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AL HARTHY ALL SET FOR FIRST SEASON WITH BMW IN FIA WORLD ENDURANCE MEET



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WINTER CAMPS... A DELIGHT FOR NATURE LOVERS



MUSCAT

SQU COUNCIL NOD FOR NEW COURSES

As part of its efforts to expand scholarly specialisations at various levels, the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) Council approved a number of new academic programmes. The Council approved the programmes during its second meeting for academic year 2023/2024, chaired by Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation. The Council approved programmes at the College of Education, including PhD in Educational Psychology and educational assessment programmes. The Council also approved the MSc programme in clinical physiology (specialisation in cardiovascular and neurology) at the College of Medicine and Health Sciences. **SEE P3**

WORLD CIVIL DEFENCE DAY ON MARCH 1

The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority, will mark the World Civil Defence Day on March 1. Marking this day comes in implementation of the resolutions of the International Organisation for Civil Defence in order to commemorate this occasion internationally, regionally and locally, and in appreciation of the efforts made by civil defence agencies in various countries of the world.

OPINION

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Dr Khalfan Hamed Al Harrasi

The mysteries behind our shared yawns

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Dr Yousuf bin Hamed al Balushi

Opportunity Oman: Unlocking growth through UK partnership

ECONOMY HAS ENTERED GROWTH PHASE



Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy.

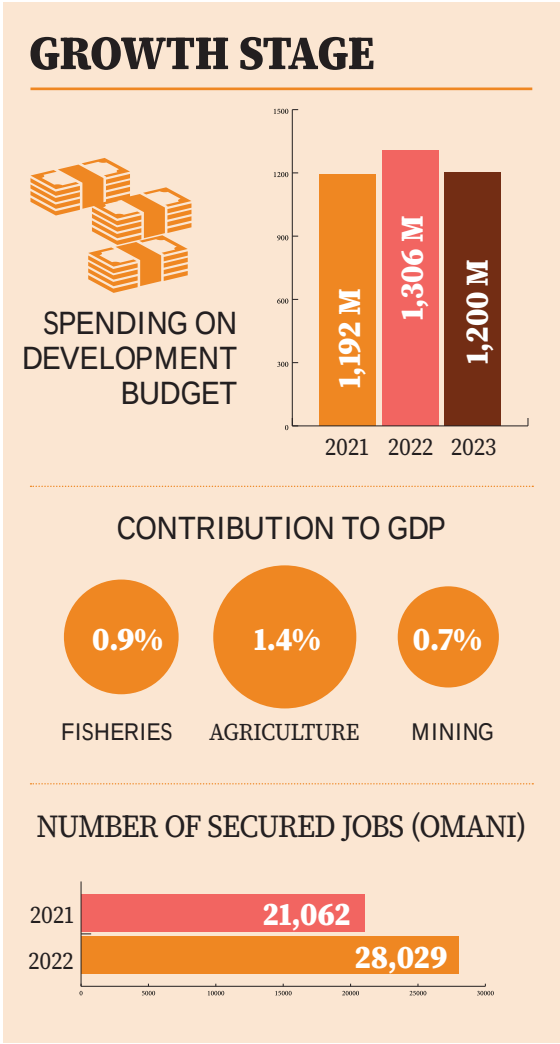
QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, Feb 28

The performance indicators show that the Omani economy has moved beyond the pandemic recovery phase, and has entered the growth phase. The economy has achieved remarkable growth rates, which were strengthened by policies and measures taken by the government. As a result of improvement in oil prices, the economy has witnessed rapid positive developments during the past period of the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan (2021-2023).

This was revealed by Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, when the Majlis Ashshura hosted him on Wednesday during its fifth regular session of the first annual convening of the 10th term (2023-2027).

During a discussion with the members, the minister in his statement outlined key areas of focus related to the nation's economic performance at the

ECONOMY POSTED GROWTH THANKS TO RISE IN OIL PRICES



midpoint of the current five-year development plan.

He said that, over the past period (2021-2023) of the current five-year plan, the economy saw rapid developments evidenced by a rise in oil prices over the first two years (2.6 per cent and 9.6 per cent, respectively), while outlook for the rest of the Tenth Five-Year Plan remained positive.

The minister pointed out that the proactive government measures contributed to protecting the economy from inflation and keeping it within safe limits, despite the significant rise in global inflation rates that averaged about 6 per cent in 2023. The inflation rate in Oman did not exceed 1 per cent, he added.

This came as a result of the policies taken to limit rise in prices, stemming from the Royal directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik — to fix the price of fuel at the level of October 2021 as a maximum, and to expand the number of goods exempted from value added tax, he noted.

TURN TO P2

Rains likely to intensify from Thursday

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
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The National Multi-Hazards Early Warning Centre said that scattered rain is expected over the northern governorates, warning that it could intensify on Thursday morning in the governorates of Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah, and Al Batinah North.

Rainfall of varying intensity is expected in the governorates of Muscat, Al Batinah South, Al Dakhiliyah and Al Batinah North on Thursday afternoon and evening with chances of thundershowers, active wind and hail storm.

