

Pact for Mega Hub in Duqm

Brazilian mining conglomerate Vale SA signed a land reservation agreement with the Port of Duqm Company SAOC and a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Marafiq to establish an integrated industrial complex (Mega Hub) to produce low-carbon products to the steelmaking industry in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm. **DETAILS ON P13**



HIS MAJESTY, EGYPTIAN PRESIDENT REVIEW BILATERAL TIES

HM CONCLUDES OFFICIAL EGYPT VISIT



HIS MAJESTY AND EGYPT PRESIDENT REVIEW AREAS OF COOPERATION

TWO LEADERS DISCUSS OPPORTUNITIES TO BOOST BILATERAL RELATIONS

OMAN AND EGYPT SIGN AGREEMENT ON DOUBLE TAXATION

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik returned home on Monday evening, concluding an official two-day visit to the Arab Republic of Egypt in response to an invitation from President Abdul Fattah el Sisi.

His Majesty the Sultan was received at the Royal Airport by HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, among others.

Earlier, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik left Cairo, following an official two-day visit during which he met President El Sisi. His Majesty the Sultan was seen off at Cairo International Airport by the Egyptian President.

Meanwhile, His Majesty the Sultan has sent a cable of thanks to President El Sisi following his two-day visit.

In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere appreciation to President El Sisi for the warm welcome and hospitality.

His Majesty the Sultan lauded the opportunity offered by the meeting with the Egyptian President in reviewing the bilateral relations and means of enhancing them in various spheres to serve the joint interests of the Omani and Egyptian peoples.

His Majesty the Sultan prayed to Allah the Almighty to protect President El Sisi and grant him good health, wellbeing and long life to achieve further aspirations of progress and prosperity for the Egyptian people.

BOOSTING TIES

Earlier, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik met at his residence in the Qubba Palace in Cairo with President Abdul Fattah el Sisi. During the meeting, the two leaders reviewed areas of cooperation between the two countries and opportunities of boosting them towards broader horizons in a manner that serves the joint interests of the two countries' peoples. They also touched on several matters of common concern. **SEE ALSO P2, 3 AND 4**

MOU ON COOPERATION IN FINANCIAL POLICIES, DEVELOPMENTS

DESIRE TO ESTABLISH FIRM PARTNERSHIPS IN VARIOUS SECTORS

NUMBER OF EGYPTIAN COMPANIES IN OMAN STAND AT 1,546

HM VISITS NEW ADMINISTRATIVE CAPITAL IN CAIRO



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik visited the new administrative capital in Cairo. He was accompanied during the visit by Dr Assem al Jazzar, Minister of Housing, Utilities and Urban Communities (Head of the Mission of Honour). The visit comes within the context of His Majesty the Sultan's official visit to the Arab Republic of Egypt. His Majesty the Sultan went on tour of the facilities of the new administrative capital, including the government quarter. He took note of the yard of the Grand Mosque, an Islamic architectural edifice that takes centre stage in the area. His Majesty had a close look at Dar Al Quran (Holy Quran House) at Egypt's Islamic Cultural Centre. Whole Chapters of the Holy Quran are carved on the walls of the Dar. His Majesty the Sultan was briefed about the objectives of Dar Al Quran and the services it offers to members of the public.

HM Sultan Haitham Rose, Honourable Assayida Ahd Rose inaugurated in London



The Sultanate of Oman on Monday Inaugurated "Harcarmine", the rose named after His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, and "Harforever", the rose named after Her Highness The Honourable Lady Assayida Ahd Abdullah Hamed al Busaidi, Spouse of the Sultan of Oman. The launch of the two roses was made within the context of Oman's participation in Chelsea Flower Show, currently held in London and will continue until May 27. **SEE P4**



HM visits new administrative capital in Cairo

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His Majesty the Sultan also toured the City of Arts and Culture, intended to be a global destination that comprises a range of modern buildings and facilities. There, His Majesty the Sultan visited the Opera House and watched a visual display on the potential of the Opera House, designed in line with the loftiest international specifications. Later, His Majesty the Sultan visited the Egypt's Capitals Museum, which narrates the stories of Egyptian capital cities and their evolution over the ages.

His Majesty the Sultan voiced his admiration for the new administrative capital in Cairo, noting that its unique configuration reflects the

historically deep-rooted Egyptian architecture.

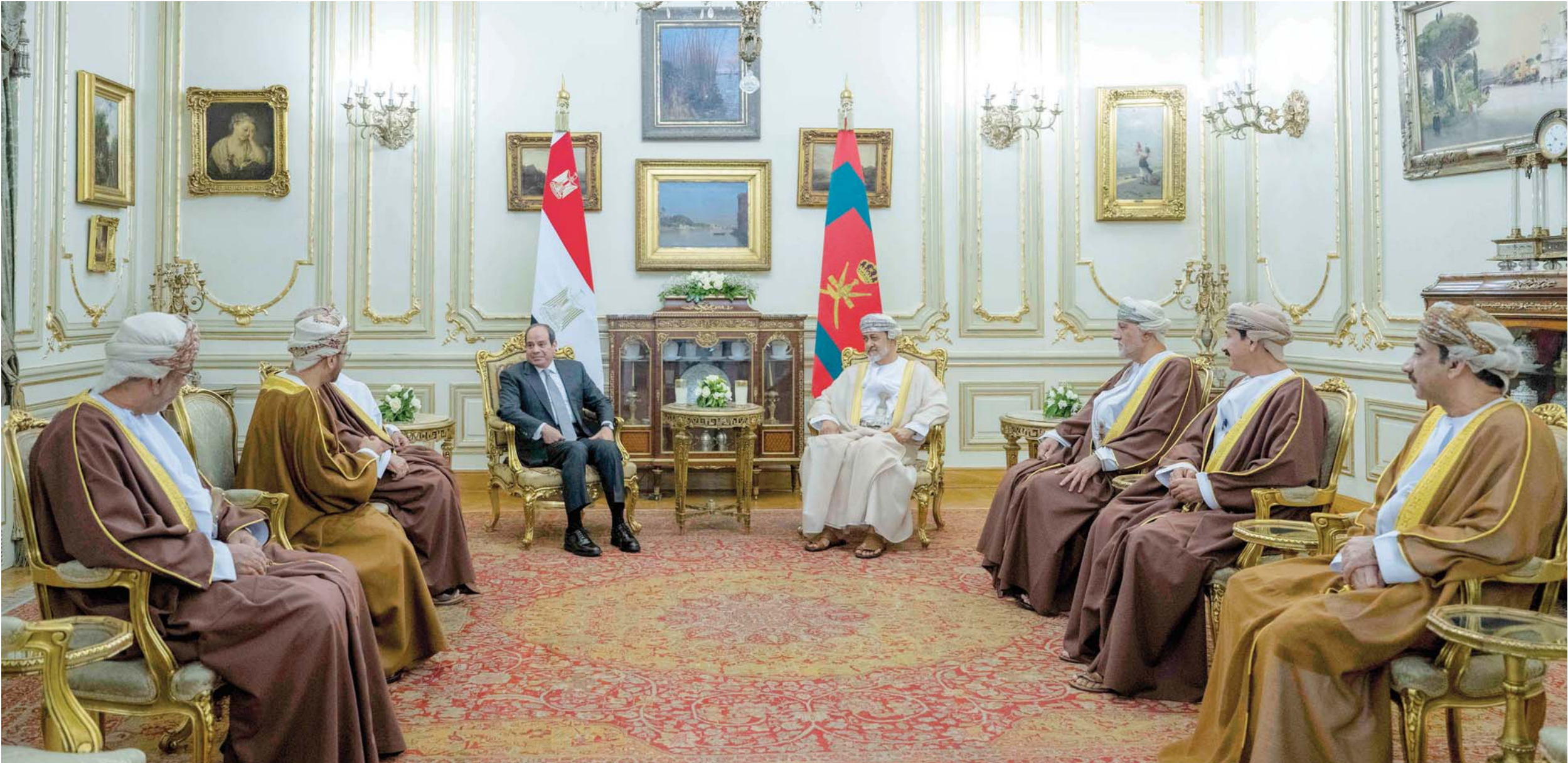
He commended the great efforts exerted by the Arab Republic of Egypt (the leadership, the government and the people) to accomplish this vital project. He prayed to the Almighty Allah to grant Egypt further progress and prosperity.

His Majesty the Sultan was accompanied during his visit to the Administrative Capital by HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs, Sayyid Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court, Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Dr Hamad bin Said al Aufi, Head of the Private Office, and Abdullah bin Nasser al Rahbi, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Arab Republic of Egypt and its Permanent Representative to the Arab League. — ONA





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His Majesty returns home from Egypt



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq returned to the homeland after completing a two-day official visit to the Arab Republic of Egypt in response to an invitation from his brother President Abdul Fattah El-Sisi of the Arab Republic of Egypt. – ONA



HM Sultan Haitham Rose, Honourable Assayida Ahd Rose inaugurated



LONDON: The Sultanate of Oman on Monday inaugurated 'Harcarmine', the rose named after His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, and 'Harforever', the rose named after Her Highness the Honourable Lady Assayida Ahd Abdullah Hamed al Busaidi, Spouse of the Sultan of Oman.

The launch of the two roses was made within the context of Oman's participation in Chelsea Flower Show, currently being held in London and will continue until May 27.

Harcarmine and Harforever figure among the finest hybrid roses, and they derive their colours from the colours of the Flag of Oman. Harcarmine bears the red colour and Harforever takes the white colour, with the green colour around them representing the landscape.

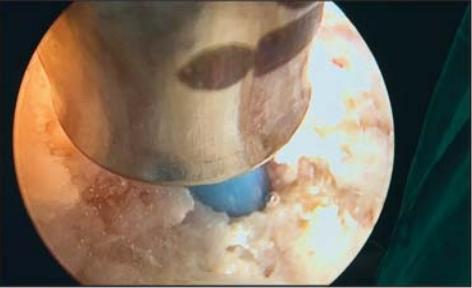
The two roses were cross-bred after a number of agricultural experiments made by specialists on scientific grounds.

The experiments showed the successful growth of the two roses in Salalah, Governorate of Dhofar, where they adapted to the governorate's weather and climatic conditions.

Their growth also proved a success in some countries of the European continent.

The inaugural protocols ceremony was attended by Badr bin Mohammed al Mantheri, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, among other Omani officials. – ONA

Oman's first Transforaminal Endoscopic Discectomy performed at Apollo Hospital



Apollo Super Speciality Hospital, Al Hail's Orthopedic and Spine Surgical Center of Excellence performed Oman's First Transforaminal Discectomy Endoscopically (Key Hole), marking a significant technological advancement for spine surgery in the Sultanate.

The surgery was performed by a team led by Dr Sultan Al Kalbani, Department of Orthopedics, Spine, and Sports Medicine at Apollo Super Speciality Hospital. The department offers a comprehensive range of services for patients with joint, spine, and sports-related injuries.

"The team and I at Apollo Hospital Al Hail managed to do the first surgery performed in Oman using this technique in April of this year. The patient had previous surgery 10 years back and came to us with recurrence. The traditional open surgery would have been extensive, which would have included putting screws and rods. The recovery would have taken weeks and patient would have suffered from chronic back pain. After

doing the endoscopic surgery the patient had immediate pain relief and was discharged the next day," said Dr Kalbani.

Transforaminal endoscopic discectomy is a recent development in spine surgery. It can be performed through a small incision using no muscle dissection. The advantage is that the patients would have very minimal surgical pain and can return to work immediately.

The patient had foraminal disc prolapse, causing severe compression of spinal root. He is extremely happy, grateful and has returned to his normal daily activities.

"This surgery can be done for most paracentral disc prolapses. It is especially useful for foraminal and extraforaminal disc herniation in which traditional surgery includes instrumentation (metal work) while with endoscopy there is no need for instrumentation saving the patient from extensive muscle dissection and pain," explained Dr Al Kalbani, who is also currently the president

of Oman Spine Society.

The Spine Care Center within the Department of Orthopedics, Spine, and Sports Medicine at Apollo Super Speciality Hospital offers a comprehensive range of services for patients with joint, spine, and sports-related injuries. The department with a team of highly trained orthopedic surgeons include sports medicine specialists, physiotherapists, and rehabilitation experts who are dedicated to delivering the best possible care to patients.

Back problems are unfortunately becoming more prevalent, especially due to sedentary lifestyle. Dr Kalbani's advise to everyone is to maintain good amount of physical activity, at least 10k steps per day.

"Play at least half an hour or indulge in cardio exercises like running or swimming every other day. It is important to maintain healthy weight and avoid sitting for longer than half an hour without stretching," Pointed out Dr Kalbani.



Omani-Egyptian Business Forum highlights investment opportunities in Oman

CAIRO: The Omani-Egyptian Business Forum was held here on Monday within the framework of the visit paid by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to the Arab Republic of Egypt.

The forum aims to highlight investment opportunities available in the Sultanate of Oman and to strike economic partnerships.

Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, underscored that the forum will contribute to boosting joint economic action in accordance with the directives of the two countries' leaderships.

Al Habsi added in his speech that there is a serious desire to establish firm partnerships in strategic economic sectors. The two sides are also keen to enhance investments and trade exchange in a manner that reflects the competitive advantage between the two countries in a bid to achieve economic integration.

Al Habsi added that Omani-Egyptian partnership can be set up on a greater base of integration between the two countries on the political, historical and cultural levels, as well as in economy, trade exchange and investment cooperation.

Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, gave an overview of Oman Vision 2040, national programmes and incentives offered to investors. Those incentives include reducing commercial registration fees and 50-year long usufruct contracts that can be renewed for a similar period, as well as full foreign ownership and tax exemptions up to 30 years.

The Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment



Sultan bin Salim al Habsi



Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef



Dr Hala El Said



Ayman Soliman



TRADE EXCHANGE BETWEEN OMAN, EGYPT DURING THE PAST YEAR AMOUNTED TO ABOUT \$1.08 BILLION, COMPARED TO \$651 MILLION IN 2021

Promotion said that trade exchange between Oman and Egypt recorded an increase, to stand at \$1.023 billion in 2022 compared to \$566.1 million.

To break down the figures, he pointed out that the number of Egyptian companies licensed in Oman till the end of 2022 amounted to 1,546. Egyptian contribution amounted to approximately \$208 million.

Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Chairman of Oman Investment Authority (OIA) said that OIA, through its strategic partnerships, boosts Oman's efforts aimed at bolstering relations with Arab and friendly countries in a manner that serves the interests of all parties. OIA also works on introducing modern technologies to the local sectors.

Al Murshidi added that OIA manages its investments, which are distributed over more than 40 countries (including Egypt), through two portfolios. Those are the National Development Portfolio and the Future Generations' Fund.

Oman, Egypt sign MoU and agreement



CAIRO: The Sultanate of Oman and the Arab Republic of Egypt signed an agreement and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in Cairo on Monday.

The agreement is related to the elimination of double taxation with regard to taxes on income and the prevention and avoidance of

tax evasion. As for the MoU, it is related to cooperation in areas relevant to financial policies and developments.

They were signed by Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance on behalf of Oman's government, and Dr Mohammed Moait, Minister of Finance on behalf of Egypt's government. — ONA

He noted that OIA works in an integrated manners with other government units to attract foreign investments to Oman. Recently, 36 investment opportunities were offered in the Invest Oman lounge.

Al Murshidi said that OIA has investments with Egypt's private sector. He also expressed his hope that the visit of His Majesty the Sultan to Egypt will enhance joint investments.

