competence of Omani professionals across various sectors, particularly within the oil and gas sector.

Engineer Saif al Hamhami, CEO of Abraj Energy Services,

shared his enthusiasm: “Today, we celebrate the graduation of this exceptional group from Oman’s pioneering vocational training programme.

Our commitment, embodied by the Infitech Training Institute, is to contribute to the development of highly qualified national professionals, aligned with the Ministry of Labour’s tenth five-year plan for 2021-2025 and in full alignment with Oman Vision 2040’s objectives for the qualification and training of Omani talents.”

Al Hamhami also highlighted the wealth of tools and activities

provided by the programme, ensuring that the graduates are well-prepared for their professional roles and capable of honing their skills to meet the demands of the oil and gas sector.

Notably, this vocational training programme, meticulously implemented by the institute, is the first in Oman.

Trainees dedicated a total of 1,512 training hours to develop their skills.

The programme introduced numerous techniques and strategies to enhance trainees’ performance, making them well-prepared to join the workforce.

Maisarah Islamic Banking Services receives leadership in Islamic banking award

MUSCAT: Maisarah Islamic Banking Services received “Leadership in Islamic Banking for Priority Segment Award” at the Alam Al Iktisaad Islamic Banking & Finance Awards 2023.

This award was presented

to the best performers in the Islamic banking, finance and fintech sectors in Oman.

Mohammed Al Mulla al Balushi, Head of Priority Banking & Wealth Management/ Maisarah, received the award.



National Finance sponsors Bait Al Zubair’s ‘Narrative Days’

MUSCAT: Fostering the richness of Omani culture and continuing its engagement across sectors, National Finance — the leading finance company in the Sultanate of Oman — played a pivotal role in driving cultural and literary development through its sponsorship of Bait Al Zubair’s ‘Narrative Days’.

The event highlighted the vital role Omani culture plays in shaping and inspiring the country’s ambitious youth. Held on December 19-20, the event — in its first edition — witnessed the participation of Omani authors and literati, alongside the presence of prominent international writers.

They partook in workshops and enriching sessions, and also engaged in meaningful discussions with visitors emphasising the social role of culture.

National Finance’s participation in ‘Narrative Days’ reaffirms the company’s



The event witnessed the participation of Omani authors and literati.

commitment to fostering the importance of literature and the Arabic language as significant drivers for the progress of societies and the development of cultural and creative expression.

This commitment aligns with the social development and cultural progress goals outlined in Oman Vision 2040.

Through its participation in the event, the company highlighted the crucial role of

culture, literature, and language as essential components of the Omani national identity.

Visitors also witnessed the celebration of World Arabic Language Day, which is annually marked on December 18.

The event highlighted the rich linguistic and literary heritage of the Arab world, emphasising the importance of language as a source of inspiration and encouragement for the youth to

excel in various fields.

Several engaging activities were conducted to mark the occasion, including Arabic calligraphy, novel-writing workshops, literary dialogues, and book signings featuring numerous cultural and literary works.

Commenting on the company’s support for the event, Tariq bin Sulaiman al Farsi, CEO of National Finance, stated, “At National Finance, we believe that nurturing and enhancing national identity through literature and culture have an exceptional impact on fostering creativity, encouraging youth, and contributing to the enrichment of society’s intellectual and cultural progress.

By supporting the Bait Al Zubair ‘Narrative Days’ event, it was our aim to promote the dissemination of knowledge and encourage literary authenticity and innovation for a flourishing future, characterised by wise and enlightened generations.”

Qatar Airways offers 12% discount on tickets for Bank Muscat customers

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, has tied up with multiple award-winning airline, Qatar Airways, to launch an exclusive discount for customers who use their Bank Muscat Credit, Debit or Prepaid Cards to pay for tickets to select destinations of their choice across Qatar Airways expanding network.

Qatar Airways offers up to 12% discount on economy and business tickets booked by Bank Muscat customers till May 31, 2024, for travels up until November 7, 2024.

The discounts are available for a large number of leisure destinations in the America, Europe, Africa, Middle East, South East Asia, Australia and North Asia and will greatly benefit those who are planning to fly during the holiday period.

Abdullah bin Tamman al Maashani, General Manager — Products, Bank Muscat, said: “Bank Muscat continues to be



proactive and listen to the needs of its customers so as to provide products and services which best address their needs.

We are pleased to offer exciting discounts in partnership with Qatar Airways to provide the best value to our customers in line with our customer-centric vision. We encourage our valued customers to take full advantage of the various innovative services and features available to them including these excellent tickets to destinations all around the world.