The centre said that the impact of the low pressure system will gradually weaken starting from Friday with continued chances of scattered rain in Al Sharqiyah North and South governorates.

The centre advised the public not to risk crossing flowing

valleys. The precipitation predicted to be ranging from 20 mm to 50 mm which may cause flash flood.

Weekend drive in the northern governorates is to be undertaken with all precautions as the Oman Met Office has issued an alert for heavy rains.

“By afternoon, the rest of the northern governorates should receive rains. I would not recommend anyone to approach the sea as it could be very rough especially the Sea of Oman coastline because of the northwesterly wind till Saturday,” the centre advises.

On Wednesday, Khasab in Musandam, Suhar and Shinas in Al Batinah North received rains.

The rainfall is expected to range between 20-50 mm with downdraft wind of 15 to 35 knots. The weather experts have warned about the decrease in horizontal visibility due to dust rising, thundershowers and at times hailstorms.

OMAN, IRAN REVIEW REGIONAL AND GLOBAL ISSUES



TEHRAN: Dr Hossein Amir Abdollahian, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, received Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs, in the Iranian capital, Tehran, on Wednesday. During the meeting, they reviewed bilateral relations between the two friendly countries and ways to foster them in various fields. They stressed the importance of exchanging visits between officials of the two countries. They also discussed the latest developments regarding the Israeli war on Gaza Strip as well as regional and international issues. The meeting was attended by the ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Islamic Republic of Iran, beside a number of officials from both sides. — **ONA**

Only licensed firms responsible for delivery of e-commerce products

VINOD NAIR
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Postal or courier companies which come under the Telecom Regulatory Authority (TRA) are only responsible for delivery of purchases made by international e-commerce companies.

“Our companies are only responsible for deliveries of the purchases made from these companies (to and from the Sultanate of Oman), but their actual operations are regulated by the Ministry of Commerce,

Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP),” a TRA official said in reply to a query from the Observer regarding who is responsible if customers have any grievances.

Thousands of citizens and residents make purchases through international companies and delivery of products often overshoots the deadline promised by the retailer, and in some cases the products delivered are not as promised.

“These products are affordable and competitive, but as we have



Online products are affordable and competitive.

to make payments in advance in most of the cases, the buyer is at their mercy till the product is delivered in right condition at right time,” said Fatima, a regular customer, who purchases products online.

It may be noted that the ministry has started implementation of regulatory provisions for e-commerce under Ministerial Decision No 499/2023 this month.

This regulation is part of the national plan for e-commerce to regulate online buying and selling

processes and reduce online fraud and scams related to e-commerce. Additionally, the regulation is introduced to align with countries that are advanced in regulating e-commerce, overseeing online stores, and imposing penalties on violators.

The regulations specify several conditions for obtaining the license for individuals who do not possess a commercial record.

The applicant must be an Omani, and the age of the applicant should not be less than 18 years.



Royal Office Minister receives Ambassador of Brazil

MUSCAT: Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received in his office Alfredo Cesar Martinho, Ambassador-designate of the Federative Republic of Brazil to the Sultanate of Oman.

During the meeting, the two sides reviewed current issues on the regional and international arenas.

The meeting also discussed aspects of the joint cooperation between the two countries.

It underlined the friendship relations between Oman and Brazil.

— ONA



The meeting underlined the friendly relations between Oman and Brazil. — ONA

RNO CONCLUDES NAVAL DRILL ‘SEA LION’



MUSCAT: The Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) concluded the naval drill ‘Asad Al Bahar’ or ‘Sea Lion’ 1/2024. The naval drill was conducted with support of the Royal Army of Oman (RAO), the Royal Air Force of Oman (Rafo) and the Maritime Security Centre. The execution of this naval drill comes within the framework of the RNO training plans aimed to sustain the level of readiness of its fleet and personnel, in line with the national tasks entrusted to it. — ONA

Oman economy has entered growth phase

FROM PAGE 1

The minister said that the plan focused on increasing the number of Omanis working in the private sector, both through training and education of youth and by devising flexible employment terms.

The total number of Omanis who secured jobs during 2021 grew to 21,062, and in the second year of the plan, the number also grew to 28,029 workers, exceeding the annual target estimated in the plan. In order to determine the priorities of development projects in the Tenth Five-Year Plan, the ministry has created a matrix for evaluating and selecting priority projects submitted by all ministries, governorates and government agencies for projects that require implementation in the budget of the fiscal year. The matrix aims to set specific criteria for evaluating and selecting development projects according to a clear and transparent methodology through which priority projects are selected according to unified standards, in order to ensure social and economic impact.

The first and second years of the plan witnessed an increase in spending on development budget, as the actual spending in the 2021 budget amounted to about RO 1,192 million, and in the 2022 budget, the actual spending stood at about RO 1,306 million. It is expected that the actual spending on the development budget will be

about RO 1,200 million.

Commenting on the performance of key economic sectors during the tenth plan, Dr Al Saqri noted that the fisheries sector's contribution to the GDP stood at 0.9 per cent by the end of September 2023 (versus a 10th plan target of 2 per cent). For the agricultural sector, it stood at 1.4 per cent in September 2023 (versus 10th plan target of 1.5 per cent). The contribution of mining is 0.7 per cent, which equals that of the 10th plan target.