Eng Ahmed Samir, Egyptian Minister of Trade and Industry, said that the two countries look forward to augmenting the rates of intra-trade and joint investments. The mechanisms of future work between the two sides include stimulating investment in light of the keenness attached by the two leaderships to expand the domestic and foreign private sector and benefit from the great investment potentials of the Egyptian market that contribute to alluring the Omani investor, added the minister.

He pointed out that the trade exchange between the two countries during the past year amounted to about \$1.08 billion, compared to \$651 million in 2021.

The Egyptian Minister explained that Omani investments

in Egypt stand at more than \$80 million in 110 projects in the sectors of industry, agriculture, tourism, construction, finance, communications and others, while Egyptian investments in Oman stand at \$860 million in several sectors, including infrastructure, as well as real estate and tourism investment.

Meanwhile, Dr Mohammed Moait, Egyptian Minister of Finance, delivered a speech during the event in which he underlined Egypt's keenness to raise the economic, commercial and investment gains with the Sultanate of Oman to reach a level that meets aspirations of the two peoples. He pointed out that trade exchange between the two countries witnessed a great boom last year.

Dr Hala El Said, Minister of Planning and Economic Development lauded the historical relations binding Oman and Egypt.

Ayman Soliman, CEO of the Sovereign Fund of Egypt, stressed that one of the goals of the fund is to attract local and foreign investors in important sectors of the Egyptian economy in the fields of industry, technology and digital transformation. — ONA

‘The Water Diviner’ wins Arabic Booker

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, MAY 22

The award-winning book ‘The Water Diviner’ by Omani author Zahran al Qasimi has won the Arab Booker Prize 2023. Six Arab novels competed for the coveted Arab Booker, shortlisting for which was announced in March.

The announcement of this prestigious award was made on May 21, Sunday, during the book launch event in Abu Dhabi.

The International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) aims to recognise excellence in contemporary Arabic literature and promote the demand for reading Arabic literature globally by translating and publishing the winning novels in major languages.

Besides Zahran al Qasimi's ‘The Water Diviner’, other competing novels included ‘Mina’ by Siddik Hadj Ahmed from Algeria; ‘Qurena Eduardo Concerto’ by Najwa Binshatwan from Libya; ‘Days of the Rising Sun’ by Miral al Tahawy from Egypt; ‘The Stone of Happiness’ by Azhar Zarzis from Iraq; and ‘The Horizon: Al Ala’ by Fatima Abdel-Hamid from Saudi Arabia.

The award in the 16th edition



of the IPAF has put Zahran al Qasimi in the global spotlight, showcasing the diversity and richness of Arabic literature.

The panel for the IPAF comprising Reem Bassiouney, Fadhila el Farouk, Tetz Rooke, and Aziza Al Ta'i, and Mohammed Achaari, unanimously selected ‘The Water Diviner’ for its innovative exploration of the relationship between water and the natural environment, particularly in challenging areas.

The novel skillfully weaves together reality and myth, employing a tightly woven narrative and transparent poetic language while presenting captivating characters that simultaneously play vital roles in people's lives and elicit aversion

and fear. Through this work, the author acquaints readers with the unfamiliar setting of Oman's valleys and falaj, delving into the influence of natural elements on human connections with their surroundings and culture.

‘The Water Diviner’ transports readers to an Omani village where the protagonist, Salem bin Abdullah, works as a water diviner, venturing deep into the earth to uncover hidden springs. At the core of the story lies the ‘Aflaj’, an irrigation system that is integral to village life in Oman and often serves as inspiration for various tales and legends. Al Qasimi explores water's dual nature as both a life-giving force and a potential harbinger of danger and death through scarcity or flooding.

Notably, Al Qasimi places great emphasis on the significant role of female characters in his narrative. He highlights how women have historically been instrumental in giving life to humanity, initiating changes in civilisations, and driving significant historical transformations. This theme resonates throughout the book, focusing on how women also bring about transformative shifts in the life of the main protagonist.

Born in Dima W'attayeen, Oman in 1974, Zahran al Qasimi is an accomplished poet and novelist. Prior to ‘The Water Diviner’, he published three novels: ‘Mount Al Shua’ (2013), ‘The Sniper’ (2014), and ‘The Hunger of Honey’ (2017). Additionally, he has authored ten collections of poetry, along with ‘Sirat Al Hijr 1’ (Short Stories, 2009) and ‘Sirat Al Hijr 2’ (Texts, 2011).

Al Qasimi's win marks a significant milestone, as he became the first Omani novelist to receive the International Prize for Arabic Fiction. ‘The Water Diviner’ was published by Dar Rashem in Saudi Arabia, solidifying its recognition and reach across the Arab world and beyond.



Tender Announcement

The Internal Tender committee of **Ministry of Social Development** hereby announces the following tender :-

Tender No.	Tender Subject	Grade	Last date for obtainment of Tender Document	Last date for Tender Submission	Tender Document Price (non- refundable)
134/2023	General maintenance work for the gymnasium building at the Child Welfare Center in at Al - Khoud	Companies specialized in the field of building contracting and registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board in the second degree	Tuesday 13-6-2023 02:00 PM	Sunday 2-7-2023 10:00 AM	R.O. 25/=

❖ Specialized Companies, registered with the **Tender Board** may obtain the Tender documents at the Tender Board e-tendering digital portal link (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>). On **Tuesday 23/5/2023**.

❖ For Inquiry, please contact though the e-tendering website (reg@tenderboard.gov.om) tel. (24402200).

“ The lowest or any other tender shall not be binding to the Ministry “



Israeli soldiers leave after a raid at the Balata refugee camp in the occupied West Bank city of Nablus. – AFP

Israeli forces kill three Palestinians in West Bank

TEL AVIV: Israeli forces killed three Palestinian fighters on Monday in a raid on a refugee camp in the occupied West Bank in what the army described as an operation targeting suspects.

In a statement, the Palestinian health ministry identified the three men killed in Balata camp in Nablus as Muhammad Abu Zaytoun, 32, Fathi Abu Rizk, 30, and Abdullah Abu Hamdan, 24.

Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, the armed wing of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party, said in a statement that the three were among the group's "fighters".

The group's emblem was wrapped around the foreheads of the men in a morgue, and their bodies shrouded in the Palestinian flag.

The Israeli army said it had shot several fighters when a gun battle erupted during a "counter-terrorism" operation.

During the operation, "armed suspects fired at the soldiers, who

responded with live fire. Hits were identified," it said.

The army added in a statement that it "apprehended three wanted individuals suspected of involvement in violent activity", and that weapons and ammunition were seized.

Palestinian presidency spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeineh described the killings as a "veritable massacre" and charged that repeated Israeli raids and attacks by settlers constituted a "major war crime and a collective punishment".

He said "silence" from the United States had emboldened Israelis to escalate attacks, calling on Washington to "immediately intervene to stop the Israeli madness that will drag the region toward explosion".

Deadly military operations have surged in recent months across the Palestinian territory.

Following the raid, Palestinians inspected the rubble of a damaged building and salvaged belongings.

Israel's army, meanwhile, said it had "located in one of the residences an explosives manufacturing site" and detonated it.

Hamas, which rules the blockaded Gaza Strip, described those killed as "freedom fighters".

"Hamas reiterates that resisting the (Israeli) occupation is a legitimate right for the Palestinian people in their quest for freedom," the group said in a statement.

Densely-populated Balata is home to some 27,000 people, making it the largest camp in the West Bank, according to the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA.

The Israeli army also reported clashes in an operation in Jenin, north of Nablus.

The troops "responded with live fire" and in two cases "a hit was identified", the statement said.

Israeli forces arrested three suspects in Jenin and seven others in other parts of the West Bank, it added. — AFP

India's G20 tourism meeting begins under tight security

SRINAGAR: A G20 tourism meeting began on Monday under tight security in Indian-administered Kashmir.

India is promoting tourism in the region — home to spectacular mountain scenery — and welcome signs at the airport declare it "paradise on earth".

More than a million Indian citizens visited last year, to the delight of local tourism businesses.

Police said last week that security had been beefed up "to avoid any chance of terrorist attack during the G20", and on Monday soldiers and armoured vehicles were deployed at multiple locations in Srinagar.

But many checkpoints — wrapped in metal mesh and barbed wire — were dismantled overnight, and some paramilitary police stood hidden behind G20 advertising panels in what appeared to be an effort to minimise the security forces' visibility.

The three-day gathering is



Delegates attend the G20 tourism meeting in Srinagar. – AFP

taking place at a well-guarded complex on the shores of Dal Lake in Srinagar. Residents have chafed under the stepped-up security measures.

"Does the government think that tourism can be promoted in closed conference halls next to a scenic lake being patrolled by marine commandos, with surveillance drones overhead?" columnist Bharat Bhushan wrote

in the Deccan Herald newspaper.

India holds the G20 presidency for 2023, and has planned more than 100 meetings across the country.

Two Indian government ministers are attending the tourism event in Srinagar, but several Western nations are sending only locally based diplomatic staff.

G20 member China has refused to attend. — AFP

FIRE HITS CENTRAL POST OFFICE



Smoke rises from the burning Manila Central Post Office building after a massive fire in Manila, Philippines. – Reuters

Air strikes hit Khartoum as seven-day ceasefire approaches

KHARTOUM: Sudan's army conducted air strikes in the capital Khartoum on Monday, residents said, seeking to win ground against its paramilitary rivals hours before a week-long ceasefire aimed at allowing delivery of aid was due to take effect.

The army also carried out air strikes into the evening, witnesses said, targeting vehicles from mobile units of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) that have been operating across

residential areas in the capital since the conflict between the two military factions erupted on April 15.

Both sides have said they will abide by a ceasefire starting at 21:45 local time. Though fighting has continued through previous ceasefires, this is the first truce to be formally agreed following negotiations.

The ceasefire deal includes a monitoring mechanism involving the army and the RSF as well as



A Sudanese army armoured vehicle is stationed in southern Khartoum. – AFP

representatives from Saudi Arabia and the United States, which brokered the agreement after talks in Jeddah.

The deal has raised hopes of a pause in a war that has driven nearly 1.1 million people from their homes, including more 250,000 who have fled into neighbouring countries, threatening to destabilise a volatile region.

On Monday, residents reported air strikes in Khartoum, Omdurman and Bahri, the

three cities that make up the greater capital, separated by the confluence of the Blue Nile and White Nile. They also said clashes could be heard in central Khartoum.

"The situation is horrible. The planes are bombing us on every side and from the strength of the vibration of the house doors, we feel like we'll die today," said Salma Abdallah, a resident of Al Riyadh neighbourhood in Khartoum.

— Reuters

SHORT TAKES

LAGOS

Outgoing president opens major oil plant

Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari will on Monday commission an oil plant billed as Africa's largest oil refinery, after years of delays and a week before stepping down from office.

Built by Africa's richest man Aliko Dangote in the commercial hub of Lagos, the refinery — with the ability to process 650,000 barrels a day when at full capacity — should begin operations in June.

Nigeria swaps crude worth billions of dollars for gasoline it



then subsidises for its domestic market.

The new facility, lying on 2,635 hectares of land at the Lekki Free Zone and costing \$19bn could be a game changer. — AFP

BANGKOK

Alliance signs pact aimed at ambitious reforms

An alliance led by Thailand's progressive Move Forward party on Monday signed an ambitious agreement to draft a new constitution.

The opposition Move Forward and Pheu Thai parties dominated last week's election in a resounding defeat of conservative parties backed by a royalist military that has controlled government since a 2014 coup.

They are seeking to form a coalition government with



six other parties, all of which signed the agreement on their objectives.

Leader Pita Limjaroenrat said "All parties can propose their own policies. — Reuters

BOGOTA

Colombia suspends truce with major rebel group

Colombian President Gustavo Petro on Monday suspended a truce with leftist guerrillas in four flashpoint regions following the killing of four Indigenous children by those rebels.

Petro said the bilateral ceasefire "is suspended and all offensive operations are reactivated" in the Meta, Caqueta, Guaviare and Putumayo regions.

Four children and teenagers from the Murui Indigenous community were executed in southern Colombia by



dissidents of the now-disarmed Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebels, authorities said on Sunday.

Those four regions are a stronghold of FARC. — AFP



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In brief

■ LONDON



MINISTER DENIES IMPROPRIETY OVER SPEEDING TICKET

UK Home Secretary Suella Braverman on Monday denied any impropriety over the handling of a speeding ticket that has again put her at the centre of controversy about alleged rule-breaking.

The interior minister in charge of law enforcement asked her officials to set up a one-to-one driving awareness course, instead of taking penalty points on her licence, according to newspaper reports on Sunday.

That has led to opposition claims that she may have breached the ministerial code of conduct by requesting non-political civil servants to help deal with a private matter.

— AFP

■ ATHENS



EYES NEW VOTE AS PM SEEKS ABSOLUTE MAJORITY

Greece's PM Kyriakos Mitsotakis said on Monday he was seeking a new vote as soon as on June 25 in order to obtain a ruling majority, a day after his party won national elections that failed to produce a single-party government.

The conservative New Democracy party of Mitsotakis trounced its rivals in Sunday's vote, with a 20-point lead over its nearest contender, Syriza, led by leftist Alexis Tsipras.

Voters handed the conservatives even their best result since 2007, crediting the party with bringing economic vital stability back to a nation once known as an EU laggard.

— AFP

■ GEORGETOWN



AT LEAST 20 DEAD IN SCHOOL DORMITORY FIRE

At least 20 people were killed and several injured on Sunday in a school dormitory fire in Guyana, the government said in a statement, with the nation's president calling it a "major disaster."

"This is a major disaster. It is horrible, it is painful," the South American nation's President Irfaan Ali said on Sunday night.

The death toll had risen to 20 and several people were injured in the fire at the Mahdia Secondary School in central Guyana, the government statement said. "We have lost beautiful souls in that fire," it added. Hospitals were arranged for the incident.

— AFP

Russia says it battles saboteurs in cross-border raid from Ukraine

KYIV: Russia said on Monday it was battling a cross-border incursion by saboteurs who burst through the frontier from Ukraine, in what appeared to be one of the biggest attacks of its kind since the war began.

Vyacheslav Gladkov, governor of Russia's Belgorod region adjacent to northeastern Ukraine, said the Russian army, border guards, presidential guards and FSB security service were taking measures to repel the raid.

No civilians had been harmed, and there was no evacuation under way, he said, describing reports of an evacuation as "lies".

"Do not listen to our enemies," he said.

Earlier, the Telegram channel Baza, which is linked to Russia's security services, published footage apparently showing a Ukrainian armoured vehicle advancing on the border checkpoint.

Though there have been other reports of cross-border raids, an infiltration using armoured vehicles would appear to be unprecedented since the war began.

Baza said there were indications of fighting in three settlements on the main road leading from Ukraine into Russia.

A group calling itself the Liberty of Russia Legion, which claims to be made up of Russians cooperating with Ukraine's



This photograph shows a destroyed residential house following a strike in the village of Tsirkuny, Kharkiv region. — AFP

forces, said on Twitter it had "completely liberated" the border town of Kozinka and reached district centre Graivoron. Earlier on Monday, it released a video showing five heavily armed fighters: "We are Russians, like you.