I would also like to thank all our customers for their continuous trust and confidence in the bank’s products and services.”



Madayn launches two projects at Al Mazunah Free Zone

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 24

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn) celebrated on Sunday the inauguration of the Facility Building project and Phase 1 (Package 2), and Phases 2 and 3 at Al Mazunah Free Zone.

These milestones reflect Madayn's ongoing commitment to enhancing infrastructure and positioning Al Mazunah Free Zone as a vital economic centre in alignment with Oman Vision 2040. The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Eng Ahmed bin Hassan al Dheeb, Deputy Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), in the presence a number of local dignitaries.

Speaking at the event, Said Zabnoot, Director of Investor Services at Al Mazunah Free Zone, said that Madayn has completed the implementation of Al Mazunah Free Zone development project (Phase 1 "Package 2", and Phases 2 and 3). The project covers a total area of 1.5 million sqm, with a total cost reaching RO 6 million.



The ceremony was held under the auspices of Eng Ahmed bin Hassan al Dheeb, Deputy Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), in the presence a number of local dignitaries.

"The developed area of the free zone now spans 3 million sqm out of a total area exceeding 15 million sqm. The developed lands are ready for investment and equipped with basic services," Zabnoot pointed out.

The project includes the

development of a 15.5-km road network, along with a 20.1-km sewage drainage system equipped with inspection rooms and interconnected to a 600-cubic-metre collection tank. Additionally, the project comprises the establishment of water supply

networks and fire extinguishing systems spanning 13.6 km, and the construction of water tanks—1,200 cubic meters (underground) and 700 cubic metres (above-ground).

The project also incorporates the installation of street lighting with electrical connections for 402

columns, and the construction of a building dedicated to truck driver rest facilities. In efforts to elevate logistical services, Madayn has successfully acquired a global code (OMAMZ), designating Al Mazunah Dry Port as a final destination for both incoming and outgoing goods in the free zone.

Demonstrating a commitment to upholding the security and safety of the facilities in the free zone, a security system has been implemented, equipped with the latest surveillance devices. Madayn has also implemented a system to monitor and oversee truck movements, exercising control over entry and exit operations.

Zabnoot informed that Al Mazunah Free Zone has witnessed a vibrant year of commercial activities with a total of 18,624 commercial transactions been successfully completed in 2023. Over the past five years, Al Mazunah Free Zone has attracted and localised 220 diverse projects spanning industrial, commercial, and logistics sectors.

Notably, the free zone has entered into an agreement for the management of customs

services within the customs area of the free zone (land port), and another agreement for service management and operation with Nafith Company.

Planning for the future development of the free zone, Madayn is set to establish an integrated residential city, develop Phase 4, and attract companies specialising in a variety of services such as currency exchange, banks, and shipping. Concurrently, efforts are underway to organise trade exhibitions with the objective of boosting commercial activities.

Eng Ahmed al Balushi, Project Engineer at Shumookh Investment and Services – Madayn's investment arm, stated that the Facility Building at Al Mazunah Free Zone aims at providing a variety of services to investors, business owners, operating companies and visitors to the free zone.

Covering 11,000 sqm at a cost of approximately RO 3.5 million, this four-storey building features spaces for management offices, financial services and banks, commercial shops, cafes, restaurants, business offices, and multipurpose halls, in addition to 300 parking spaces.

OMAN'S FDI SURGES TO RO 22.961 BN, LED BY OIL AND GAS EXPLORATION

FROM PAGE 13

The surge in FDI during Q3 2023 positions Oman as a promising investment destination, despite the challenges faced by certain sectors.

The growth and stability exhibited in the oil and gas exploration sector, along with the resilience of the financial intermediation industry, reiterate the country's potential for sustained economic growth and diversification.

Oman's supportive policies, investor-friendly environment, and strategic location continue to attract foreign investors, fostering sustainable development and prosperity for the nation.

MUSCAT: Asyad Group, Oman's global integrated logistics provider, marked a successful conclusion to its participation in the 3rd Green Hydrogen Summit Oman (GHSO) 2023.

The summit served as a critical juncture for the Group to accentuate its dedication to propelling Oman into the forefront as a premier hydrogen hub within the Gulf region.

Central to the summit was a high-level executive panel discussion, focusing on Oman's forward-thinking Green Hydrogen mission. Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Abri, CEO of Asyad Ports, took the stage to impart invaluable insights on Oman's commitment to nurturing and championing hydrogen-centric projects, and significantly

bolstering Oman's stature in the international energy domain.

"Oman's ports, as vital gateways of innovation and progress, play a pivotal role in the nation's green hydrogen journey.