According to the statement made by the minister, the economy has further witnessed positive developments within the timeframe set by the government. Meanwhile, the first two years of the plan have seen remarkable growth of approximately 2.6 per cent and 9.6 per cent, respectively, with positive growth anticipated for the remaining period.

The minister also addressed the government's proactive measures to safeguard the economy from inflationary pressures. These strategies effectively maintained inflation within safe limits, despite the global average reaching around 6 per cent in 2023. In contrast, Oman's inflation rate remained below 1 per cent during the same period. Additionally, the minister underscored the critical role of the Ministry of Economy in navigating regional and international economic fluctuations.

Urgent call for global action against Gaza aggression

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

The Observer Round Table discussion held at the newspaper recently condemned the attacks in Gaza and Palestine, which are the biggest aggression on humanity.

Just as the nation expressed its resentment toward the ICJ and the UN, the people registered their strongest protest against such barbaric acts.

The participants at the Round Table urged the urgent intervention of the world into the 'life or death' situation prevailing in the Gaza Strip.

They expressed concern at the 'catastrophic conditions' existing at southern Gaza Hospital which was staring the world of mass death due to famine and as humanitarian aid was stopped for four days.

The discussions came in the wake of the recent visit that the UN delegation paid to the only remaining hospital, Al Amal Hospital in Khan Younis, to inspect the damage caused by Israeli forces and the heavy artillery shelling to the hospital.

The UN delegation was convinced of the catastrophic conditions inside due to severe shortages in food, drinkable water, medical supplies, and medication.

"What is making the situation even worse is that they are killing civilians and innocent people who are not part of any conflict and that is making the situation even pathetic. Is there any end to this war? Is there a light at the end of the tunnel?," asked Abdullah al Shueili, Editor-in-Chief, Observer.

"The conflicts are claiming even more lives day by day and global



There is no international legitimacy to depend upon, nor international law or bilateral treaty to seek help from

AHMED AL MUKHAINI

A political analyst



The participants at the Round Table urged the urgent intervention of the world into the 'life or death' situation prevailing in the Gaza Strip.



The fact that even the ruling from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) could not bring an end to the murders is appalling

FATMA AL ARAIMI

Strategic Information Navigator

intervention in this matter is the need of the hour. Although there have been many international interventions in the past, there is no respite to the issue. All high-level talks were in place to resolve the decades-long issue but 'unintended consequences' led to an inability to gain control over the issue for several years. But today, the situation is getting even worse and a quick stoppage of aggression is what we, as humans, need the most," said Ahmed al Mukhaini, a political analyst who proposed solutions to the existing Israel-Palestine issue.

Fatma al Aرامي, Strategic Information Navigator who specialises in navigating the complex landscape of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and Observer journalists were present at the debate that delved into various facets of the long-pending issue of Israeli

aggression on Palestine.

"The fact that even the ruling from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) could not bring an end to the murders is appalling. Israel has the guts not to heed the cries of other nations to stop violence because it has unconditional support from the US and the same goes with the UK and Germany. I feel that cutting the unconditional support and supply of necessary materials to Israel will not end the conflict," said Fatma, who is affiliated with several regional and international think tanks and research centres, where she collaborates with teams of researchers and analysts working on key issues affecting the MENA region.

Al Mukhaini also mentioned that there is a credibility crisis and there is no system where you can go.

As a researcher, policy analyst,

In a recent Observer Round Table discussion, participants strongly condemned the attacks in Gaza and Palestine, labelling them as the most significant aggression on humanity

author, interlocutor, public speaker, and lecturer with over 25 years of experience in policy analysis and development, he said, "There is no international legitimacy to depend upon, nor international law or bilateral treaty to seek help from. There is no one to approach and that is making the scenario worse." Al Mukhaini reiterated that the conflict is not a religious one but

a political and ideological one and what is happening now is a blatant violation of international laws, humanitarian laws, and other laws of the land. "It is important to recognise this because we should not use religious discourse while seeking a solution to the issue," adds Al Mukhaini.

"Palestinians are starving because of the Israeli siege. Hundreds of thousands of people in the north are hungry due to Israel's blockade. The UN's World Food Programme said it had paused delivering aid to northern Gaza, and cited Israeli gunfire as well as complete chaos and violence due to the collapse of civil order in the area. The safety and security to deliver critical food aid and for people receiving it must be ensured," mentioned Fatma.

Ahmed's proposed road-map for peace between Palestinians and Israelis is a four-phase road-map

the first of which is confidence-building measures, ceasefire, and an end to violence where both sides should commit to an immediate and comprehensive ceasefire, ending all acts of violence and acts of terrorism and enhance security cooperation to prevent attacks and maintain order.

He also mentioned mutual recognition and renunciation of violence because of mutual recognition of the right to exist and the legitimacy of each other's national aspirations.

"Both sides, including Hamas, should renounce violence as a means to achieve their political objectives. All my proposals on the Palestinian issue are ideas inspired by the Omani governance systems case, which coincided or coexisted for most of the known history of Oman, with brief periods of centralisation or a unified state system," he added.