We are people like you," one said facing the camera. "It is time

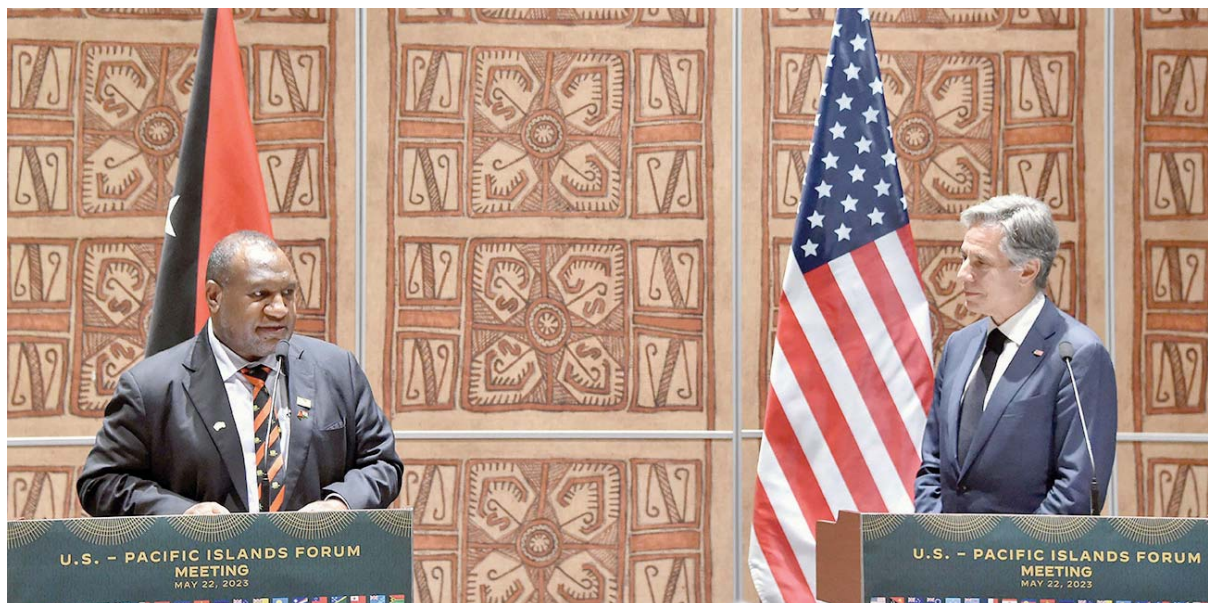
The Telegram channel Baza, published footage apparently showing a Ukrainian armoured vehicle advancing on the border checkpoint

to put an end to the dictatorship of the Kremlin." The Ukrainian military was not immediately available for comment.

The reported incursion comes two days after Russia said it had captured the final few blocks of the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, Moscow's first substantial claim of victory since

last summer after the bloodiest land battle in Europe since World War Two. But even as the Russians have pushed forward inside Bakhmut, their forces on the city's northern and southern outskirts were retreating last week at the war's fastest pace for six months, giving both sides reasons to claim momentum. — Reuters

US, Papua New Guinea sign defence pact at Pacific summit



PNG Prime Minister James Marape (L) speaks as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (R) looks on during a joint press conference in Port Moresby. — AFP

PORT MORESBY: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said a defence cooperation pact signed with Papua New Guinea on Monday would expand the Pacific island nation's capabilities and make it easier for the US military to train with its forces.

The United States and its allies are seeking to deter Pacific island nations from forming security ties with China and after Beijing signed a security pact with Solomon Islands.

Leaders of the Pacific islands, whose territories span 40 million square km of ocean, have said rising sea levels caused by climate change are their most pressing security priority.

Meeting PNG Prime Minister James Marape, Blinken said the United States would deepen its partnership across the board with PNG, and he expected

partnerships with US businesses would bring tens of billions of dollars' worth of new investment.

Marape said in an evening press conference "there is nothing for us to be fearful about".

The accord updated an existing US military relationship, he said, and "has nothing to do with China". "We have a healthy relationship with the Chinese government and they are an important trading partner," Marape said with Blinken standing alongside.

Marape told media that the defence agreement would see an increase in the US military presence over the next decade, while the US State Department said it would bolster security in the region.

"The defence cooperation was drafted by the United States and Papua New Guinea as equals and sovereign partners," Blinken said

at a signing ceremony.

It will expand PNG defence capacity to enhance humanitarian assistance and disaster response, and make it easy for US and PNG forces to train together, Blinken said.

In Beijing, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told a news briefing that China had no objection to mutually beneficial cooperation with Pacific island countries such as PNG, but added: "What we need to be vigilant about is engaging in geopolitical games in the name of cooperation, and we also believe that no cooperation should target any third parties."

Marape said the agreement would boost economic security by giving PNG's defence force "the ability to know what is happening in its waters - something we have never had since 1975". — AFP

S Korea, EU agree to boost security ties amid Ukraine, North Korea tension

SEOUL: South Korea and the European Union agreed on Monday to step up cooperation on security amid tension over Russia's war of Ukraine and North Korean nuclear threats.

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol held a summit in Seoul with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel, during which the leaders also pledged to work together on climate change, health and supply chains.

"South Korea and the EU are important partners that share universal values of freedom, human rights and rule of law," Yoon told a joint press conference.

Yoon has been pushing for greater security ties with Europe and other US allies to address global challenges,

including the conflict in Ukraine. He also wants cooperation to curb North Korea's nuclear ambitions. In June, he attended a Nato summit for the first time as a South Korean leader.

At Monday's talks, which mark the 60th anniversary of bilateral relations, Yoon and the EU leaders in a joint statement condemned Russia's attack of Ukraine as a grave violation of international law.

They also criticised North Korea's ongoing efforts to develop its nuclear arsenal and Pyongyang's threats of the possible use of nuclear weapons against South Korea.

"Russia must stop its aggression and immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces from the entire territory of Ukraine," the statement said. — Reuters



S. Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol (C) poses with President of the European Council Charles Michel (L) and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during their meeting at the Presidential Office in Seoul. — AFP

Prolonging our longevity through healthy lifestyles



Hyesha Barrett
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The writer is a life coach and NLP practitioner

Across the globe, there exist five regions known as Blue Zones; their populations boast an exceptionally long life, with their elderly commonly surpassing the age of 100.

Through exploring the similar lifestyles of Blue Zone inhabitants, we can discover valuable insights on how to enhance our own well-being and potentially prolong our lives.

One of the prominent features of all Blue Zones is their plant-centric diets. Their nutrition is rich in essential nutrients, antioxidants, and fibre while being low in saturated fats and processed foods. Blue Zoners also adopt a principle to eat until they are 80 per cent full. Interestingly, the remaining 20 per cent is the marker for whether we lose or gain weight.

Regular physical activity plays a crucial role too within the Blue

Zone populations. Repeating daily natural movements will aid with weight management, bone density, strength and flexibility.

Incorporating exercise into your daily routine, such as 30 minutes a day of physical movement (walking, jogging, swimming or skipping), taking the stairs instead of the lift and parking further away from the entrance are practices that will ensure our bodies remain strong and agile as we age.

Solid social connections are integral to the Blue Zone communities. Engaging in group interactions fosters a sense of belonging and support. Connection contributes to lower stress levels, reduced rates of depression, and increased life satisfaction.

By actively nurturing our relationships and building meaningful connections with the right people, we can enhance

BLUE ZONE INHABITANTS EMPLOY VARIOUS STRESS REDUCTION TECHNIQUES, SUCH AS MINDFULNESS, MEDITATION, PRAYER, AND BREATHWORK, ALL OF WHICH HELPS TO UNWIND AND FIND INNER PEACE

our overall well-being, ultimately promoting longevity.

Stress management is vital for up-levelling the health of your mind, body, and soul. Blue Zone inhabitants employ various stress reduction techniques, such as mindfulness, meditation, prayer, and breathwork, all of which help them unwind and find inner peace. Engrossing yourself in hobbies

that bring joy and relaxation will effectively lower the negative impact that stress brings.

Another principle that the Blue Zone populations abide by is finding purpose and meaning in their lives. Reflecting on your values, interests, and passions will help you identify yours.

Finding your “Y” is key to fuelling your motivation and desire to do better, achieve more, give back, and ultimately feel fulfilled.

Remember that incorporating these practices is a gradual process. Start by identifying the areas that resonate with you the most, establish a daily or weekly routine, and set realistic, timely, trackable goals.

Focus on making small, daily, sustainable changes and find ways to make the practices enjoyable and pleasurable. Designate specific times for exercise, meal

preparation, and stress reduction techniques. Engage in physical and social activities that you genuinely like and which resonate with you the most, explore new flavours in your plant-based diet, and be mindful of how full you feel.

Expect setbacks and obstacles along the way. Identify potential challenges in advance and brainstorm strategies to overcome them. Whether it's a lack of time, unexpected events, or occasional lapses, having contingency plans will help you bounce back and stay on track.

Be patient and kind to yourself, celebrate your progress, and remember that daily steps done consistently over time can only lead to long-term change.

Every step, no matter how small, will move you closer to a more fulfilling, healthier, and longer life. Decide which path you'll take.

EU’s next food fight: regulating gene-edited crops

JULIEN GIRAULT

Extreme weather caused by climate change has damaged food production across Europe.

Confronted with a deteriorating situation, divided European Union decision-makers are debating new rules for genetically modified crops.

Last year’s drought ravaged the continent’s farms, starving everything from Spanish olive harvests to Hungary’s maize and sunflower crops, Italian and Romanian corn fields to France’s dairy production.

Some argue the answer to Europe’s problems is deregulating gene modification techniques to produce better crops. Others claim this would be a “smokescreen” to avoid having to radically change the way the bloc farms.

Supporters say seeds produced using gene editing techniques are less vulnerable to drought and disease — and require less water.

The European Commission, the EU’s executive arm, will propose a law in July that will loosen the rules on plants produced by certain new genomic techniques (NGTs), branded by critics as simply “new genetically modified organisms (GMOs)”.

The proposals will open a new battlefield among the EU’s 27 member states — with drought-hit countries especially in favour — and between EU lawmakers. The new techniques are a mix of genomic editing tools that alter a plant’s genetic make-up without the addition of foreign genetic material, unlike “transgenic” GMOs that include DNA from other species.

The commission says the current rules on GMOs including permission and labelling are “not fit for purpose” for the new technology.

“Plants produced by new genomic techniques can support sustainability,” the EU’s health commissioner, Stella Kyriakides, said last month.

The proposals, she said, “will strongly signal to farmers, researchers and industry that this is the way forward in the EU”. In a document from February, the commission looked at whether it should treat traditional seeds and those produced using the new techniques, with modifications that could in theory have happened naturally, as the same. France, severely affected by drought last summer, backs changing the rules.

In April, French Agriculture Minister Marc Fesneau expressed his concerns over what he called Europe’s “delay”, arguing there should be a push to allow biotechnology that gives Europe the tools to deal with climate change by producing more resistant seeds. Late last year, his Spanish counterpart, Luis Planas, hailed the techniques as a “magnificent tool to have seeds that need less water and fertiliser”. — AFP

He promised change in Thailand. But will he be allowed to lead?



Sui-Lee Wee
The writer is the Southeast Asia bureau chief for NYT

When Pita Limjaroenrat was a student at Harvard in 2008, he shadowed his American classmates who were campaigning at the time for former President Barack Obama.

The experience gave him a window into electoral politics, from phone banks and polling data to knocking on doors and putting campaign flags on front lawns.

Fifteen years later, Pita said he used what he learned in Massachusetts to help his recent campaign in Thailand, where he stunned the country’s political establishment by leading his progressive Move Forward Party to a momentous victory.

For decades, Thai voters had known only two dominant political forces: one led by conservative royalists and militarists and the other by a populist billionaire living in exile.

Supporters saw Pita, 42, as the candidate who represented change and a return to democracy after nine years of military rule that was preceded by a coup. On the stump, he promised to undo the military’s grip on Thai politics and revise a law that criminalises criticism of the monarchy.

But his path to prime minister remains uncertain.

“What I need to do now is to find a road map that bridges that gap between a functioning democracy and

AS A CANDIDATE, PITA DEVELOPED A REPUTATION FOR BEING A CLEAR ORATOR, WINNING THE PUBLIC OVER WITH HIS SPEECHES AND POLISHED LOOKS

half-baked democracy at the very end of nine-year rule by a military coup,” he said in an interview with The New York Times.

In order to take the role, Pita needs to gather enough support in the 500-member House of Representatives to overcome a 250-member, military-appointed Senate. To be precise, he needs 376 votes. So far, he only has 314.

Already, several senators have said they would not support a candidate who so threatens the status quo.

Now Thais are waiting to see if their choice will be allowed to lead or if he will be blocked from becoming prime minister by prevailing powers, an outcome that could plunge the country into political chaos. Thai generals rewrote the constitution in 2017 so

a Senate stacked with military allies could jointly determine the top leader

Conservatives are counting on an Election Commission complaint that has been filed against Pita for failing to disclose that he owned shares of a now-defunct media company that he inherited from his father.

So far, Pita has brushed off the petition to investigate him, saying he had already reported the shares to authorities. He also said he believed there was a group of senators who had “felt their conscience” and understood the consequences of going against the 25 million Thais who voted for change. Only 14 senators have indicated that they would vote for him.

Pita graduated with a joint degree from the Harvard Kennedy School and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s Sloan School of Management. From his time in the United States, he learned how to map out a campaign strategy, which he put to use in this election by using data to reach voters in 160 districts.

Most of Pita’s career was in consulting and business, as a managing director of the rice bran oil business that his father started, and then as a senior executive for Grab, the ride-hailing company that acquired Uber in Southeast Asia.

As a candidate, Pita developed a reputation for being a clear orator, winning the public over with his speeches and polished looks.

Pita was drawn to the ideas of the founder of the Future Forward party, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, in 2018, and within a few months was asked to join.

He became the leader of Move Forward after Thailand’s Constitutional Court dissolved Future Forward in 2020 and barred its senior executives from politics for 10 years.

If his bid for prime minister is successful, Pita has promised to reset Thailand’s foreign policy, saying the country would “not be part of the Chinese umbrella or the American umbrella,” but will have the ability to determine its own destiny, Pita said.

— *The New York Times*



Pita Limjaroenrat, leader of Thailand’s Move Forward Party, is greeted by supporters during a voter thank you parade culminating in Owl Market in Nonthaburi, Thailand.

Let’s get to know space more

Observe beyond the earth and remember sky is not the limit. That is a request from a space scientist, who is called as the ‘Moon Man of India’, Dr Mylswami Annadurai, who was the chief guest at the Annual Science Fiesta 2023 of India Science Forum held at Oman’s National University for Science and Technology.

Interacting with him, one realised, it was so easy to understand the distinguishing of reality and probability. Whether it is about aliens or the moon’s journey of evolution he was very clear about defining it as a reality and at the same time, quick to point out, ‘Cannot rule out.’

And I was under the impression that the scientists always stood their ground until proven scientifically otherwise. I now realised it is that option of ‘probability’ that keeps a scientists’ minds open. It is this openness that allows them to experiment and study endlessly.

It is this very factor that keeps them bouncing back if something does not meet their expectations. Go back to the project with a new start. When did his fascination with moon begin?

He said it was in childhood. Sitting in his village, looking up at the moon and the stars while recollecting what the teacher had spoken about in the classroom regarding the celestial beings.

He said there was no disturbance or pollution and could see everything so clearly in the sky at night because his village did not have streetlights until he turned 10 years old. This meant they played when there was sunlight and when the darkness set in it was time to differentiate the stars and the planets. The moon looked fascinating but the planet that went on to become his favourite is the one with the rings the Saturn.