They are not just points of transit but hubs of sustainable energy, propelling Oman forward as a leader in the green hydrogen revolution," stated Dr Al Abri.

Emile Hoogsteden, the Chief Eexecutive Officer of SOHAR Port, delivered an insightful presentation, providing a comprehensive overview of the global hydrogen sector.

Emile highlighted SOHAR's roadmap to carbon neutrality and energy transition featuring SOHAR Tenant decarbonisation plans, the renewable energy integration, and the usage

Asyad Group charts sustainable future for Oman's mobility sector



Dr Ahmed al Abri, CEO - Asyad Ports, joins a panel discussion during the recent Green Hydrogen Summit Oman (GHSO).

of clean hydrogen for green manufacturing of steel, ammonia, methanol, and aluminium.

Demonstrating proactive leadership, Asyad Group, as the main sponsor of GHSO, was at the

forefront of several key initiatives.

These included orchestrating an influential exhibition booth and facilitating the BMW Roadshow from Dubai to Muscat, symbolising the Group's

dynamic role in the summit. In its quest to solidify its commitment, Asyad Group entered into key Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs).

The collaboration with BP delves into various co-operative ventures, encompassing the utilisation of port yards and establishing Asyad as a vital hydrogen supplier.

Another groundbreaking agreement with Hydrom is set to revolutionise logistics readiness within the green hydrogen sector.

The alliance with Hydrom is anticipated to amplify global freight operations, cultivate all-encompassing logistics solutions, and delineate protocols for transporting large-scale equipment pertinent to the green hydrogen industry.

Tender Board sets regulations for enhanced national content

MUSCAT: The Secretariat - General of the Tender Board issued a regulation regulating local content to enhance the In-Country Value (ICV) of the national economy, through using the local content elements that include national products of goods and services produced within the Sultanate of Oman that have a national product identity from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

The elements of local content that the regulation stresses on the importance of using them which also include the national workforce, local fixed assets, products and services of the small and medium enterprises.

Under this regulation, the Directorate General of Local Content at the Secretariat-General of the Tender Board is responsible for determining local



Eng Bader bin Salim bin Marhoon al Maamari
Secretary-General of the Tender Board.

content requirements in project contracts whose value exceeds RO 3 million, where it may also review the local content requirements, prepared by the concerned authorities for contracts whose value ranges between RO 500,000 to RO 3 million, in accordance to the contract type.

Eng Bader bin Salim bin

Marhoon al Maamari, Secretary-General of the Tender Board, clarified that the regulation regulating local content obligates bidders to submit a plan on local content for all stages of the project in their bid and include it in the subcontracts - if any, while the Secretariat-General of Tender Board may amend it with the consent of the concerned party and the company, which has been awarded the tender of implementing the concerned project.

The regulation seeks to enhance the processes of local supply of national products and their use in implementing project contracts through analysing the value and supplying chains, support the local products directly or indirectly, contribute to developing small and medium enterprises, improve the national cadres, and to create job opportunities.

The Secretary-General of the Tender Board pointed out the regulation stipulates that the Secretary-General of the Tender Board shall issue a list of national products required to be used in implementing project contracts and to update it in accordance with the controls, procedures and requirements it specifies, where the concerned authorities must adhere to them when contracting.

The Secretary-General of the Tender Board noted that in accordance to the regulation, the contracting company must immediately notify the Directorate General of Local Content about the difficulties it faces in implementing the local content plan, and to obtain its approval for the amendment measures to implement the local content plan stipulated in the original contract whose value exceeds RO 3 million.

Electricity companies discuss strategies for 2024

BUSINESS REPORTER MUSCAT, DEC 24

In a bid to bolster the power sector's performance to align with national priorities, the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR) hosted on Sunday, December 24, 2023, a comprehensive meeting with CEOs of Oman's electricity companies. The agenda focused on reviewing past achievements, dissecting 2024 strategies, and identifying avenues for enhanced service delivery and system resilience.

The meeting, chaired by APSR Chairman Dr Mansoor bin Talib al Hina'i, saw engaging discussions with representatives from Oman Electricity Transmission Company, Rural Areas Electricity Company (Tanweer), and Nama Electricity Distribution Company.

A key highlight was the review of 2023 targets within Oman Vision 2040. The



A highlight was the review of 2023 targets within Oman Vision 2040.

companies reported exceeding expectations in localisation efforts, achieving a remarkable 98 per cent. Additionally, 100,000 smart meters were installed, contributing to efficient grid management.