SQU Council approves new academic programmes



The Council took note of the latest developments in the university's march. – ONA

MUSCAT: As part of its efforts to expand scholarly specialisations at various levels, the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) Council approved a number of new academic programmes.

The Council approved the programmes during its second meeting for academic year 2023/2024, chaired by Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation. The meeting was attended by HH Sayyid Fahad bin Al Julanda al Said, SQU Vice-Chancellor.

The Council took note of the latest developments in the university's march and the progress made in implementing decisions and recommendations it issued over the course of the academic year.

The Council approved a number of academic programmes at the College of Education, including the PhD in Educational Psychology and the PhD in educational assessment programmes.

The specialisations approved were the first two doctoral programmes of their kind in the Sultanate of Oman. They aim to provide highly qualified human resources to lend support to educational institutions and contribute to upgrading academic research.

— ONA

The Council also approved the MSc programme in clinical physiology (specialisation in Cardiovascular and Neurology) at the College of Medicine and Health Sciences.

The programme targets health science graduates and technicians working in physiological diagnostic units

The Council approved a number of academic programmes at the College of Education, including the PhD in Educational Psychology and the PhD in educational assessment programmes

who wish to further enhance their professional skills.

The programme is designed to meet the growing demand for such a specialty in the public and private health sectors.

The Council expressed its commitment to realise the university's strategic plan and achieve its goals by following up performance indicators set for the current academic year.

— ONA

Bids invited for masterplan in Rimal Al Sharqiya

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@vinot_nair

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has invited tender to develop a masterplan for tourism projects at the Rimal Al Sharqiya dunes of Al Sharqiyah North and South governorates.

The last date for the sale of tender documents is March 13, while the bid will be opened on April 14.

The project aims to plan and organise the area, replace the current ad-hoc approach, and avoid the occurrence of organisational, social, and environmental problems.

It is expected that the study will include a tourism development strategy with detailed planning frameworks for the region and identify tourism activities and events and their distribution in the area.

The ministry shall not be obligated to accept the lowest or any other bids. The Rimal Al



The project aims to plan and organise Rimal Al Sharqiya, replace the current ad-hoc approach, and avoid the occurrence of organisational, social and environmental problems

Sharqiya area is considered a tourist area based on the Tourism Law issued by Royal Decree No 33/2002, and Royal Decree No 95/2005, and based on the public interest requirements, the ministerial decision 75/2019 deemed Rimal Al Sharqiya area as

a tourist zone.

The recently-held Desert Tourism Forum 2023 addressed various aspects, including the regulations governing the sector, investment opportunities for both local and foreign investors, the cultural and social dimensions

of desert tourism, and drawing insights from Gulf experiences in this realm.

This initiative seeks to foster awareness, collaboration and exploration of the rich potential within the desert tourism sector in the governorate.

■ STATE COUNCIL RECEIVES MAURITANIAN OFFICIAL



MUSCAT: Shaikh Dr Hilal bin Ali al Hinai, Deputy Chairman of the State Council, received on Wednesday Dah Ould Sidi Ould Amar Taleb, Minister of Islamic Affairs and Original Education in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. During the meeting, Shaikh Al Hinai expressed his hope that the visit would enhance relations between Oman and Mauritania. The guest was briefed on the tasks and prerogatives of the State Council. – ONA

Muscat-Sharjah bus service starts



Mwasalat clarified that the trips would be in a trial phase during the first week of the service launch

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 28

Mwasalat has launched its first intercity bus service from Muscat Governorate to Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates via Shinas with initially two round trips daily.

The journey starts from the Mwasalat station in Al Athaiba in Muscat Governorate. Mwasalat clarified that the trips would be in a trial phase during the first week of the service launch.

This route will enhance integration with other transport routes in the Sultanate of Oman,

allowing access to several destinations in both countries. This aligns with Mwasalat's ambitious goals to become a regional transport operator applying world-class standards.

The service includes several stops, most notably: Mwasalat bus station in Al Athaiba - Muscat International Airport - Burj Al Sahwa bus station - Al Mawaleh bus station - Mwasalat bus station in Suhar - Mwasalat ferry marina in Shinas - Kalba bus stop - Fujairah - Sharjah Industrial Area 4 - Al Jubail bus station in Sharjah.

It is noteworthy that the

operation of this line is an extension of the passenger transport agreement signed by Mwasalat with the Sharjah Roads and Transport Authority to operate daily passenger bus services between Muscat Governorate and Sharjah.

This aims to expand the international bus transport network between the Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates, enhance tourism movement between the two brotherly countries, and provide the utmost comfort, time-saving, and travel options for travellers.

Saudi, French military delegations visit MTC

MUSCAT: Maj Gen Pilot Talal bin Sulaiman al Ghamdi, Deputy Commander of the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and his accompanying delegation visited the Military Technological College (MTC).

The Saudi military official and his delegation were accompanied during the visit by Air Commodore Zahran bin Nasser Ambosaidi, Acting Commander of the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO).