Lakshmi Kothaneth @lakshmioman

The writer is a senior journalist and a radio anchor

SCIENTISTS CAN ALSO SPEAK HYPOTHETICALLY AND REALISTICALLY AS WELL AS PRACTICALLY AND TECHNICALLY AT THE SAME TIME POETICALLY TOO

Years later we can imagine how the young child’s curiosity must have gone on to create fascination when found the sun’s rays were causing the birth of water on moon. He went on to write about all this in his vernacular language, Tamil, a book titled ‘Moon is within hand’s reach’.

Shouldn’t there be life where water is present, I couldn’t help but ask. As of now no, but there could be a probability’ he replied.

You see how this world could work wonders. In today’s world where people react before knowing the complete truth here is a thought that gives room for probability and space for the benefit of doubt as in the case of the word ‘probably’.

If we look at it mathematically then we have four options and they are classical, empirical, subjective and axiomatic.

Scientists can also speak hypothetically and realistically as well as practically and technically at the same time poetically too.

It is interesting because by second nature they could analyse each situation with probabilities so they are never caught off guard. It is the others who want to see the world either black or white. The reality has been and could be that there is a whole lot of grey there.

We tend to stereotype people, and in a way it could be because it comforts us thinking we know what to expect. The reality is each person’s personalities differ and accordingly their response might differ.

Unlike animals that follow their instincts, humans can be influenced also by their environment and circumstances.

Both animals and humans find that experiences can change them especially when it comes to trust.

When the world is with people fighting against each other’s principles and policies, scientists might be one group of people who might be observing us too.

A HOT SUMMER DRINK!



A man prepares lassi, a traditional yoghurt-based drink, on a hot summer day in Amritsar, India, on Monday. – AFP

Fast track for Ukrainians, slow train for other refugees in Italy

Kabinet Camara says he fled in fear from the west African state of Guinea six years ago after receiving threats because of his work at an organisation fighting child exploitation.

“The government started opposing me and it was very hard to defend myself from the attacks. Eventually, I was forced to flee,” he said.

But seeking asylum in Italy, where he has lived since 2017, was “very different from what I expected,” Camara said, describing overcrowded conditions at the reception centre where he was sent and poor staffing leading to delays.

“In the reception centre, there were 10 people to take care of 1,000,” he said.

The asylum application process in Italy is hard to navigate and can be arbitrary, refugee advocates said.

But Camara was lucky. “In less than two years I obtained the necessary documents. I have friends who after seven years are still waiting,” he said.

As a main European arrival point from Africa, Italy has long been overburdened by the sheer numbers of refugees reaching its shores. The Interior Ministry said 105,000 arrived in 2022. This year has seen a surge in arrivals to 34,715 between January 1 and April 19, compared to 8,669 in the same period last year. Prime Minister



Jade Wilson

The writer is a reporter for The Irish Times

OF THE MORE THAN 150,000 UKRAINIANS IN ITALY UNDER THE TEMPORARY PROTECTION DIRECTIVE, ONLY 11,000 ENDED UP STAYING IN STATE-RUN RECEPTION CENTRES AND 8,000 IN HOTELS

Giorgia Meloni’s right-wing coalition is making the already perilous Mediterranean crossing harder by forcing boats run by non-governmental organisations that pick up migrants to dock at mainland ports in northern Italy, thus increasing their costs.

It has also introduced jail terms of up to 30 years for people smuggling that leads to the death of migrants.

But Italy was quick to give 150,000 Ukrainians who fled Russia’s war last year immediate access to support services under the European Union’s Temporary Protection Directive.

The directive, not used since it was adopted in 2001 is “the sleeping beauty of European asylum legislation,” Sara Consolato, immigration expert at Refugees Welcome Italy, a non-governmental organisation helping displaced people find housing, said.

Consolato said the freedom of movement within the EU that it gave Ukrainian refugees was an “astonishing U-turn in the policy of the EU, where the Dublin Regulation establishes that the first state of arrival is the one responsible for processing the asylum claim.”

The Association for Juridical

Studies on Immigration (ASGI), a group of lawyers, academics, consultants and civil society representatives focusing on the legal aspects of immigration, said there was now a “fast-track system for Ukrainians”, alongside an “extremely slow” asylum process for others. Big delays in officially registering asylum claims in Italy, an ASGI spokesperson said, were of growing concern as asylum seekers could in the meantime be deported.

In 2019, Italy declared 13 Balkan and African countries safe, meaning people could be

returned there much more easily. Tunisia was among those countries and Tunisians are among the main nationalities crossing the Mediterranean to Italy by boat. The vast majority are sent back home.

A report by a database managed by the non-profit European Council on Refugees and Exiles said it had become common for some nationalities, including Tunisians, not to be allowed to seek asylum. Of the 12,883 Tunisians who disembarked in 2020, only 918 were registered as asylum seekers, the report said. The Dublin

regulation states asylum seekers cannot choose the EU state where they would like to live, as their claim must be processed by the first state in which they arrive.

“But Ukrainians could enter EU member states in a safe and legal way and choose their destination freely, according to their family and cultural links,” Consolato said. Asylum seekers can apply to join only immediate family members elsewhere in the EU, but rights groups say there are often delays processing applications in a number of EU countries.

Laura Boldrini, a centre-left member of parliament and former spokesperson for the United Nations refugee agency, said the Dublin regulation could be unfair for refugees who arrive in Italy by sea, but want to join family elsewhere in the EU.

“You also have two categories now in Italy,” she said, referring to asylum seekers and Ukrainians benefiting from temporary protection. “Italians were very generous in offering assistance and receiving Ukrainians. They were well received because the far-right in power decided they were the real refugees.”

— Thomson Reuters Foundation



Italy was quick to give 150,000 Ukrainians who fled Russia’s war last year immediate access to support services.

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Sprinter Ali claims silver in Arab U23 Athletics in Tunisia

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MAY 22

Young Omani sprinter Ali bin Anwar al Balushi captured a silver medal at the Arab Athletics U23 Championships which is underway in Tunisia until May 24. Al Balushi's medal was registered in men's 100 metres race after an impressive display and he clocked 10.48 seconds. The gold medal went to Saudi Arabia's Nasser Mahmood Mohammed who cleared the distance in 10.19 seconds while Iraq's Saif Raad Abdulwahed claimed bronze medal as he finished in a timing of 10.58 seconds.

In other competitions of the championship, Oman national youth hammer throw record-holder Mubeen bin Rashid al Kindi was placed fourth after his throw of 59.70m. Saudi's Mohammed Abdullah secured the gold medal with a hammer throw of 63.15 metres.

In the men's 1,500 metres run, Oman's Hussain al Farsi ended the race in fifth place after he clocked 3 minutes 55.88 seconds. In the women's 100 metres, Oman's sprinter Azza al Yarubi clocked 12.37 seconds and finished the race in fourth position while the first place was for the Egyptian

runner Maram Mahmood as she ended the distance in a timing of 11.97 seconds.

The first edition of the championships is organised under the Arab Athletics Federation in cooperation with Tunisian Athletics Federation. As many as 300 athletes representing 18 countries from across the Arab world are taking part in the youth event. The Arabian championship acted as a thrilling event for the young athletes as they are gearing up to secure slots in the world class action including 2024 Olympic Games in Paris.

After completion of the second day competitions on Sunday, Morocco led the medals tally by 16 medals including seven gold, five silver and four bronze. Egypt are in second place with eight medals including five gold. The hosts Tunisia are third with 12 medals with three gold medals. Saudi Arabia are in fifth place with two gold, two silver and one bronze while Oman are positioned in 10th place with one silver only.

Oman's delegation to the Arab Athletics is being led by Shaikh Salim al Amri, Chairman of Oman Athletics Association (OAA).



OFA to conclude OL at Al Buraimi Complex

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MAY 22

The Oman Football Association (OFA) will conclude the Omantel League 2022-23 season at the Al Buraimi Complex with a match between champions Al Nahda and Sur on Tuesday at 7.30 pm.

The match, originally scheduled at Sur Sports Complex was shifted to Al Nahda's home stadium following an agreement between the two clubs.

The OFA will organise a closing ceremony at the Al Buraimi Complex, marking the end of an exhilarating season.

During the ceremony, the coveted Omantel League shield will be presented to the victorious Al Nahda Club, who clinched the title with an impressive performance before the final round. This will be the fourth title after winning the title in three previous versions, specifically the seasons 2006-07, 2008-09 and 2013-14.

The CEO of the Omani Telecommunications Company (Omantel) will graciously sponsor the closing ceremony of the



football season.

In addition to the closing ceremony, the spotlight will be on two other exciting matches. The Sultan Qaboos Complex in Bausher will witness an intense face-off between Al Suwaiq Club and Sohar Club. Simultaneously, at the Al Rustaq Complex, fans will watch an exciting match between Al Rustaq and Al Seeb. These matches will determine the runner-up position, with Al Suwaiq and Al Seeb teams vying for the coveted spot.

The runners-up position will determine the second participant in the Super Cup match. Since league champions Al Nahda are

also the HM's Cup winners this season, the runners-up team will earn the opportunity to compete in the Super Cup.

The remaining four matches are expected to conclude without any major surprises. Al Musannah Club will host Al Bashayer Club at Al Seeb Stadium, while Bahla meet Al Nasr at the Salalah Complex. Dhofar will welcome Al Ittihad to the Al Saada Complex and finally, Al Oruba Club will visit Oman Club at the Police Stadium.

Al Bashayer, Al Oruba and Al Ittihad clubs were officially relegated to the First Division two rounds before the league's conclusion.



Gill ton trumps Kohli's 101 as Bangalore knocked out of IPL

BENGALURU, India: Shubman Gill hit an unbeaten 104 to trump Virat Kohli's record century as holders Gujarat Titans knocked Royal Challengers Bangalore out of the IPL with a six-wicket victory on Sunday.

The result allowed five-time winners Mumbai Indians to fill the fourth and final play-off spot after they hammered Sunrisers Hyderabad by eight wickets in the first match of the day.

Gill starred in the final group match with a 52-ball knock that steered Gujarat to victory with five balls to spare. Gill hit the winning six to raise his second straight ton.

His hundred was the event's third of the day after Cameron Green's match-winning 100 for Mumbai and then Kohli's 101 not out. "As a bowler, Gill doesn't give you a chance," Gujarat skipper Hardik Pandya said of his star batsman, who put on a key 123-run stand with Vijay Shankar, who made 53. "Other batters also get confidence from it."

Kohli hit his second successive hundred and seventh in the IPL to overtake Chris Gayle's six and steer Bangalore to 197-5 in a match that started an hour late due to rain in Bengaluru. The effort was in vain as Kohli's wait for an elusive IPL title goes on for another year.

"A lot of people think that my T20 cricket is declining, I don't feel like that at all. I think I am playing my best T20 cricket again," said Kohli after an innings which featured 13 fours and a six.

"I'm just enjoying myself. This is how I play T20 cricket."



Gujarat Titans' Shubman Gill celebrates after scoring a century. — AFP

UNBELIEVABLE VIRAT

Mumbai will play Lucknow Super Giants, who became the third team to make the play-offs on Saturday, in the eliminator next week.

Table-toppers Gujarat and second-placed Chennai Super Kings will clash in the first qualifier on Tuesday. The winner of Qualifier 1 will head straight to the final in Ahmedabad on May 28 and the loser will play the winner

of the eliminator.

Kohli started strongly in a 67-run opening partnership with skipper Faf du Plessis, who made 28 to stay on top of the batting chart with 730 runs.

Kohli, who made a match-winning 100 in Bangalore's previous game, had moved behind Du Plessis in the batting list with 639 runs but Gill toppled the senior star to take second spot with

Kohli, who made a match-winning 100 in Bangalore's previous game, had moved behind Du Plessis in the batting list with 639 runs but Gill toppled the senior star to take second spot with 674 runs

674 runs.

"Virat played an unbelievable knock to give us a chance and thought that was a good score," said Du Plessis. "But Shubman played incredibly well to take the game away from us."

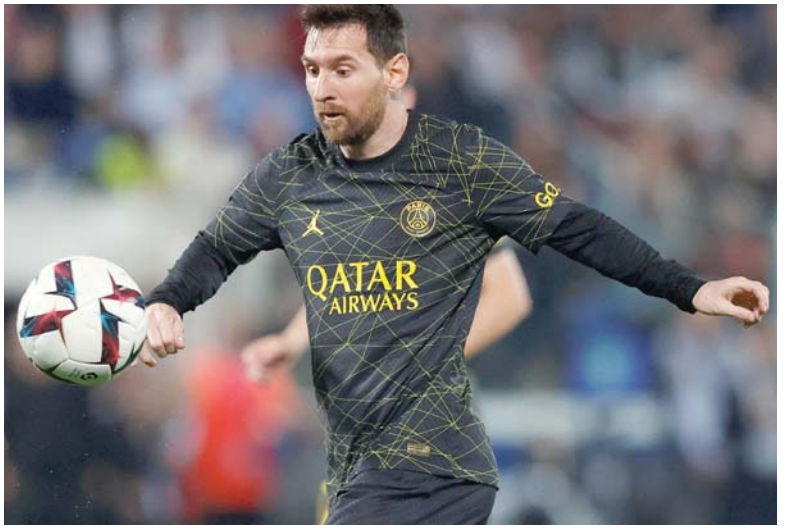
In the first match, Green starred for Mumbai with his first ever T20 century as he hit a 47-ball unbeaten 100 to drive his team home with two overs to spare.

Green, a big buy for Mumbai for \$2.11 million in the auction, stood out with eight fours and eight sixes.

After Rohit Sharma's departure, Green kept up the charge and put on an unbeaten partnership with Suryakumar Yadav, who hit 25, to register their eighth win in 14 group matches.

Medium-pace bowler Akash Madhwal set up victory with figures of 4-37 to check Hyderabad to 200-5, a total that looked to go bigger but for some disciplined bowling.

Hyderabad, led by Aiden Markram, took the wooden spoon in the 10-team table. — AFP



Messi to lead Argentina in friendly against Australia in China

BEIJING: Lionel Messi will lead world champions Argentina against Australia in a friendly in Beijing next month, with his first visit to China in six years set to spark a mass scramble for tickets.

The Argentina Embassy in China said on Monday that Argentina would play Australia on June 15, bringing Messi to the country for the first time since 2017.

It will mark the seventh time the 35-year-old has visited China and comes at a time when his future at Paris St. Germain is the subject of intense speculation.

A source close to Messi has told Reuters he had received a formal offer to join Saudi Arabian club Al Hilal next season, though his father said Messi had not "signed or agreed" a deal.

Messi has received a fervent welcome on each of his previous

visits to China, which has a huge soccer fan base despite the struggles of the men's national team, who have played at the World Cup only once.

Since his first China trip in 2005, Messi has played for Argentina or his former club Barcelona in friendlies. The LaLiga side beat Beijing Guoan 3-0 in a friendly in 2010.

News of the match against the Socceroos quickly went viral on Chinese social media, with many fans voicing eagerness to watch the game and see record seven-time Ballon d'Or winner Messi play.

"If I can get a ticket, I wouldn't mind not having a girlfriend for a whole year," one fan quipped on social media.