Furthermore, electrical losses were reduced to 10 per cent, and average connection times for new subscribers were trimmed down to a commendable 3 days. Moving forward, the meeting delved into strategic plans for 2024.

Emphasis was placed on projects that drive subscriber satisfaction, optimise service provision, and strengthen the nation's electricity infrastructure.

Green investors will learn the art of stockpicking

Renewable energy companies had a tough old 2023. After years of robust valuations and cheaper power costs, green stars like Danish offshore wind developer Orsted crashed to earth.

Despite the threat posed by Donald Trump's possible re-election as US president, discerning investors should experience a rebound.

On the face of it, clean energy is a sector to swerve. Power prices' failure to keep pace with soaring input costs meant shares in Orsted and wind turbine maker Siemens Energy fell over 50% between June and the end of November, prompting billions of dollars of writedowns and state support.

As of end-November the MAC Global Index of solar



GEORGE HAY

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companies had fallen almost 40% in 2023 and the iShares Clean Energy ETF had slumped nearly 30%, even as benchmark European and US indexes both rose.

Quarterly inflows into global sustainable funds fell from over \$180 billion globally in early 2021 to \$14 billion in the third quarter of 2023, with funds in the US recording actual outflows.

In 2024, the scope for Trump to gut \$369 billion of clean energy support from the US Inflation Reduction Act adds another risk. Yet the long-term trajectory of green capital demand is up.

The International Energy Agency thinks clean energy investment will exceed \$1.7 trillion in 2023, against fossil fuels' \$1 trillion. Solar and wind capacity needs to rise threefold by 2030 to cap global warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius above

pre-industrial levels. Equipment cost inflation may have peaked, Bernstein analysts reckon, and the UK government recently joined Portugal and India in hiking renewable subsidies to make project economics stack up.

Moreover, the single biggest driver of wind and solar valuations is that their long duration creates a strong inverse correlation with interest rates.

Anyone who thinks borrowing costs have peaked should therefore be buying green stocks. Capital Economics reckons that if 10-year US Treasury yields fall to the analyst's 3.75% forecast level by the end of 2024, stocks in renewable players might outperform wider energy equities by 50% in the same period.

What's clear is that investors need to do more than just check their target is green. Breakneck manufacturing of



cut-price Chinese solar panels risks exacerbating a supply glut, hurting Western manufacturers like Switzerland's Meyer Burger Technology, who are vulnerable to falling prices and lack protective tariffs. Solar developers, on the other hand, might gain if the price of kit falls.

Offshore wind's high capital costs will continue to make it a dicier bet than onshore solar and wind.

The regulated network arms of diversified utilities like Spain's Iberdrola, Italy's Enel and Britain's SSE give them a hedge against unpleasant surprises. — Reuters

The myth of the unprecedented

I have been in the forecasting business for more than 50 years. Over that period, I have heard the constant refrain that the world is in the midst of “unprecedented changes.”

This popular trope frequently resulted in equally hyperbolic corollaries: breathless claims that we have never faced greater risks or such an uncertain future, that forecasting has never been harder. Repeat it enough, and it starts to become believable.

Confession: my crystal ball has been cracked so many times by purportedly unprecedented developments that I have lost count. The 1970s was a decade of extraordinary turmoil: the oil shock of 1973 was swiftly followed by the “Great Inflation” and a period of stagflation, setting the stage for the first seemingly unprecedented phase of the post-World War II era.

The subsequent disinflation of the 1980s allowed the horror movie of the 1970s to run in reverse well into the 1990s, which came to an end with the Asian financial crisis, ushering in what was initially billed as the first crisis of globalisation.

But today, we look back on these episodes as mere tremors preceding the seismic shocks to come.



STEPHEN S. ROACH

The author, a faculty member at Yale University and former chairman of Morgan Stanley Asia, is the author of “Unbalanced: The Codependency of America and China” (Yale University Press, 2014) and “Accidental Conflict: America, China, and the Clash of False Narratives” (Yale University Press, 2022).



A man is reflected on a board showing stock prices outside a brokerage in Tokyo. – Reuters

Europe and the Middle East, and the unprecedented has become the new norm. Books on the “permacrisis” and the “polycrisis” now make the bestseller list.

The cynic in me says, “Been there, done that.” But just because I have plied my trade as a forecaster during a half-century of turmoil doesn't mean I have a unique understanding of what comes next.

Bearing in mind Mark Twain's observation that history often rhymes, I offer three key lessons from my experience in attempting to make sense of what may lurk in the uncertain future:

First, learn to expect the unexpected. The human species is inherently autoregressive, always looking to the recent past as the best predictor of the future. Policymakers are especially prone to this myopic approach — repairing flaws in systems that led to the last crisis but never considering what could spark the next one.