Upon their arrival at the college, they were greeted by Air Commodore Eng Mohammed bin Aziz al Siyabi, Dean of the MTC.

Members of the visiting delegation were briefed on the college's educational and technical specialisations.

They also toured the Military Technological College's departments and service facilities.

In a separate visit, a French delegation from the Omani-French Defence Equipment Committee also visited the Military Technological College (MTC).

Upon their arrival at the college, members of the delegation were greeted by Air Commodore Eng



Members of the Saudi delegation were briefed on the college's educational and technical specialisations. – ONA



French delegation from the Omani-French Defence Equipment Committee also visited MTC. – ONA

Mohammed bin Aziz al Siyabi, Dean of the MTC.

Members of the visiting delegation were briefed on the college's educational and

technical specialisations.

They also toured the Military Technological College's departments and service facilities.

— ONA



Exploring the impact of Artificial Intelligence

BALQEES ALORAIMI

Visitors can dive into the realms of artificial intelligence at the Muscat Book Fair, where the evolution of this groundbreaking technology takes centre stage. From Alan Turing’s pioneering machine in 1935 to the contemporary era marked by rapid advancements, the fair sheds light on AI’s pivotal role in societal transformation.

Artificial Intelligence and its technologies have enabled societies to make a cognitive transformation and leap towards civilisational changes.

AI major role at the Book Fair is clearly seen in the accompanying cultural and artistic events. This comes within the context of the interest Oman attaches to development and positive interaction with contemporary technologies.

Visitors to the book fair will find that the exhibition halls are full of discussions based on the impact of artificial intelligence, its role in the education process, or cultural transformations and the impact of artificial intelligence on culture and creativity.



One can also notice the dominance of technical terms in the titles of events in general, such as creative industries, cybersecurity, digital industries, digital marketing, and digital culture. These terms express the interests of institutions and society in general regarding technical transformations and applications of artificial intelligence in particular.

Abdulhafith al Muqbali, press preservation department, Oman News Agency (ONA), says “AI has been employed by way of designing a character with the Omani identity who performs the function of a digital broadcaster



without any human intervention and transmits, reads radio materials to the public.” Visitors at the exhibition received this digital

broadcaster. Ahlam al Balushi from the Ministry of Information said the Ayn platform used AI by

AI has been employed by designing a character with Omani identity who performs the function of a digital broadcaster without any human intervention and transmits, reads radio materials to the public

ABDULHAFITH AL MUQBALI
*Press preservation department,
Oman News Agency (ONA)*

will get a better experience and better features by downloading various programmes and videos on their phone or computers.

Nawal al Busaidy from the Department of Manuscripts, Registration and Cataloging, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, says, This year the manuscripts were provided with a special barcode for easy access to information and images, and the visitor can keep information about the manuscript through the barcode.

Dr Amal bint Abdullah al Haramliyah, Senior Studies and Research Specialist, Ministry of Social Development, says AI was used by working with the Technical Integration Company and employing robots through the Values Radar event, which consists of questions for children about positive and negative behaviours and through effective interaction.

The visiting schoolchildren were awestruck with robots presenting gifts to the children. It also displayed visual videos shown through the robot that roams around the exhibition. The robot received good reception by the children and the visiting public.

A modern exploration of tradition and technology



SIHAM AL SAIDI

The Children’s Museum at the Muscat International Book Fair serves as a pioneering example in instilling cultural values among children and youth through interactive activities.

The Cultural Identity and Virtual Reality corner featured three documentaries about Oman’s intangible heritage. Additionally, educational games allowed children to experience traditional attire, folk arts, and cultural landmarks of Oman through virtual reality.

Khadeeja al Kalbani, general supervisor of activities at the Children’s Museum in Muscat, said, “ We aim at introducing Omani culture and heritage for children in order to cultivate such values and preserve them for future generations. In the book

In the book fair, we present an interactive experience for children to explore our heritage and customs

KHADEEJA AL KALBANI
*General Supervisor
Children’s Museum, Muscat*

fair, we present an interactive experience for children to explore our heritage and customs.”

Integrating artificial intelligence and education not only enhances learning experiences but also fosters a deeper connection with cultural heritage.



Parents are positively impressed by their children’s engagement and excitement while participating in the Cultural Identity and Virtual Reality corners. They value the educational enrichment provided by the interactive activities.

Al Jassasi, a mother of two girls from Al Dhahirah, said : “ I have never thought before that such digital experiences can be used to cultivate the cultural values in such an interesting way. Thanks to them, new opportunities to use technologies in a positive way have been created.”

By using interactive technologies to foster and emphasise the heritage and values, we empower our youth to embrace their roots, save the rich tapestry of Omani culture and ensure its preservation for generations to come.



MoHERI opens registration for Block Funding Programme

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation (MoHERI) announced the opening of applications for research proposals for the Block Funding Programme 2024 through the Research Information Management System (RIMS) in the Oman research portal.

The Block Funding Programme consists of three sub-programmes namely Research Grants (RG), Graduate Research Grants (GRG), and Undergraduate Research Grants (URG). For the Research Grants Programme, the applicant should be a PhD holder or its equivalent (senior specialist or higher for medical doctors), and the duration of the project is two years at a maximum with a budget of RO 20,000 per project.