Australia and Argentina last met at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar in the round of 16, where Messi was among the scorers as his team won 2-1. — Reuters

Gujarat face challenge of breaching Chennai fortress



CHENNAI crowd is going to get another opportunity to see their hero performing at their home ground and I assure you that the Chidambaram Stadium is going to be one really noisy ground. Chennai are up against defending champions Gujarat and both these teams would want to be the first to make it to the final. Although, if they fail to do so, they would have another opportunity by playing against the winner of Lucknow and Mumbai.

Could this be the last game of Dhoni ever played in Chennai? This is the question that has been lasting through the season and with MS Dhoni, hitting autographed tennis balls in the crowd for fans and appreciating them. MSD has been really focused on looking to win this season and if that happens, he could very well look to call it off on a high this season. Experts have also suggested that, if he wins this year, he would play another season for the fans.

What exactly would MSD do is something that can not be defined and doubt that there would be a person who would know about it. He is known for walking away quietly without making any noise and that has been his speciality. Although,



from the fan's perspective, they would want the maximum of him. **GT VS CSK AT CHENNAI TEAM INFO** — Gujarat are obviously the defending champions and they have also been one of the best teams of the season this year in the league phase, but this is going to be one of the bigger challenges while they try to break the fortress of Chennai. Chennai are going to be facing the twin edged sword on

their spin friendly track. Gujarat are equipped with the quality Afghani spin duo of Rashid Khan and Noor Ahmad. In simple terms, it's a battle between the batting of Gujarat and the bowling of Chennai, if Gujarat can stand tall against that then this could very well be their game.

PREVIOUS ENCOUNTER — Both these teams clashed in the first game of this year's edition in a

cracker of a match. Although that match was played in Ahmedabad, which is the home ground of Gujarat Titans and they are a very strong side there. On the back of Ruturaj Gaikwad's blistering 92, Chennai managed to put on 178/7 in 20 overs batting first. Chasing 179 to win, Shubman Gill anchored the innings with a 63, while Saha, Sudarshan and Shankar scored 20s to comfortably chase the target with

5 wickets and 4 balls to spare.

Head-to-Head - Played — 3; Won by GT - 3; Won by CSK - 0
CSK possible 12 — R Gaikwad, D Conway, A Rahane, A Rayudu, S Dube, M Ali, R Jadeja, M S Dhoni, D Chahar, T Deshpande, M Theekshana, M Pathirana
GT possible 12 — S Gill, W Saha, H Pandya, D Shanaka, D Miller, R Tewatia, R Khan, M Sharma,

N Ahmad, M Shami, Y Dayal, V Shankar.

Pitch & Weather Report — The MA Chidambaram Stadium is the home ground of Chennai Super King and it is also called as the unbreachable fortress of CSK. The pitch is ideally trusted to support the spinners and stroke making becomes tougher as the innings progresses. Although, the small boundaries will provide results to even half of a well-connected short as well. The temperature is expected to hover between 29 to 36 degrees and as the evening progresses, batting could get easier with dew coming into play. Teams winning the toss could very well chose to bowl first.

Match Prediction — This is the match which both these teams would like to win and then take a relaxation break till the other teams fight it out for the final. Both have been the best teams of the tournament and they would like to go with the winning momentum to the finale. Expect this to be a cracker of a match, with both the teams having quality spin on their side. Toss could very well be a factor and team chasing would have a little advantage. All said and done, I feel that this is the year for MSD and his leadership has been exceptional and CSK should win this one comfortably at home. So Chennai would be looking to greet the Gujarati's with the 'Mulligatawny Soup'.

MEDVEDEV WINS MAIDEN CLAY COURT TITLE AT ITALIAN OPEN



I don't love clay, but let's call it a friendship, I always want to believe in myself and I always want to win the biggest tournaments in the world

DANIIL MEDVEDEV



Defeated Rune puts 'too many expectations' on himself

ROME: Holger Rune on Sunday blamed a nervous start and the relentless game of Daniil Medvedev for his 7-5, 7-5 loss in the final of the Italian Open. The seventh-ranked Dane said that he might have also felt the pressure of two back-to-back high-profile tests after reaching the Foro Italico final by defeating world number four Casper Ruud in Saturday's semi-final.

"I was very nervous stepping into the match," he said. "Maybe I put too many expectations on myself, even if I told myself not to. He played great, really solid from the back of the court."

The 20-year-old added: "Medvedev likes to grind. If he gets a chance to grind, it's going to be long rallies." Despite his defeat, Rune remains a title contender for the French Open which starts in Paris next Sunday especially with 14-time champion Rafael Nadal missing with a hip injury.

"Paris is the main goal of the clay season. I think I had the matches that I needed to be as well-prepared as possible," said Rune who also stunned Novak Djokovic in the quarterfinals in Rome.

Rune was runner-up at the Monte Carlo Masters and successfully defended his Munich title earlier in the clay court season. "Now it is the last small things I want to do better the next time I stay in these big matches," he said after missing out on the chance to win a second Masters title. — AFP

ROME: Daniil Medvedev beat Holger Rune 7-5, 7-5 to win the Italian Open on Sunday, his first trophy in a clay court tournament and a major boost ahead of the French Open.

"I don't love clay, but let's call it a friendship," said Medvedev after his one-hour, 41-minute win over the 20-year-old Dane.

Medvedev, who had been 0-3 in Rome prior to this year's edition, claimed his fifth title of the season and 20th of his career.

"I always want to believe in myself and I always want to win the biggest tournaments in the world," said former world number one Medvedev who knocked out 2017 champion Alexander

Zverev and 2022 runner-up Stefanos Tsitsipas on his way to the final.

"But at the same time, I didn't think I could win a Masters 1000 on clay in my career because usually I hated it, I hated playing on it. I didn't feel good on it and nothing was working."

Sunday's final was the first in Rome since 2004 without either Rafael Nadal or Novak Djokovic.

"When I came here I felt so good in practice and I told my coach, 'I don't know what is happening but I am feeling amazing, so let's see how it goes,'" added Medvedev.

"But then you have to play the toughest opponents in the world to try to make it.

"I am really happy I managed to do it and to prove to myself and everyone else that I am capable of doing it."

The French Open, the second Grand Slam of the year, starts in Paris next Sunday.

Medvedev was an opening-round loser in the French capital in all his first four visits before making the quarter-finals in 2021 and last 16 in 2022.

"I like clay much more now," he said after Sunday's final which secured him a sixth trophy at the elite Masters 1000 level.

Medvedev took charge of the final which started 90 minutes late due to more rain, seizing the opening set with a break in the final game.

The momentum slowed in the second

as Rune began with a break of the third seed to love, only to lose it for 2-all.

STEP IT UP

World number seven Rune struck back in the seventh game, which began with a 38-shot rally and ended with Medvedev sending a return long to trail 4-3.

Rune made it 5-3 as he won his 13th point from 16 but was broken back for a second time in the set for 5-5.

Two games later, Medvedev took victory when his opponent fired a forehand long.

"Today we both started a little nervous," Medvedev said. "We were missing easy shots.

"I was able to step it up at the end of

the first set before he did.

"But in the second he stepped up immediately, I knew I had to play better and not overthink it too much, just go up to his level. After that I played amazing."

Medvedev was playing his second clay final after Barcelona in 2019 where he lost to Dominic Thiem.

Rune was trying to become the youngest player to win the title in Rome since then-19-year-old Rafael Nadal lifted the trophy in 2006.

He defeated Novak Djokovic and Casper Ruud en route to Sunday's final and had been hoping to win a second Masters after triumphing at Paris last year. — AFP

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Vale signs land reservation pact for Mega Hub in Duqm

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MAY 22

Brazilian mining conglomerate Vale SA signed a land reservation agreement with the Port of Duqm Company SAOC and a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Marafiq with Marafiq to establish an integrated industrial complex (Mega Hub) to produce low-carbon products to the steelmaking industry in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD).

The signing ceremony took place at the Invest Oman Hall, in the presence of Eng Ahmed bin Hassan al Dheeb, Deputy Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ); Dr Mansoor bin Talib al Hinai, Chairman of the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR) and Vice Chairman of National Negotiation Team; and Ibtisam bint Ahmed al Faroojiyah, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, for Investment Promotion.

Signed by Eduardo Bartolomeo, Vale's CEO, and Reggy Vermeulen, Port of Duqm's CEO, the land reservation agreement between

THE PORT OF DUQM IS ALSO SET TO BE A FUTURE HUB FOR GREEN HYDROGEN AND ITS DERIVATIVES



Vale and Port of Duqm also commissions joint studies to build a Mega Hub in Oman.

Additionally, a MoU was signed by Eduardo Bartolomeo and Abdullah al Hashmi, Managing Director of Marafiq, a leading utilities service provider in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm. The memorandum aims to provide the project with access to all the utilities and services required for its operations, while promoting

the use of clean energy and green hydrogen at the port of Duqm.

The stakeholders focused on the use of clean energy and green hydrogen in the coming Mega Hub. The planned industrial complex will cover an estimated total area of 6.78 km2 and produce hot briquetted iron (HBI), and other steel products.

"The signing of these agreements marks a significant milestone in establishing Vale as a



leader in sustainable mining," said Vale's CEO.

"We are thrilled about the prospects the planned Mega Hub presents in supporting the steel industry's drive towards greener operations. The Port of Duqm, a growing key industrial hub in the Sultanate of Oman, is perfectly positioned to support our expansion plans, and we are excited to demonstrate the potential of Oman and Duqm as an attractive

proposition for foreign direct investment."

Speaking for the Port of Duqm, CEO Reggy Vermeulen stated: "We are pleased that Vale, a world-renowned mining company, chose to establish its Mega Hub in the Port of Duqm. The strategic location of our port on key international trade routes, its proximity to large regional markets including India, Africa and GCC countries, and its world-class infrastructure make it

an ideal location to establish such major industrial projects."

"The Port of Duqm is also set to be a future hub for green hydrogen and its derivatives," Vermeulen added. "We are optimistic that it will quickly emerge as a destination of choice for green steel manufacturing and are proud to call ourselves the 'green port'. We are committed to supporting the national goals of the Sultanate of Oman, including de-carbonisation, commitment to net-zero, and realising the sustainable development goals laid out in Oman Vision 2040."

Marafiq's Managing Director Eng Abdullah bin Mohammed al Hashimi stated that Marafiq is keen to sign this MoU with Vale and provide the project with vital utilities services, including power. Al Hashimi also highlighted the importance of Vale's Mega Hub plans in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm, and said the company will fully support the project which in turn promotes Marafiq's growth.

The Mega Hub initiative contributes to Vale's commitment to reduce 15 per cent of net Scope 3 emissions by 2035. **TURN TO P15**

Salalah Port second most efficient port in the world

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, MAY 22

The Port of Salalah has been ranked the second most efficient container port in the world in the 3rd edition of global Container Port Performance Index (CPPI) developed by the World Bank and S&P Global Market Intelligence. Yashan Port in China ranked first in the latest CPPI report.

The CPPI is an annual report that ranks container ports worldwide based on their operational efficiency. The report is based on data collected from more than 348 ports worldwide and covers over 80% of global container traffic.

The ranking is based on five key performance indicators (KPIs) including vessel turnaround time, berth productivity, port capacity utilisation, container dwell time, and time spent at anchorage.

The ranking is intended to identify gaps and opportunities for improvement for the benefit of key stakeholders in global trade, including government, shipping lines, port and terminal operators, shippers, logistics companies and consumers.

The ports in the Middle East and North Africa performed well this year, with three ports from the region finishing in the



top five: Port of Salalah in Oman ranked 2nd, Khalifa Port in Abu Dhabi took 3rd and Tanger-Mediterranean ranked 4th.

Completing the top ten include Colombia's Cartagena Port (5th), Malaysia's Tanjung Pelapas (6th), China's Ningbo Port (7th), Qatar's Hamad Port (8th), China's Guangzhou Port (9th) and Egypt's Port Said (10th).

"In the aggregate index, the two top-ranked container ports in the CPPI 2022 are Yangshan Port (China) in first place, followed by the Port of Salalah (Oman) in second place.

These two ports occupy the same positions in the rankings generated by the constituent approaches. The Port of Salalah was ranked second in both approaches in CPPI 2021, while the Yangshan Port ranked third and fourth in the statistical and administrative approaches, respectively, in CPPI 2021," the report said. **TURN TO P15**

South Oman alone has renewable energy potential of 300 – 500 GW

Prodigious capacity: Offshore wind potential of 300 GW to be explored once land-based projects are substantially developed

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MAY 22

The southern part of the Sultanate of Oman, characterised by vast sun-soaked desert expanses and rugged wind-swept terrain, has ample renewable resources to generate a world-beating 300 – 500 gigawatts (GW) of zero carbon electricity.

Together with an estimated 300 GW of offshore wind capacity, the Sultanate of Oman is well-positioned to emerge among the world's leading players in the green energy industry, Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi (pictured), Minister of Energy and Minerals, said here on Monday.

The upbeat assessment of Oman's prodigious renewable energy potential came at the opening of IEEE Power Talks — a 3-day forum on the power and energy sector co-hosted by Raya Services and UMS Event.

Delivering the keynote address, Al Aufi provided an overview of



Oman's ambitious bid to kickstart the development of a green hydrogen based sector in line with the government's Net Zero strategy.

That effort is well and truly under way, he said, noting that the Ministry has already signed agreements for six green hydrogen projects earlier this year (under the legacy route).

More agreements are in the offing under the auction route overseen by Hydrom, the orchestrator of Oman's nascent green hydrogen industry. "We are negotiating the first two auction blocks, which will hopefully be signed by the end of this month or early next month," the minister said.

"Thus, all in all, if everything goes well, we are looking at generating anything between 25 – 30 GW within the next 5 – 7 years. When you compare that with a current generation capacity of about 10 – 11 GW, we are effectively multiplying the total electricity generated — and this time it's going to be green electricity," he stated.

Total investment in green hydrogen projects is estimated at \$30 – 40 billion over the next seven years, Al Aufi said. Much of the output of green hydrogen from these projects will be potentially converted into green ammonia or some other carrier for export.

But ultimately, the goal for Oman is to utilise part of this

output to decarbonise the local industry and economy, he stressed. Longer term, however, Oman's renewable energy output can be scaled up to stellar levels, according to the minister.

"In terms of renewable energy alone, we estimate that South Oman can potentially generate anywhere between 300 to 500 GW of electricity — that's a lot of power that is generated in one country. Of course, this means there is a lot of work that we need to do. (Envisioned timeframes) will probably be 2050, 2060 or 2070," he said.

Equally promising, Al Aufi pointed out, is the offshore wind sector, which is presently not on the ministry's radar because of the relatively high capital cost involved.

"Let's first get the (land-based projects) moving, and then we can start looking at the offshore potential. There's probably another 300 GW that we can produce from the offshore sector at some point in time.

And later, we can go back again to the areas that we did not touch either because it's a military training zone or an environmental reserve and see how we can coexist. And of course that itself will have huge generation capacity."

Lulu launches Mango Mania Festival 2023

MUSCAT: The much-anticipated Lulu Hypermarket Mango Mania Festival 2023 is here to whisk you away on a journey down memory lane. The mango fest, which will be held from May 17 to 27, is organised every year for customers to indulge in a burst of juicy goodness in summer.

The festival was inaugurated by Amit Narang, the Ambassador of India to the Sultanate of Oman, at Lulu Hypermarket Bausher, in the presence of a representative from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, Lulu staff and customers.