For example, in the late 1990s, Asian economies built up large reservoirs of foreign-exchange reserves — a move that would have helped prevent the next Asian financial crisis but did nothing to stop the one that actually occurred, which arose from the bursting of an equity bubble.

Second, there is an unmistakable continuum from one so-called unprecedented era to another. One crisis tends to beget the next. Led by the great Paul Volcker, the US Federal Reserve took tough measures to arrest the Great Inflation (as did other central banks).

But despite winning the war, policymakers squandered the peace — taking interest rates far too low to preserve financial stability.

Similarly, as global capital markets seized up during the Asian financial crisis, central banks discovered the miracle drug of near-zero policy interest rates.

That, in turn, set the stage for the profusion of asset bubbles to come — not just equities but also bonds and credit — that culminated in the global financial crisis a decade later.

Third, crises and the

“extraordinary” developments they spawn are now the rule, not the exception. In recent decades, there has been an average of one catastrophe every three or four years.

The Latin American debt crisis in 1982 was followed by the 1987 stock-market crash and the 1986-95 savings and loan crisis in the US; implosions in Japan (1990), Mexico (1995), and Asia (1997); the near-collapse of the hedge fund Long-Term Capital Management (1998); the collapse of the dot-com bubble (2000); Enron's accounting scandal (2001); the sub-prime mortgage disaster (2007); the euro zone's sovereign-debt crisis (2010), the “taper tantrum” spurred by fear of policy normalisation by the Fed (2013); a Chinese stock-market crash (2015), a US-China trade war (2018), Covid-19 (2020), and deglobalisation (2023).

It is against this background that forecasters face the seemingly impossible task of predicting the future.

Of course, public policymakers face an equally

profound challenge: While another crisis is coming, probably sooner rather than later, aligning forward-looking policy with the pitfalls of a highly uncertain future is the functional equivalent of balancing a heavy weight on the head of a pin.

But that hardly justifies self-serving excuses for policy mistakes, or portraying asset-market mispricing and economic dislocations as unavoidable accidents arising from so-called unprecedented circumstances.

I have run out of patience with policymakers, corporate decision-makers, and investors who collectively throw up their hands and say, “Don't blame me.”

This is largely a cop-out. Shocks are here to stay, and our task is not to predict the next one — although someone always does — but to sharpen our focus on resilience. Staying the course of politically mandated policies while minimising the inevitable dislocations is easier said than done. But that is no excuse to fall for the myth of being victimised by the unprecedented.

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M.COM graduate with Oman driving licence, residing in Muscat with 1 year and 4 months work experience as Media Finance Executive in India, seeking for Accounts Assistant or other related eligible jobs. Contact: 71755901, E-mail: krishnanmahesh02@gmail.com

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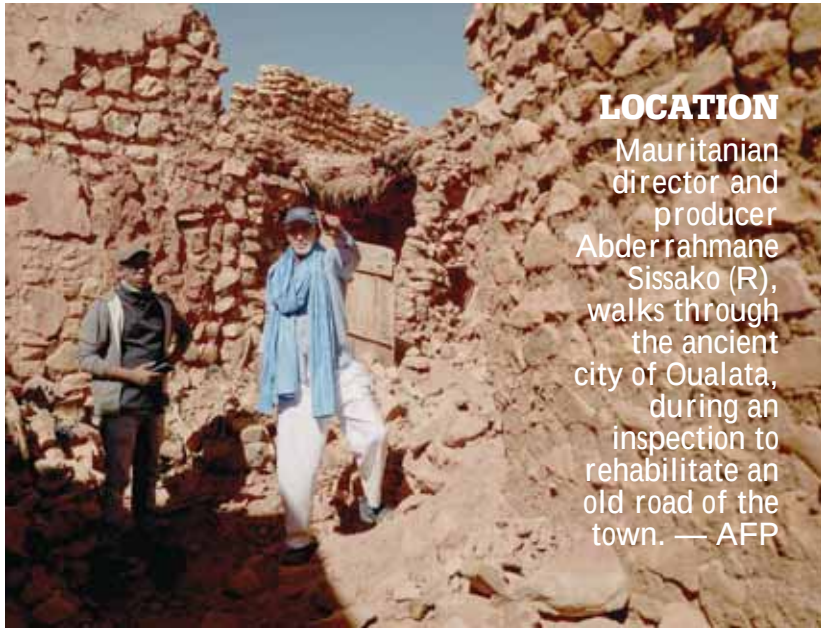
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ENTERTAINMENT