For the Graduate Research Grants Programme, the applicant should be a master's or bachelor's degree holder with at least one year of work experience, or a



May 30, 2024, is the deadline for the Block Funding Programme 2024.

postgraduate student or an Oman Medical Speciality Board resident, and the duration is two years as a maximum with a budget of RO 3,000 per project.

As for the Undergraduate Research Grants Programme, the applicants should be undergraduate students who have completed their foundation year

and a GPA of no less than 2.30 or its equivalent, with the duration being 1 year with a budget of RO 1,500 per project.

Applying for the Block Funding Programme 2024 has a set of conditions, including the applicant (PI, Co-PI) should be affiliated with the institution by the time of submission and

approval (Oct-Dec 2023), the applicant must not have any ongoing or uncompleted funded project from MoHERI, and the applicants in URG must not have graduated or about to graduate.

Moreover, the research proposal must not be an ongoing project or has been completed, the research project should be new and not been started or completed, the institutional focal points and evaluation committee members are not eligible to apply, and there must not be any kind of conflict of interest the research proposal should be related to Sultanate of Oman.

The deadline for the Block Funding Programme 2024 is until May 30, 2024. Interested applicants can apply through (<https://rims.trc.gov.om>) at the Oman Research Portal. For inquiries, interested applicants can contact (BFP@moheri.gov.om).

Muscat Arbitration Workshop 2024 held



The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs recently hosted the Muscat Arbitration Workshop.

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs hosted the Muscat Arbitration Workshop 2024 on February 28 in collaboration with Three Crowns LLP and Decree, under the auspices of Dr Yahya bin Nasser al Khusaibi, Under-Secretary, Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs, and other senior officials from the public and private sector.

The workshop featured a keynote presentation by Prof Nassib Ziadé on the recent developments and trends in the field of arbitration in the MENA region Panel discussions centred around the appointments and challenges of arbitrators, the

recent developments in investor-state dispute settlement, as well as the efficient management of arbitration costs.

The event featured speakers and panellists from the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs, Three Crowns LLP, Decree, OQ, SASLO, Oman Investment Authority, Oxy Oman, and Trowers & Hamlin.

This workshop was part of the efforts of the Ministry of Justice and Legal Affairs in spreading legal knowledge and contributing to the capacity building of legal professionals in the public and private sectors in the Sultanate of Oman.

e-shopping awareness campaign launched

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
@afrahbalushia

An e-shopping campaign was launched in all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman and was organised by the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA). The campaign helped to enhance public awareness about e-shopping among all segments of society.

The campaign was launched to enhance consumers' awareness of their rights and duties within the framework of electronic shopping, raise cognitive awareness of the foundations and standards of electronic shopping, and enhance the legal awareness of suppliers in electronic sales outlets of consumer protection legislation.

Khalid al Siyabi, Director, the Department, Regulating and Monitoring Prices of Goods and Services said, "The e-shopping campaign continues for three consecutive weeks, and targets



Consumer Protection Authority (CPA) launched an e-shopping campaign in all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman.

the category of providers, represented by individuals who practice e-commerce, commercial institutions with electronic sales outlets, and consumers of all segments. The Authority expects that the results of the campaign will contribute to reducing the rate of complaints and reports related to online shopping."

CPR confirmed that it is necessary to be careful when buying and shopping online, especially with the

presence of fake websites that commit fraud and steal credit card information, and it is necessary to ensure the importance of websites that provide electronic shopping services being licensed by the Ministry of commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) to practice e-commerce activity.

In conjunction with the Muscat International Book Fair, CPR organised the dialogue session entitled (Consumer

Rights and Supplier Duties in Light of e-Commerce). The session is one of the events and activities implemented by CPA within the e-shopping campaign.

It is worth noting that the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion has issued a ministerial resolution No 499/2023 regarding the regulatory regulations for e-commerce to regulate the practice of this activity in the country. The decision comes within the national plan for e-commerce with the aim of creating a legal and regulatory environment for developing and promoting e-commerce.

This also includes documenting local e-stores and facilitating access to them, regulating operations related to buying and selling over the Internet, reducing fraud and swindles related to e-commerce, keeping up with developed countries in this field, and monitoring electronic stores.

Students benefit from Globe Programme

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Over 100 regular students, in addition to 60 teachers and supervisors of the National Forum for Education (GLOBE) benefited from the activities which were held under the auspices of Dr Jokha bint Abdullah al Shukailiyah, CEO of the Omani Authority for Academic Accreditation and Educational Quality Assurance (OAAAEQA) at Avaani Hotel on Tuesday. The event marked the participation of the children and teachers from various directorates affiliated with the education and learning sector of the governorates of the Sultanate of Oman, whose work will continue over the long term, also witnessed young teams bringing about ideas that will add value to the science of tomorrow.

The Haji School for Basic Education from Al Wusta



Over 100 students, 60 teachers and supervisors took part in the National Forum for Education (GLOBE) programme.