India with its extensive varieties of mangoes, is a food lovers delight. Mango Mania, Lulu's annual event has showcased not only mangoes but several other mango delicacies, which I am sure will delight the citizens of Oman", said Amit Narang while inaugurating the event.



From the common to the rarest, more than 60 varieties of the luscious tropical fruit from different parts of the world will be

on display during the festival.

LuLu has flown in mangoes from across the world, namely India, Yemen, Thailand, Vietnam,

Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, Kenya, Uganda, and, not to forget, local delicacies from Oman.

There will also be amazing deals and offers on freshly imported selection of mangoes. Customers will also be able to relish some of the special mango treats in the hot food, bakery, sweets and pickles section. Special mango preserves, smoothies, pulps, juices, and jams will also be available during the promotion.

Shabeer K A, Regional Director — Lulu Hypermarkets, Oman, said "LuLu is happy to organise Mango Mania Fest, which has become a popular event among our customers over the years, especially for lovers of this exotic fruit. It is a unique opportunity for shoppers to experience the best varieties of the sweet, succulent, refreshing and mouth-watering mangoes and mango products

flowed in from different parts of the world. We hope this fest would be a treat for the customers looking for a burst of juicy goodness this summer."

"Like every year, we have stacked up our aisles with a wide range of delicious mangoes from countries all over the world for this year's fest. Each variety of mango has its own distinctive taste, texture, aroma, colour and size, making it suitable for consumers of all ages and nationalities," he added.

Lulu constantly brings in innovative strategies and ideas to keep up with customers' changing preferences and needs for every season and occasion. With a leading retail experience that includes the very best services, selection, quality, and value, shopping at Lulu has always been an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

Low car loan interest rates from Oman Arab Bank



MUSCAT: Oman Arab Bank (OAB) is helping its customers to get moving this summer with low car interest rates — starting from 3.75 per cent per annum for two years — alongside dealership deals and special savings to help them keep cool as the hottest months approach.

The limited-time offer is bolstered with an additional value-added benefit of free insurance on used cars and fuel cards worth of RO 50 per month for the first 50 customers.

In addition to attractive rates, the loans are among the most flexible available, with financing available for up to 10 years, for both new and pre-owned cars.

On top of that, customers can benefit from special agreements with car dealerships across Oman for discounted rates on best-selling cars, while new customers will have credit card fees waived for the first year.

And when customers take out an auto loan, they will also receive a 65 per cent discount on window tinting and 35 per cent off other services from Car Lab.

Simple, transparent and easy to understand, OAB's car loan process is optimised for faster turnaround for customers. The offer is available until May 31, 2023, from OAB branches when customers transfer their salaries to the bank.

For more information on the car loan package, including full rates and conditions, please visit www.oman-arabbank.com.

OPAZ showcases latest investor e-services at COMEX 2023



MUSCAT: The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) is participating in Oman's Official Technology Show (COMEX 2023), which is being held with the support of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology and Oman Vision 2040 during May 22-25, at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

As part of its participation in COMEX 2023 Show, OPAZ is showcasing its various initiatives in digital transformation and smart cities. OPAZ is also displaying a number of outstanding projects and applications in the field of artificial intelligence, including the Internet of Things project, which is being implemented in the network control rooms at OPAZ building and the

Centralised Compliance System "Eltizam", which will be launched at COMEX 2023, in addition to artificial intelligence and drone experiments.

Visitors and participants passing by OPAZ booth can view the different initiatives and achievements in the digital transformation, artificial intelligence and the use of 3D printing technology projects of OPAZ. Likewise, they will be also familiarised with the various services provided by OPAZ and its affiliated zones to investors and other beneficiaries.

In addition, OPAZ is presenting its success story in the digital transformation journey in the first forum for digital proficiency in government digital transformation that is held on the sidelines of COMEX 2023.

Bank Nizwa continues to champion fintech at COMEX 2023

MUSCAT: Bank Nizwa, the leading and most trusted Islamic bank in the Sultanate of Oman, is proud to announce its unwavering support for COMEX 2023, Oman's prestigious technology, communications, innovation and digital transformation show.

As the main Islamic Banking partner, Bank Nizwa aims to leverage Oman's fintech and banking sector to drive innovation and digitalisation in the industry.

The 32nd Annual Hybrid Event, taking place at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC), as well as through Virtual Support Platforms, will showcase a wide array of exhibitions, conferences, awards, workshops, seminars, certified training programmes, gaming, B2B meetings and other engaging attractions.

Commenting on their participation at COMEX 2023, Khaled al Kayed, Bank Nizwa's Chief Executive Officer said, "At Bank Nizwa, we firmly believe that digitalisation and innovation go hand in hand with our core values. We are committed to staying at the forefront of this transformative wave, continuously investing in cutting-edge technologies and nurturing a culture of creativity and collaboration.

By doing so, we not only enhance customer experiences but also contribute to the growth and sustainability of



the communities we serve. We remain focused on delivering seamless digital experiences, empowering our customers with real-time access to their finances and providing secure and transparent transactions.

We understand the importance of adapting to the evolving needs and preferences of our tech-savvy customers, and we are dedicated to offering them a comprehensive suite of Shariah-compliant digital banking services."

Bank Nizwa, renowned for its position at the forefront of banking and FinTech and recognised as the 'Most Innovative Islamic Bank,' remains committed to digitalisation and the introduction of dynamic Shariah-compliant products and services.

At COMEX 2023, the bank presented its cutting-edge digital banking offerings to visitors,

including a Digital Onboarding section that allows individuals to open an account with Bank Nizwa seamlessly through the use of a QR code.

This digital onboarding feature brings Islamic banking closer to a wider audience and simplifies the account opening process for prospective customers.

Bank Nizwa remains committed to investing in innovation, ensuring a distinctive digital experience for its esteemed customers whilst simultaneously establishing an equitable platform for the Bank's future business expansion.

Innovation is deeply ingrained in the bank's strategic vision, providing significant advantages to its business partners, who can anticipate improvements in customer-facing applications and corresponding backend processes and systems.

Ikram package for pensioners hailed for innovative facilities

MUSCAT: The Ikram package launched by Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat has been hailed by customers for its innovative facilities and services. In line with its strategy to improve financial inclusion in Oman, Meethaq's Ikram package offers a specialised package of Shariah-compliant financing products with attractive profit rates catering to Omani pensioners.

The Ikram package was launched earlier in the beginning of 2023 after a detailed study of the needs of retirees from

government and private institutions.

On this occasion, Sami Bait Rashid, Assistant General Manager, Retail Banking – Meethaq, said: "Meethaq developed the Ikram pensioner package to offer a full suite of Islamic financial services and facilities that meet our customers' needs and aspirations.

We are hence delighted to see the excellent response to this newly-launched package which is playing a key role in bringing about greater financial inclusion



for retirees.

In this context, I would like to mention that Meethaq will continue to introduce new financial products and services targeting different sections of society in line with the changing needs of our customers to whom I extend thanks for their continuous trust in Meethaq's products and services."

Both current and new customers can benefit from the Ikram package which offers a wide range of services, competitive profit rates, exclusive financing

offers, credit card offers and discounts at selected merchant partner outlets. Under Ikram, pensioners can apply for different types of financing solutions and credit cards till the age of 70.

Housing finance will be provided up to a maximum of 25 years or till the customer is 70 years old.

To know more details, customers can contact the Meethaq Call Centre 24/7 on 24656666, while applications can be made in person at the nearest Meethaq branch.



Promising results from Oman's Block 70 production test: Maha Energy



QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, MAY 22

Swedish based international Oil & Gas firm Maha Energy has described the initial finds of its production test conducted on Block 70 onshore Oman as "promising". The test, centring on Alpha Pad in the block, encompassed four wells: Mafrag-9, Mafrag-7, Mafrag-10, and Mafrag-8.

The production test has yielded encouraging outcomes, showcasing the potential of the wells, said Maha Energy in a statement.

Mafrag-9, the first well linked to the production test facilities, demonstrated a flow rate ranging from 300 to 350 barrels of oil per day, accompanied by a water cut of approximately 5%.

However, Mafrag-7 faced initial challenges during testing and is currently undergoing reassessment to address these issues, the company noted.

Another promising result emerged from Mafrag-10, which exhibited an estimated production rate of 430 barrels of oil per day, with a water cut of around 10% before the conclusion of the test.

Similarly, Mafrag-8 showcased favourable results, achieving an estimated production rate of 600 barrels of oil per day, with a water cut below 5%.

Significantly, Block 70's output is categorised as

heavy oil with a viscosity that exceeded initial expectations, according to Maha Energy. To ensure compliance with transportation and processing requirements at third-party facilities, Maha is collaborating with experienced service providers specialised in heavy oil processing.

They are implementing various thermal and chemical treatment methods to optimise the quality of the extracted oil.

Once the necessary specifications are met, Maha plans to transport the oil via heated trucks to third-party facilities for further processing. Subsequently, the oil will be integrated into the Omani national pipeline system for transportation.

"Maha remains committed to comprehensive testing and data collection. The evaluation process will continue until all eight newly drilled production wells have been thoroughly assessed. Each well is equipped with a Progressive Cavity Pump (PCP).

As per the scheduled timeline, the drilling programme for production, exploration, and appraisal wells in Block 70 is progressing smoothly in the second quarter of 2023. Block 70 is operated by Maha Energy, holding a 65% working interest, while Mafrag Energy retains the remaining 35% interest in the project.

Major MoUs signed on digital transformation at COMEX

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, MAY 22

The COMEX Exhibition 2023 which got under way under the auspices of His Highness Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar on Monday witnessed major IT giants entering into agreements and signing Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) towards digital transformation and keeping pace with the Oman Vision 2040.

Oman's OQ, the global integrated energy group, signed 8 agreements and MoUs with specialised international companies and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) focused on digital transformation and the technology of the fourth Industrial Revolution (IR).

In addition, OQ forged alliances with Deloitte and SAP to introduce the SAP ERP 2.0 system, along with Ariba, Concur, and other innovative applications. The MoUs were formalised on the sidelines of OQ's participation in the COMEX 2023, demonstrating the group's commitment to staying abreast of technological advancements and enhancing operational efficiency across its facilities and assets.

The first agreement involved



a partnership with Oman Data Park (ODP) to optimise cloud systems.

The second agreement, signed with Accenture, will facilitate the development and operation of OQ's digital factory, accelerating the group's digital transformation journey. Ashraf bin Hamad al Mamari, Chief Executive — People, Technology, and Culture at OQ, and Maryam bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, OQ's Vice President of Integrated Digital Solutions signed the agreements.

In an effort to enhance remote support capabilities, OQ signed agreements with Marmol Integrated LLC and Data Capture Systems LLC, enabling technicians to utilise augmented and virtual reality technology through devices like virtual reality headsets and camera-equipped

helmets. These tools will enable seamless communication with experts in remote areas.

Additionally, OQ entered into an agreement with BHC3i, aiming to leverage advanced artificial intelligence technology for predictive maintenance operations. Another MoU was signed with SAP to explore the potential transition to the SAP S4-Hanna system, which offers improved business processes and streamlined data, transaction, and analytics management.

The eighth agreement was inked with CISCO to explore avenues for enhancing the security of OQ's networks.

Speaking to the Observer, Ashraf al Mamari said, "OQ seeks to partner with international companies, national firms, and

SMEs in the technology and digital transformation fields to enhance the in-country added value. We believe in the importance of sharing experiences and knowledge, as well as developing the expertise of individuals in these areas."

He emphasised that OQ is guided by a digital transformation strategy that enhances work efficiency, reduces costs, and prioritises personnel safety. Al Mamari highlighted that OQ awards digital transformation contracts to specialised national companies, empowering them in these domains.

"OQ remains committed to integrating cutting-edge technologies within its facilities and operations. Our participation in COMEX 2023, showcasing 11 new technologies, reflects OQ's vision for the future.

OQ has operations across 17 countries that covers the entire value chain from exploration and production of oil and gas, refineries and petrochemicals to marketing and distribution of end-user products reaching more than 60 countries worldwide.

OQ Alternative Energy focuses on investments in renewables and green hydrogen in Oman and for us digitalisation is an ongoing process," Al Mamari added.

Vale signs land reservation pact for Mega Hub in Duqm

FROM PAGE 13

Vale seeks to reduce its Scope 1 and 2 emissions by 33 per cent by 2030 and achieve net-zero by 2050, in line with the Paris Agreement, leading the evolution towards sustainable mining.

The trend towards the use of low-carbon technologies in the production of HBI and iron briquettes is a major stride in the sector's sustainability and is aligned with the objective of net-zero by 2050 adopted by Oman under the leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq.

The development of the Mega Hub project is expected to produce HBI and steel

products to supply both the local and export markets, while significantly reducing of CO2 emissions.

The production of HBI using natural gas emits around 60 per cent less CO2 when compared to more traditional methods. In the future, the replacement of natural gas with hydrogen and the usage of renewable energy could eliminate CO2 emissions.

Vale is expected to build and operate iron ore concentration and briquetting plants within the hubs, securing the supply of high-grade agglomerated products. Local parties are expected to promote the construction of the required

logistics infrastructure.

Investors and/or clients are expected to construct and operate the direct reduction plants and be off-takers of HBI for either the export or domestic markets.

These Mega Hubs shall supply different markets across the globe, supporting the de-carbonisation of the steelmaking industry.

Abbas Irshad al Lawati, CEO of Invest Oman Lounge, stated that the lounge is a single window that provides major investors with integrated services and in cooperation with relevant government and private entities, presents to them investment opportunities.

Salalah Port second most efficient port in the world

FROM PAGE 13

The Port of Salalah has climbed four positions from sixth place in the Container Ports Performance Index (CPPI) 2020 to second place globally in the CPPI 2021 report. The port has been recognised for its operational efficiency and its ability to handle large volumes of cargo.

The port has also been recognised for its commitment to environmental sustainability and social responsibility. This recognition is a testament to the hard work and dedication of the management and staff at the Port of Salalah.

It also highlights the importance of investing in infrastructure and technology to improve operational efficiency and enhance competitiveness in the global market.

Oman Power and Energy Forum highlights Oman's remarkable progress on energy transition

MUSCAT: The second edition of the annual three-day Oman Power and Energy Forum commenced yesterday at the Grand Millennium Hotel in Muscat and discussed developments in energy transition in line with Oman Vision 2040.

Eng Salim bin Nasser al Auqi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, was the Chief Guest at the forum.

In his keynote address at the forum, Al Auqi stated, "The global shift towards sustainable energy sources contributes to achieving a balance between sustainable development and mitigating the

impacts of climate change.

It also presents an opportunity to capitalise on investments and economic prospects. This transformation is in line with the Sultanate of Oman's adoption of ambitious plans for its energy transition journey, aligning with the Oman Vision 2040.

This vision serves as a roadmap towards a more sustainable, diversified, and prosperous future by embracing clean technologies, diversifying energy sources, achieving zero carbon neutrality, and enhancing national capabilities through innovation,



in-country value programmes, industry localisation, job creation, and the development of national

competencies."

He also emphasised the importance of partnerships and

cooperation in achieving the goals of transformation, overcoming challenges, and leveraging the opportunities presented by the sector. These efforts are aimed at securing a more sustainable future for the Sultanate of Oman and the world as a whole.

The forum is organised by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) Oman Section, under the auspices of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, and in partnership with the IEEE Power and Energy Society and Oman Society of Engineers with the support of

the Authority for Public Services Regulation and in strategic partnership with Nama Group.