Member of a vintage car group Hiroyuki Wada, dressed as Santa Claus, prepares presents for the public on a street in Tokyo's Marunouchi area. — AFP



LOCATION

Mauritanian director and producer Abder rahmane Sissako (R), walks through the ancient city of Oualata, during an inspection to rehabilitate an old road of the town. — AFP



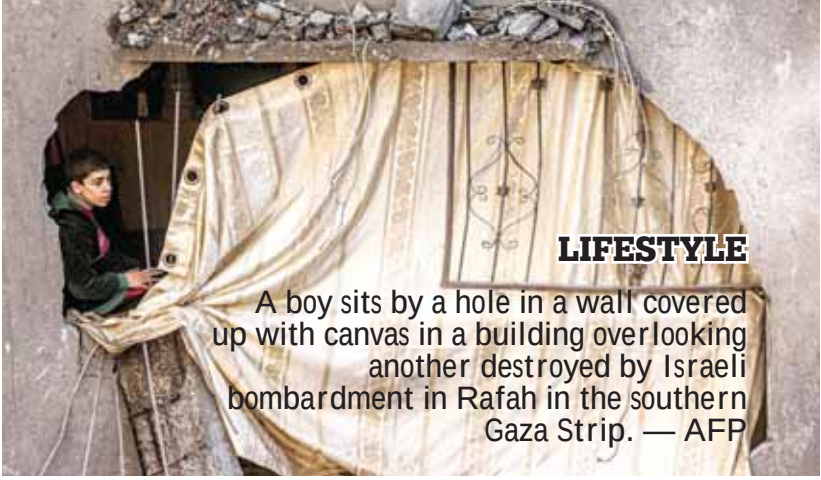
FASHION

Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan attends the Indian film producer, distributor Anand Pandit 60th Birthday celebration party in Mumbai. — AFP



MUSIC

A chorister from the Ukrainian Radio Choir plays a bandura, a traditional Ukrainian instrument, during a break in rehearsal at the Kyiv Radio House, in Kyiv. — AFP



LIFESTYLE

A boy sits by a hole in a wall covered up with canvas in a building overlooking another destroyed by Israeli bombardment in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. — AFP

art & life

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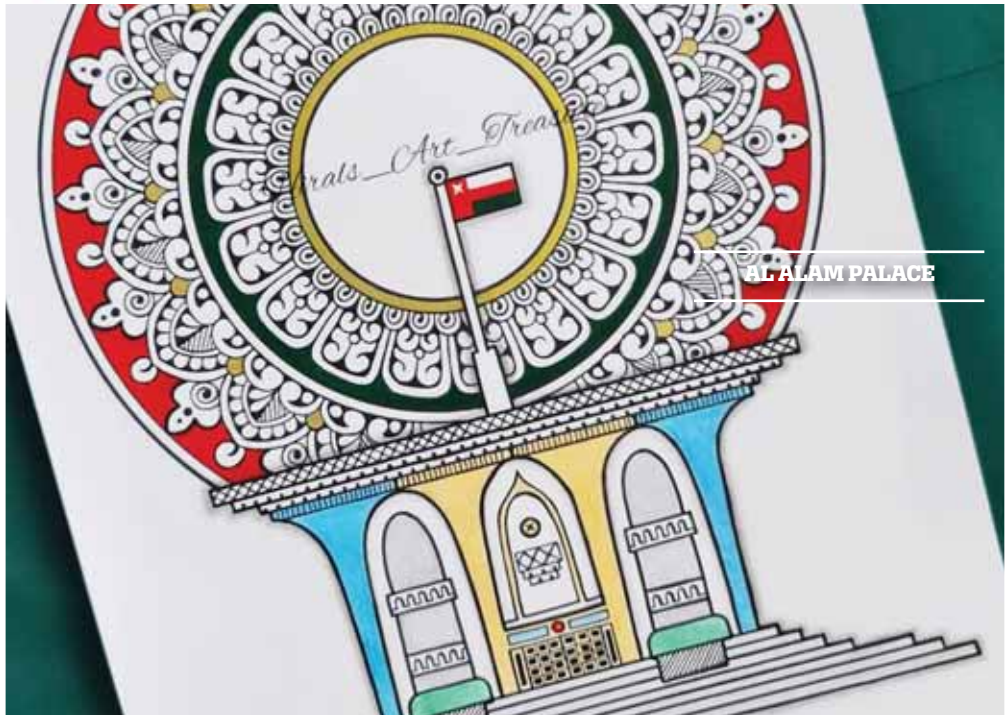