Governorate won first place for its study of the effect of marine organisms' scales on water filtration in the Haj area in the Wilayat of Mahout, Al Wusta Governorate.

The second place went to Al Hawari bin Muhammad al Azdi School for Basic Education for a study on the effect of garlic in treating harmful bacteria in gray water in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate. The third place went to Al Zahraa School for Basic Education in the Muscat Governorate for a study on the effect of fertilising the mesquite maritime plant on the growth of

tomato and basil seedlings and soil characteristics in Muscat.

Al Wafa School for Basic Education from Al Batinah North Governorate won fourth place for a research project on the sustainability of soil and water management using graphene oxide nanoparticles. The fifth and final place went to Al Khawarizmi School for Basic Education for their project analysing the growth factors of the Arjoun fungus in the Kohl area and its lack of growth in the Al Khadra area in Al Buraimi Governorate. The national forum aimed at enhancing the capabilities of supervisors,

teachers, and students in applying the programme's protocols, which are atmosphere protocol, water protocol, soil protocol, civil aviation, humidity, land cover protocol, in addition to training them on how to data entry after applying the protocols on the programme's global website.

The forum also included evaluating student research works participating in the annual student research competition of the Globe programme related to the environmental field, in preparing the students for the competitions at international levels.



Sultanate of Oman سلطنة عُمان
وزارة التراث والسياحة
Ministry of Heritage and Tourism

Tender Announcement

Tender No.	48/2024/MHT/HQ-12	Tender Name	Provide consultancy services tourism development master plan for the sand dunes (Remal Al-Sharqia)
Fees of Tender Documents		50 O.R	
Tender Document Sales End Date		18/3/2024	
Last Date for Bid Submission		17/4/2024	
Grade		First, Second	
E-Tendering Portal		https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om	

Interested Companies registered with Tender Board (in the mentioned Grade) may obtain Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>, against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document.

The Tenderers must acknowledge commitment to the bid.

The Ministry shall not be obligated to accept the lowest or any other bids.

The bid submission period starts after the end of the inquiry period shown in the e-tendering portal, and the bid submission period shall be 10 (ten) days, (Oman time).

Kindly communicate through the etendering.tenderboard.gov.om

For the e-tendering system, kindly contact the Tender Board on 24402200

For further information

Email : sotic@mht.gov.om
Phones : 22088348 - 22088085

شركة نزوى عبر القارات ش.م.ع.م

إعلان دعوة لحضور اجتماع الجمعية العامة العادية السنوية



نزوى عبر القارات
NIZWA TRANSCONTINENTAL

يسر مجلس إدارة شركة نزوى عبر القارات ش.م.ع.م دعوة المساهمين الكرام لحضور اجتماع الجمعية العامة العادية السنوية للشركة المقرر عقده في تمام الساعة الحادية عشرة صباحاً من يوم الثلاثاء الموافق 19/ مارس/ ٢٠٢٤م، بمكتب جامعة نزوى بالخوير، وفي حالة عدم إكمال النصاب القانوني سيتم عقد جمعية عامة عادية سنوية ثانية في يوم الأربعاء الموافق ٢٧/مارس/٢٠٢٤م، لمناقشة جدول الأعمال التالي:

- دراسة تقرير مجلس الإدارة عن السنة المالية المنتهية في ٣١ ديسمبر ٢٠٢٣م، والموافقة عليه.
- دراسة تقرير مراقب الحسابات، والموافقة على الميزانية العمومية وحساب الأرباح والخسائر عن السنة المالية المنتهية في ٣١ ديسمبر ٢٠٢٣م.
- التصديق على بدل حضور جلسات مجلس الإدارة واللجان المنيقة عنه الذي تقاضاه أعضاء مجلس الإدارة عن السنة المنتهية في ٣١ ديسمبر ٢٠٢٣م، والموافقة عليها وتحديد مقدار البديل للسنة المالية التي ستنتهي في ٣١ ديسمبر ٢٠٢٣م، (حسب المرفق)
- تعيين مراقب الحسابات للسنة المالية التي ستنتهي في ٣١ ديسمبر ٢٠٢٣م، وتحديد أتعابه.

- ووفقاً للنظام الأساسي للشركة يحق لأي مساهم أن يفوض خطياً أي شخص آخر لحضور الاجتماع والتصويت على القرارات المتخذة نيابة عنه على أن يكون التفويض على بطاقة التفويض المرفقة بالدعوة. ويجب بالنسبة للشخص الطبيعي أن يرفق بطاقة التفويض نسخة من البطاقة الشخصية للبالغين، وجواز السفر للنساء والفقر الذين لا يحملون بطاقة شخصية، وبطاقة مقيم أو جواز السفر لغير العمانيين، كما يجب بالنسبة للشخص الاعتباري، أن تكون بطاقة التفويض موقعاً عليها من أحد الأشخاص المفوضين بالتوقيع ومختومة بختم الشركة ومرفقاً بها نسخة من شهادة التسجيل في السجل التجاري ونموذج المفوضين بالتوقيع.

نرجو التكرم بالحضور الي مقر الاجتماع قبل الموعد المحدد بنصف ساعة على الأقل.