The discussions on day one of the forum focused on three key themes including updates on market trends and policies, which provided insights into the latest developments and regulatory changes in the industry; sustainable energy, focusing on the promotion of clean and renewable energy sources; and distribution systems, which explored the modernisation and efficiency of energy delivery networks.

China’s power consumption shows moderate growth



JOHM KEMP

The author is a senior market analyst specialising in oil and energy systems.

China’s electricity generation grew in line with the long-term average during the first four months of the year as the economy recovered from the end of Covid-19 lockdowns and the exit wave of the pandemic.

Total electrical generation increased by 128 billion kilowatt-hours (4.9%) between January and April compared with the same period in 2022, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS).

Increases from thermal power plants (+83 billion kWh), wind farms (+64 billion kWh), solar farms (+16 billion kWh) and nuclear units (+6 billion kWh)

more than offset reduced hydro-electric output (-42 billion kWh).

China’s burgeoning electricity consumption is so huge the government has no choice but to follow an “all of the above” strategy even as it tries to boost the share of generation from low-emission sources.

Thermal generation, mostly from coal-fired units, has increased by 38% over the last nine years, while hydro is up by 31%.

But there have been even faster increases from wind farms (up by more than 580%) and solar (up by almost 400% in just five years).

As a result, thermal generation’s share of the total fell to 71% in the first four months of 2023 down

from 79% in the same period in 2014.

Renewables wind and solar provided 14% of generation up from just 3% in 2014, while nuclear supplied 5% up from 2%.

Coal remains the “ballast stone” for China’s energy security, according to the government-owned Xinhua news agency.

China’s resource endowment is rich in coal but poor in oil with little gas, according to Xinhua, ensuring coal continues to play an irreplaceable role in energy security.

Ensuring sufficient electricity generation to meet rapidly rising demand from industry and households is the more urgent priority in the short term while

reducing emissions is a more long-term goal.

As a result, the government has encouraged rapid growth in coal production to build up power plant inventories and reduce the threat of electricity shortages this summer and next winter.

Coal production increased by more than 80 million tonnes (almost +6%) in the first four months of 2023 compared with the same period in 2022.

Coal imports also increased by 67 million tonnes (almost +90%) to ensure adequate supplies for both generators and steelmakers.

On the consumption side, electricity demand growth in the first four months shows a clear emphasis on industry rather than

households.

Consumption by primary industries increased by +10% while the service sector was up +7%, manufacturers up +5% and households by less than +1%, based on data from the National Energy Administration.

The pattern is consistent with a post-pandemic rebound of the economy driven by heavy industry as well as in-person services such as restaurants and hotels.

But manufacturing has experienced a more modest rebound, held back by weak demand in major export markets as well as cautious spending by domestic businesses and households. — Reuters

Office landlords are in store for retail redux

JENNIFER SABA

Office landlords are in store for pain, but there’s a light at the end of the hallway. Though vacancy rates in the United States recently hit a 30-year high, owners of retail space – shopping malls and grocery stores – have shown that a bounce back is possible.

A reset is in store, but the best office landlords can make it, too.

Empty space in office buildings is on the rise. Approaching a fifth of the office space in the United States was vacant as of the first quarter this year, according to commercial real estate service and investment firm CBRE.

The rate is expected to peak in the second half of 2024. That’s more than twice as high as it was in 2000 though the sector neared similar levels in 2009 during the great recession.

Working from home is a big culprit. Kastle, which tracks key card swipes in office buildings in 10 cities across the nation including Dallas, New York and San Francisco, found the average occupancy rate during the week of May 3 is just a hair under 50 per cent. But compounding the problem are wide-scale layoffs as companies hunt to cut costs. Leases are a good place to start. That’s an ominous sign for the near term. But retail real estate, which includes everything from malls to

shopping centres, went through its own misery. Twin forces of the rise of e-commerce coupled with an economic downturn in 2008 left many store owners in the lurch.

Right before the financial crisis in 2007 there was roughly 7 billion of square feet of retail space with about 170 million square feet added to the market that year.

But malls emptied out in the years following and the vacancy rate was nearly 10% from 2009 through 2011.

Rent per square foot went from \$21.14 in 2007 to \$19.24 in 2011. But then the industry right-sized.

New construction dropped 85 per cent between 2006 and 2022, according to CBRE. People returned to shopping centres in the wealthiest areas, like Short Hills, New Jersey. The average asking rent per square foot, after 11 years, bounced back and in 2022 hit an average \$22.87.

Landlords of office buildings, such as Vornado Realty Trust and Boston Properties, may find they are on a similar decade-long trajectory. In the first quarter, new building plummeted 58 per cent to 2.7 million square feet compared to the prior quarter, according to commercial real estate services firm JLL.

Effective rents are on the decline too, approximately 9 per cent quarter-over-quarter. It might be a slog, as retail shows, but office could be in store for a redux. — Reuters

An untested oil price cap has helped choke revenue to Russia



JIM TANKERSLEY

The author is a White House correspondent for The New York Times, with a focus on economic policy.

In early June, at the behest of the Biden administration, German leaders assembled top economic officials from the Group of 7 nations for a video conference with the goal of striking a major financial blow to Russia.

The Americans had been trying, in a series of one-off conversations last year, to sound out their counterparts in Europe, Canada and Japan on an unusual and untested idea. Administration officials wanted to try to cap the price that Moscow could command for every barrel of oil it sold on the world market. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen had floated the plan a few weeks earlier at a meeting of finance ministers in Bonn, Germany.

The reception had been mixed, in part because other countries were not sure how serious the administration was about proceeding. But the call in early June left no doubt: US officials said they were committed to the oil price cap idea and urged everyone else to get on board. At the end of the month, the G-7 leaders signed on to the concept.

As the G-7 prepares to meet again this week in Hiroshima, Japan, official and market data suggest the untried idea has helped achieve its twin initial goals since the price cap took effect in December. The cap appears to be forcing Russia to sell its oil for less than other major producers, when crude prices are down significantly from their levels immediately after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Data from Russia and international agencies suggest that Moscow’s revenues have dropped, forcing budget choices that administration officials say could be starting to hamper its war effort. Drivers in America and elsewhere are paying far less at the gasoline pump than some analysts feared.



G7 leaders at Schloss Elmau in Krün, Germany, in this file photo. — The New York Times

Russia’s oil revenues in March were down 43% from a year earlier, the International Energy Agency reported last month, even though its total export sales volume had grown. This week, the agency reported that Russian revenues had rebounded slightly but were still down 27% from a year ago. The government’s tax receipts from the oil and gas sectors were down by nearly two-thirds from a year ago.

Russian officials have been forced to change how they tax oil production in an apparent bid to make up for some of the lost revenues.

They also appear to be spending government money to try to start building their own network of ships, insurance companies and other essentials of the oil trade, an effort that European and US officials say is a clear sign of success.

“The Russian price cap is working, and working extremely well,” said Wally Adeyemo, the deputy Treasury secretary.

“The money that they’re spending on building up this ecosystem to support their energy trade is money they can’t spend on building missiles or buying tanks. And what we’re going to continue to do is force Russia to have these types of hard choices.”

Some analysts doubt the plan is working nearly as well as administration officials claim, at least when it comes to revenues.

They say the most frequently cited data on the prices that Russia receives for its exported oil is unreliable.

And they say other data, like customs reports from India, suggests that Russian officials may be employing elaborate deception measures to evade the cap and sell crude at prices well above its limit.

“I’m concerned the Biden administration’s desperation to claim victory with the price cap is preventing them from actually acknowledging what isn’t working and taking the steps that might actually help them win,” said Steve Cicala, an energy economist at Tufts University who has written about potential evasion under the cap.

The price cap was invented as an escape hatch to the financial penalties that the United States, Europe and others announced on Russian oil exports in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. Those penalties included bans preventing wealthy democracies from buying Russian oil on the world market.

But early in the war, they essentially backfired. They drove up the cost of all oil globally, regardless of where it was produced. The higher prices delivered record exports revenues to Moscow, while driving American gasoline prices above \$5 a gallon and contributing to President Joe Biden’s sagging approval rating.

A new round of European sanctions was set to hit Russian oil hard in December. Economists on Wall Street and in the Biden administration warned that those penalties could knock oil off the market, sending prices soaring again.

So administration officials decided to try to leverage the West’s dominance of the oil shipping trade — including how it is transported and financed — and force a hard bargain on Russia.

Under the plan, Russia could keep selling oil, but if it wanted access to the West’s shipping infrastructure, it had to sell at a sharp discount. In December, European leaders agreed to set the cap at \$60 a barrel. They followed with other caps for different types of petroleum products, like diesel.

Many analysts were sceptical it could work. A cap that was too punitive had the potential to encourage Russia to severely restrict how much oil it pumps and sells. Such a move could drive crude prices skyward.

Alternatively, a cap that was too permissive might have failed to affect Russian oil sales and revenues at all.

Neither scenario has happened. Russia announced a modest production cut this spring but has mostly kept producing at about the same levels it did when the war began.

Fatih Birol, the executive director of the International Energy Agency, has called the price cap an important “safety valve” and a crucial policy that has forced Russia to sell oil for far less than international benchmark prices. Russian oil now trades for \$25 to \$35 a barrel less than other oil on the global market, Treasury Department officials estimate.

— The New York Times



A woman photographs the Manhattan skyline from the One World Observatory observation deck on the 100th floor of the One World Trade centre tower in New York. — Reuters

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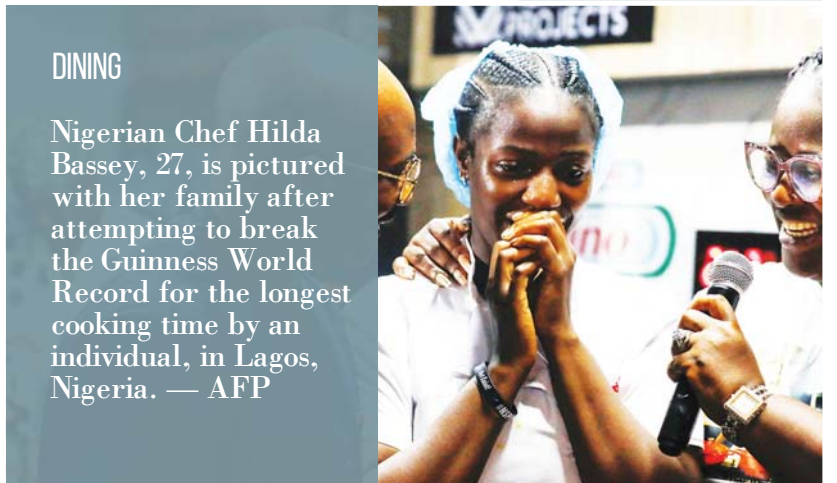
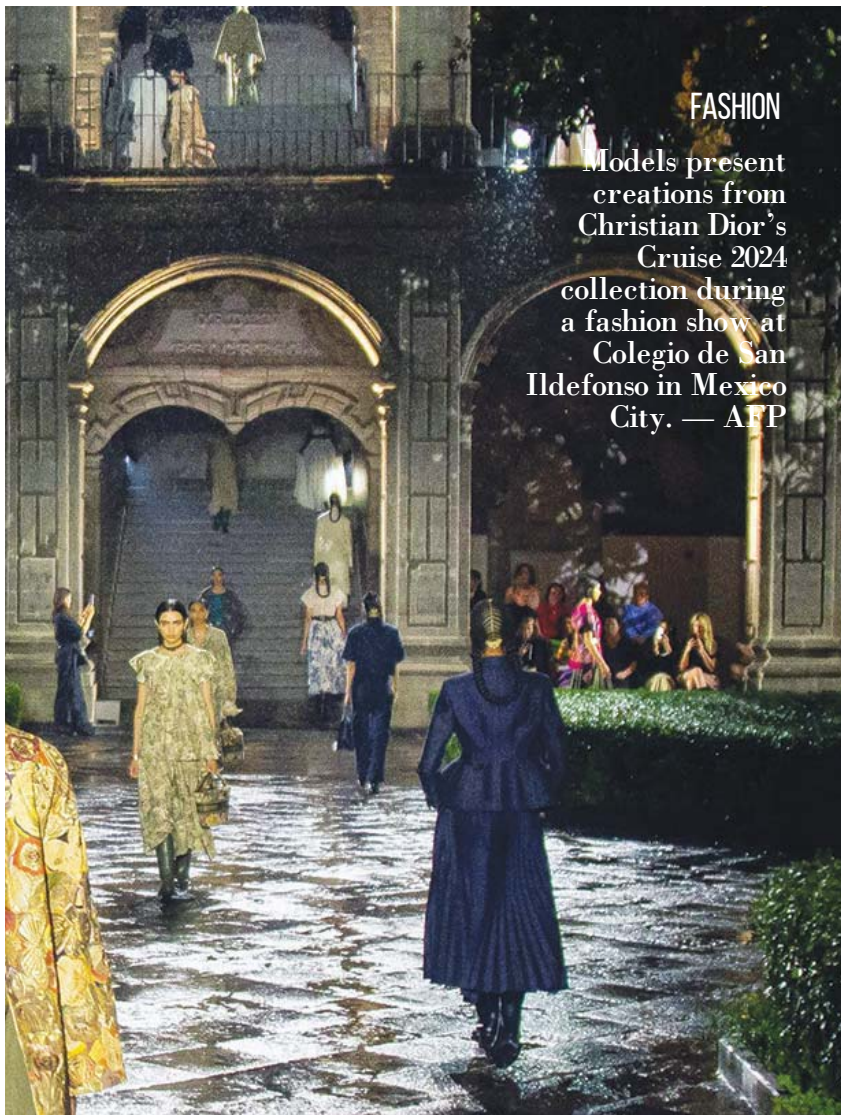
HIS MAJESTY ADMINISTERS OATH TO NEW MINISTER

NEW YORK: Antislavery Campaign, Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, has commended the role of the Sultanate in supporting international efforts to establish security and peace in Yemen.

MUSCAT: In a virtual video call, the Sultanate's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, led by the Sultan, has commended the role of the Sultanate in supporting international efforts to establish security and peace in Yemen.