Dukan Tatoon, where tradition meets modernity

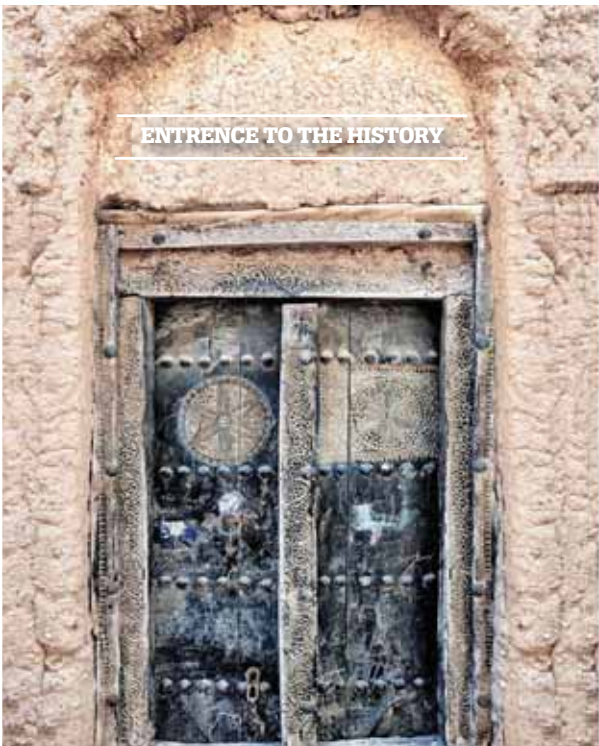
An ancient well concealed beneath a transparent glass floor, an awe-inspiring feature that captivates every visitor...P20

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AROUND THE WORLD



Fantasy fair featuring Dali, Basquiat returns to life in California

MESMERISING CAROUSELS and Ferris wheels designed by Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kenny Scharf that spin to music by Miles Davis or Philip Glass — this is “Luna Luna: Forgotten Fantasy.”

With works designed by prominent 20th-century artists, the resurrected show bills itself as the world's first art amusement park, a one-of-a-kind psychedelic fair.

Luna Luna recently opened its doors in Los Angeles. Its features include a mirrored fun house signed by Salvador Dali, a pavilion from Roy Lichtenstein, an enchanted forest by David Hockney, and a marriage chapel designed by Andre Heller, the Austrian multimedia artist who brought the “Forgotten Fantasy” to life nearly four decades ago.

Heller, an aficionado of traveling fairs and circuses, and with far-flung interests in film, music, theater, sculpture and more, recruited some of the most established names from the last century's art scene as well as some talented newcomers to create Luna Luna: an amusement park designed to make art

accessible to ordinary people.

The fair debuted in Hamburg, Germany in 1987, but after drawing thousands of visitors, money ran out, bureaucratic obstacles mounted, and plans for a world tour had to be shelved. Luna Luna ended up being packed away in 44 shipping containers in Texas for the next 35 years.

That's when Drake got involved. The superstar rapper and singer heard about Luna Luna, said he was “blown away” by the concept, and had his music company, DreamCrew, buy and restore the fair's attractions.

Drake and other investors put \$100 million into the project, a Luna Luna executive told the *New York Times*.

Breathtakingly unique pieces emerged from the dusty containers — like Haring's carousel, in which distinctive figures seem to come to life like colourful dancers, or Basquiat's Ferris wheel, which has a strong social-protest component.

“Just seeing something like this artwork in a carnival form, I've just never seen this before. It definitely was beyond our expectations,” said visitor Douglas Hickman, 38, who spent several minutes staring with fascination at the Basquiat Ferris wheel.

“Being an artist myself, I feel like it's just a one-of-a-kind experience.”

- 'A TIME CAPSULE' -

Unlike the fair's original opening in Germany, which took place in an open-air park, this one is set in an enormous warehouse. Dark backgrounds help create a psychedelic or museum-like effect.

Also unlike the German experience, the public will not be able to ride on Luna Luna's attractions, as was originally intended; they are now viewed as relics to be preserved.

Still, thanks to the spinning motion of the rides, an intoxicating play of colourful lights and the meticulous musical curation, visitors feel immersed in a carnival from another time.

“We would love to go on” one of the rides, said Adam Umber, who was with his four-year-old son Elias. “But I think it's fabulous. It's a time capsule and you get to experience something that's as

old as '87, but has not been in view” since then.

While rides like the carousel and the Ferris wheel are only for viewing, visitors can immerse themselves in the magic of other attractions — like the Dali dome, Hockney's enchanted forest or the Heller wedding chapel.

Yoori Kim, who came to the Los Angeles fair to celebrate her 35th birthday, took those words to heart and decided to marry... herself.

“I just recently got clean,” she said. “So I figured this is a good moment to celebrate my sober life and... the rest of the time I have on this world.”

“I feel a little overwhelmed because it's so stimulating,” she said.

“The great artists in the 20th century that I never got to meet, I feel like they're living through their artwork right now.

“It's such a good feeling to be in the middle of all that. We need more of this.”

“Luna Luna: Forgotten Fantasy” will be in Los Angeles until the spring of 2024. — **AFP**

MUSIC



Founding member of country music's Dixie Chicks killed in car crash

A FOUNDING MEMBER of US country group the Dixie Chicks has been killed in a car crash in Texas, with her former band-mates on Saturday mourning the loss of “a bright light.”

Laura Lynch, 65, died in a head-on collision on Friday on an undivided highway some 70 miles (115 kilometres) east of El Paso, the Texas Department of Public Safety said.

She was not wearing a seat belt and was pronounced dead at the scene, authorities said.

Lynch, Robin Lynn Macy and sisters Martie and Emily Erwin were the original members of the Dixie Chicks when the group formed in 1989, entertainment website TMZ said.

Lynch left the group — now called The Chicks — in 1995 and was replaced by Natalie Maines.

With Maines as lead singer, backed by the Erwin sisters, the trio catapulted to fame in the late 1990s, becoming one of the best-selling female groups in history with their foot-stomping fusion of bluegrass, rock and country that shook the oft-staid Nashville establishment.

But it was also Maines who told a London concert crowd in 2003 on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq that she was “ashamed” then-president George W Bush hailed from Texas — and that the band did “not want this war, this violence.”

The comment went viral and the Chicks were blacklisted by the music industry.

Country stations quickly ditched their music — which included hits like “Wide Open Spaces,” “Goodbye Earl” and a popular cover of Fleetwood Mac's “Landslide.”

In a post on Instagram, current members of The Chicks said they were “shocked and saddened” by Lynch's death.

“Laura was a bright light... her infectious energy and humour gave a spark to the early days of our band,” it said.

“Her undeniable talents helped propel us beyond busking on street corners to stages all across Texas and the mid-West.” — **AFP**

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MONDAY | DECEMBER 25 | 2023

Dukan Tatoon, where tradition meets modernity

BY SIHAM ALSAIDI

In the heart of Nizwa lies a marvel that captures the essence of cultural heritage and innovation, drawing tourists and locals alike to its enchanting embrace. "Dukan Tatoon," meaning a tiny shop, transcends conventional retail; it is an immersive experience designed by Daoud bin Sulaiman bin Amer al Hawqani.

Originally conceived from a simple market need in the bustling town of Nizwa, now a renowned tourist destination, Dukan Tatoon caters to a diverse audience of all ages. Al Hawqani envisioned a space that filled the void in the local market and added value to the neighbourhood's cultural tapestry.

Dukan Tatoon's seamless blend of traditional aesthetics sets it apart, employing wood and thatch to evoke

a sense of antiquity. While the shop primarily caters to children with its unique products and activities, the real surprise lies beneath – an ancient well concealed beneath a transparent glass floor, an awe-inspiring feature that captivates every visitor.

More than a commercial venture, Dukan Tatoon is a cultural hub strategically positioned amidst a cluster of projects, including a hotel and alternative medicine clinic. Comprising sections offering sweets, beverages, spices, ice creams, crafts, and textiles, the shop has garnered widespread popularity, evidenced by the continuous influx of visitors during holidays and weekends.

The success story of Dukan Tatoon unfolds in the expressions of amazement and joy on visitors' faces when they discover the ancient well beneath their feet. This immersive experience, both phobia-inducing

for some and thrilling for adventure seekers, is etched in Al Hawqani's daily anecdotes.

Looking ahead, Dukan Tatoon envisions expanding its footprint, with plans to triple its size to meet the overwhelming demand. Beyond its current offerings, the future holds a specialised brand selling heritage gifts, aiming to establish a presence in all tourist hubs across Oman. This project showcases natural products and rare goods and becomes a radiant gem, preserving Oman's unique heritage for locals and tourists.

"Dukan Tatoon" transcends the conventional definition of a shop; it is a testament to cultural heritage, innovation, and surprise. In essence, it encapsulates the harmonious blend of tradition with modernity, all centred around a beautifully concealed secret beneath its transparent glass floors.