STAY APART AND BREAK THE CHAIN

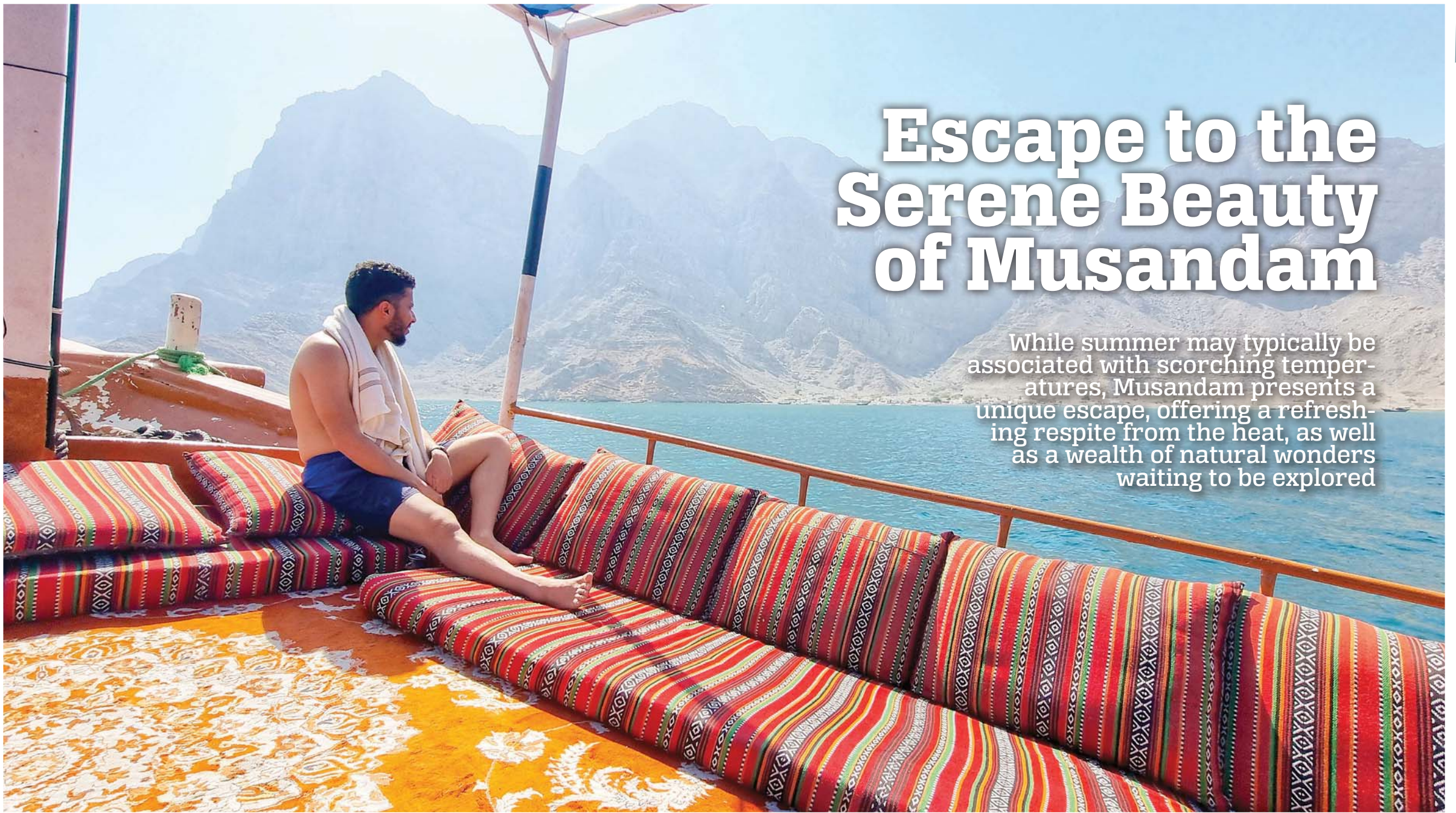
NEW YORK: To mark the 10th anniversary of the United Nations' adoption of the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, has commended the role of the Sultanate in supporting international efforts to establish security and peace in Yemen.



art & life

TUESDAY | MAY 23, 2023 | DHUL QA'ADA 3, 1444 AH

OMAN OBSERVER f t i y www.omanobserver.om features@omanobserver.om



FASHION

Mixing old and new, Gucci hosts show in 14th century Seoul palace

WITH SPARKLING LIGHTS and beating drums, Italian luxury label Gucci took over a 14th century Seoul Palace on Tuesday to showcase its cruise collection, blending Korean heritage and modern fashion.

In a mix of street and sportswear, models dressed in surfing suits or carrying skateboard-shaped bags strutted between ancient pillars in corridors surrounding the main hall of the Gyeongbokgung palace.

Wide-leg trousers were slit at the knees, coats were belted and T-shirts hung loose.

The show, featuring the sound-track of Oscar-winning South Korean movie "Parasite" during its finale, was the first of its kind to take place within the palace's courtyard.

Gucci planned to stage a show at the same venue last year but cancelled after a deadly Halloween crush in Seoul that killed 159 people.

Among the celebrities attending were Hanni, a singer of K-pop girl band NewJeans and newly named Gucci brand ambassador, "Squid Game" star Lee Jung-jae, rapper Jay Park and actress Elizabeth



Olsen.

Cruise collections, originally designed for wealthy clients holidaying on yachts or cruises during the winter months, are outfits produced by stylists on top of seasonal lines.

The Gucci cruise show follows a Louis Vuitton pre-fall fashion show on a Seoul bridge in April.

Built in 1395, the Gyeongbokgung palace served as the main royal



palace of Korea's Joseon dynasty. The South Korean national treasure became the latest iconic landmark chosen by Gucci to showcase its collection.

Gucci, owned by French luxury group Kering, parted ways with its star designer Alessandro Michele last November as sales lagged competitors. The brand will welcome its new creative director, Sabato De Sarno, later this year. — **Reuters**



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By Staff Reporter

While summer destinations often conjure images of crowded beaches and sweltering heat, Musandam defies expectations, offering a serene oasis where natural wonders abound. From its majestic fjords and tranquil waters to thrilling water sports and cultural encounters in Khasab, Musandam invites visitors to embark on a captivating journey of discovery.

Nestled in the northernmost tip of Oman, Musandam is an enchanting region renowned for its rugged beauty and pristine landscapes. While summer may typically be associated with scorching temperatures, Musandam presents a unique escape, offering a refreshing respite from the heat, as well as a wealth of natural wonders waiting to be explored. Discover why Musandam is the perfect summer destination, where tranquillity, adventure, and picturesque vistas converge.

Oman Observer recently visited the beautiful governorate and here are the top reasons for you to visit it.

MAJESTIC FJORDS AND TRANQUIL WATERS

Musandam's most iconic feature is its fjords, reminiscent of the stunning landscapes of Scandinavia. Embark on a traditional dhow cruise through the serene waters of the Musandam Peninsula, where dramatic cliffs rise majestically from the turquoise sea. Traverse the intricate network of fjords, known as khawrs, and witness nature's grandeur in the form of towering rock formations, hidden coves, and secluded beaches. The cool sea breeze and breathtaking vistas create an idyllic setting to unwind and soak in the tranquillity.

SNORKELLING AND DIVING PARADISES

Beneath the crystal-clear waters of Musandam lies a vibrant marine world teeming with life. Diving enthusiasts can explore an array of coral reefs, underwater caves, and shipwrecks, discovering a kaleidoscope of tropical fish and other mesmerising sea creatures. Snorkelling along the coastlines reveals colourful coral gardens, where



rays and turtles gracefully glide through the warm waters. The summer months offer optimal conditions for underwater adventures, with calm seas and excellent visibility, providing unforgettable encounters with marine life.

THRILLING WATER SPORTS

Musandam's favourable summer climate also presents an opportunity for thrill-seekers to engage in a variety of water sports. Kayak through secluded



coves, weaving through hidden mangroves and discovering pristine beaches accessible only by water. Feel the adrenaline rush while jet skiing, wakeboarding, or paddleboarding against the backdrop of dramatic

cliffs. The summer breeze and warm waters create the perfect playground for water enthusiasts of all levels.

CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS IN KHASAB



Immerse yourself in the cultural tapestry of Musandam by visiting the charming coastal town of Khasab. The vibrant souks offer a glimpse into the traditional Omani way of life, with fragrant spices, handwoven textiles, and intricate silver jewellery enticing visitors. Explore the iconic Khasab Castle, a restored fortress showcasing the region's rich history. Take a stroll along the picturesque corniche, where fishing boats bob gently in the harbour, and savour authentic Omani cuisine in local restaurants, experiencing the warm hospitality of the locals.

HIKING IN AL HAJAR MOUNTAINS

Escape the summer heat by venturing into the breathtaking Al Hajar Mountains, which form a stunning backdrop to Musandam. Hiking enthusiasts can explore winding trails that lead to panoramic viewpoints, offering breathtaking vistas of the rugged landscape and the sparkling sea below. The higher altitudes provide cooler temperatures, making it an ideal destination for outdoor activities during the summer months. Capture the raw beauty of Musandam from these lofty vantage points, as the mountains meet the sea in a harmonious union.

ENTERTAINMENT

Guitar smashed by Nirvana's Kurt Cobain sells for nearly \$600,000

A GUITAR SMASHED on stage by Nirvana front man Kurt Cobain sold for nearly \$600,000, several times its original estimate, an auction house said on Saturday.

The busted black Fender Stratocaster has been put back together, but is no longer playable, Kody Frederick of Julien's Auctions said earlier this month.

It was signed by all three members of the Seattle grunge outfit as they rocketed to global fame.

The auction house said it had expected the instrument to sell for \$60,000 at the event in front of a live audience at the Hard Rock Cafe in New York City.



Instead, it went for \$595,000, Julien's said in a statement, calling the total "astounding."

"You can see here the break that took place as he slammed down the guitar, where the neck here kind of connects, as well as down here on the bottom where he slammed the guitar down," Frederick said earlier in May.

"Kurt Cobain, when he was on stage, when he played, he was a machine. The man was angry, and you could feel that on stage. And you would feel that by the way he would treat his instruments.

"This broken element, in a strange way, from this broken musician, that really defined this rough and tumble era of music."

Nirvana's hits, many of which were penned by Cobain, included "Come As You Are," "Lithium" and the 1991 breakout "Smells Like Teen Spirit" — a track that became anthemic for a generation of alienated teenagers. Cobain struggled with substance addiction and depression, and had a tumultuous relationship with his wife, Courtney Love. He took his own life in April 1994.

The three-day auction, which concludes on Sunday, also includes memorabilia from the careers of Eddie Van Halen, Elvis Presley, Freddie Mercury, Bill Wyman and Janet Jackson. — AFP

FILM

New Indiana Jones director gives 'best version' of Spielberg

IT IS NO EASY feat taking over an iconic saga like Indiana Jones, but new director James Mangold says he wanted to deliver the "best version" of what his childhood hero Steven Spielberg had done with the four previous films.

Mangold took the reins from Spielberg to deliver the fifth film in the franchise with "Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny," which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival on Thursday, starring Harrison Ford, 80.

Legendary director Spielberg "has been a hero of mine all my life. I saw the first Indiana Jones movie when I was 17. It's a big chair to sit in ... but it was also a huge personal opportunity," Mangold said in an interview.

The director of "Girl, Interrupted," "Walk the Line," and "Logan," Mangold said the final cut was "my best version



of Steven, me kind of emulating my mentor and trying to tell a story. Of course, it's still me, and not him."

In a Hollywood seemingly saturated with superhero movies, Mangold said old-school action movies still had their place.

"I think maybe it's not in fashion, but I think it's refreshing to people," in a time when "everything has to be so fast that it doesn't even allow characters or the story to breathe," said Mangold, warning of the danger of new visual effects being "over-used."

However, "The Dial of Destiny" does not shun digital special effects, and

one of the most impressive sequences was filmed in a studio.

The film opens with a flashback lasting about 20 minutes in which Ford is de-aged by around 40 years.

"You have to have a lot of money to do it," Mangold said of the increasingly coveted technique.

"I'm not sure it has relevance in most films, you can do so much with make-up and lighting in other ways if those are your challenges."

After walking the red carpet with his co-stars ahead of the premiere, Ford received an honorary Palme D'Or, the highest Cannes award. — AFP



art & life

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TUESDAY | MAY 23 | 2023

CULTURE

Scent of tradition lingers in Lebanon's 'village of roses'

ON A GENTLE SLOPE looking out over Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, villagers work their way across pink-dotted terraces, gathering perfumed Damask roses that are used for essential oils, sweets and cosmetics.

The rose harvest "gives you a bit of hope, it makes things beautiful, it calms you down — it gives you strength to carry on", said Leila al-Dirani, picking the flowers from her family's land in the village of Qsarnaba.

A soft bag tied around her waist and her hands scratched from the thorns, the 64-year-old plucks the small, pink buds from their bushes as their rich and heady scent wafts across the hill.

The oil derived from the famed Damask rose — named after the ancient city of Damascus located just across the mountain range separating Lebanon and Syria — is a staple of perfumers.

Experts swear by the flower's therapeutic properties in fighting infection and as a relaxant, while rose water is used across the Middle East both as a refreshing drink, in sweets such as Turkish delight, to scent mosques and even to bestow luck at weddings.

After a morning collecting roses, the workers in Qsarnaba drop their fragrant bundles at a warehouse in the village where they are paid based on their harvest.

At the facility carpeted with pink petals, Zahraa Sayed Ahmed — whose first name means "flower" — buys the raw materials to produce her rose water, syrup, tea and jam.

Around four years ago, she set up a small workshop at her house, using a traditional metal still that "belonged to my grandfather", said Sayed Ahmed, 37.



ROSES HELP PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE

With a kilogramme (2.2 pounds) of rose petals, she said she can make up to half a litre of rose water.

She then also bottles and labels her modest production by hand, putting it on limited sale locally.

"The production of rose water is a part of our heritage," said Sayed Ahmed. "In every home in Qsarnaba there is a still, even if it's just a small one."

The rose season only lasts a few weeks, but it is a busy time for Qsarnaba's residents.

"This year is the first year that we didn't bring workers to help us because the production is low and we couldn't afford it," said Hassan al-Dirani, 25, who has been picking the flowers alongside his mother, Leila.

Since late 2019, Lebanon has been

grappling with a devastating economic crisis that has seen the local currency collapse and pushed most of the population into poverty.

"The rose harvest and all other harvests have lost about 80 per cent of their value... because of the economic crisis," said local official Daher al-Dirani, who hails from the extended family that is the biggest in Qsarnaba.

"But the roses help people put food on the table," he added.

Exported from Syria to Europe for centuries since the time of the Crusades, the ancient Damask rose



is also cultivated in countries including France, Morocco, Iran and Türkiye.

"Our village produces the most roses out of any village in Lebanon" and more than half of the country's rose water, Sayed Ahmed claimed proudly, as the captivating scent lingered in the air.

"Qsarnaba is the village of roses."

— AFP

LIFESTYLE



Hiroshima's savoury pancake wins new fan in Britain's Sunak

THE CHEAP AND cheerful savoury Japanese pancake that stirs both feelings of local pride and deep rivalry in the city of Hiroshima has found its newest fan in British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

During his visit for the three-day Group of Seven (G7) leaders summit in Hiroshima, Sunak sampled okonomiyaki, a heaped mound of batter, cabbage, noodles and often meat that is fried on a hot plate and then smothered with savoury sauce.

Its name means "cooked as you like" and it is widely considered "soul food" in Japan. In some restaurants it is fried in front of the customers, in others the customers fry it themselves.

It is also the subject of fierce regional rivalry, not unlike the debate over thin crust



or Chicago-style deep dish pizza in the United States.

In Hiroshima the ingredients are layered before cooking, but in Osaka they are mixed together first. Sunak, who tried okonomiyaki with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida - who represents Hiroshima in parliament - tried it Hiroshima style.

Sunak told reporters he "particularly enjoyed" having the okonomiyaki during his visit.

"Prime Minister Kishida pointed out to me how you do that - how you do that here in Hiroshima is different to how they do that in Tokyo, different to Osaka," he said on the sidelines of the G7 summit.



"He said the Hiroshima ones are the best. I have no reason to disagree. It has been delicious."

Hiroshima, home to more than 1 million people, boasts some 800 Okonomiyaki restaurants. Ahead of the G7 summit some local restaurants rolled out special versions to cater to foreign tastes by including ingredients from the different G7 countries.

There is one with German sauerkraut, and a maple syrup-infused Canadian version. The French option has cabbage, bean sprouts, bacon, cheese, sauce and a fried egg, all wrapped in a crepe.

It was not clear if Sunak got to try the British version - which featured fish and chips - or if he even wanted to. — Reuters