وفي حالة وجود أي استفسار يرجى الاتصال بالفاضل /محمد بن علي الكندي على هاتف رقم ٩٩٢٢٨٥١

المستشار القانوني

مراقب الحسابات

رئيس مجلس الإدارة



GAZA DEATH TOLL NEARS 30,000 Groups warn of ‘imminent’ famine



Palestinians ride a cart past the ruins of a building in the Maghazi camp for Palestinian refugees, which was severely damaged by Israeli bombardment in Gaza. – AFP

GAZA: The Gaza war’s reported Palestinian death toll neared 30,000 on Wednesday as fighting raged in the territory despite mediators insisting a truce with Israel could be just days away.

Another 91 people were killed in overnight Israeli bombardment, the health ministry said.

Mediators from Egypt, Qatar and the United States have been trying to find a path to a ceasefire amid the bitter fighting, with negotiators seeking a six-week pause in the nearly five-month war.

After a flurry of diplomacy, mediators said a deal could finally be within reach -- reportedly including the release of some Israeli captives held in Gaza in exchange for several hundred Palestinian detainees held by Israel.

“My hope is by next Monday

Mediators from Egypt, Qatar and the United States have been trying to find a path to a ceasefire amid the bitter fighting, with negotiators seeking a six-week pause

we’ll have a ceasefire” but “we’re not done yet”, US President Joe Biden said.

Qatari foreign ministry spokesman Majed al Ansari said Doha was “hopeful, not necessarily optimistic, that we can announce something” before Thursday.

But he cautioned that “the situation is still fluid on the ground”.

Doha has suggested the pause in fighting would come before the beginning of Ramadhan, the Muslim fasting month which starts on March 10 or 11, depending on the lunar calendar.

Palestinian groups had

been pushing for the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza -- a demand rejected outright by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

But a source said that the deal might see the Israeli military leave “cities and populated areas”, allowing the return of some displaced Palestinians and humanitarian relief.

Israel’s military campaign in Gaza has killed at least 29,954 people, mostly women and children, according to the territory’s health ministry.

Since the war began, hundreds of thousands of Gazans have been displaced, with nearly 1.5

million people now packed into the far-southern city of Rafah, where Israel has warned it plans to launch a ground offensive.

Those who remain in northern Gaza have been facing an increasingly desperate situation, aid groups have warned.

The WFP said no humanitarian group had been able to deliver aid to the north for more than a month, with aid blocked from entering by Israeli forces.

Most aid trucks have been halted, but foreign militaries have air dropped supplies including on Tuesday over Rafah and Gaza’s main southern city Khan Yunis.

What aid does enter Gaza passes through the Rafah border crossing from Egypt, fuelling a warning from UN chief Antonio Guterres that any assault on the city would “put the final nail in the coffin” of relief operations in the territory. — AFP

Israel presses on with settlement plans

TEL AVIV: Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich pledged to continue expanding settlements in the occupied West Bank, defying international pressure on Israel to stop building on land Palestinians see as the core of a future independent state.

Late on Tuesday, Smotrich announced the approval of a new settlement called Mishmar Yehuda, in Gush Etzion, a cluster of Jewish settlements located south of Jerusalem, and said work would continue on authorising further settlements.

“We will continue the momentum of settlement throughout the country,” he said in a statement.

The move comes just days after US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Washington considered Jewish settlements in the West Bank to be inconsistent with international law, reverting to a longstanding US position that was overturned by the administration of former president Donald Trump.

The change brought the United States back into line with most of the world, which considers the settlements built on territory Israel captured in the 1967 Middle East war to be illegal. Israel itself disputes this view, citing the Jewish people’s historical and Biblical ties to the land.

The Palestinians say that the expansion of settlements across the West Bank is part of a deliberate Israeli policy

to undermine its ambition of creating an independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Last week, Israeli ministers agreed to convene a planning council to approve some 3,300 homes to be built in settlements, a decision that Blinken said had disappointed Washington, which has been pushing a resumption of efforts for a two-state solution to the decades-long conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Smotrich, the influential leader of one of the hard-right pro-settler parties in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition government, himself lives in a settlement and has consistently backed further settlement building.

“This is also our answer to the nations of the world,” said Shlomo Ne’eman, Mayor of the Gush Etzion Regional Council. “We will continue onwards and strengthen Gush Etzion with more residents, more schools, more roads and more kindergartens.”

The Israeli advocacy group Peace Now, which monitors settlement expansion, said in a report last month there had been an unprecedented surge in settlement activities since the start of the Gaza war in October.

According to a report by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, just under 700,000 settlers live in 279 settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, up from 520,000 in 2012.

— Reuters



A soldier stands guard at Gush Etzion Junction in the Gush Etzion settlements compound, in the West Bank. – Reuters file photo

UK broadcast journalists demand open access to the enclave

LONDON: More than 50 UK-based broadcast journalists have sent an open letter to the Israeli and Egyptian embassies calling for “free and unfettered access” to Gaza for foreign media, British media reported on Wednesday.

The letter, from 55 correspondents and presenters from the main broadcasting outlets based in the UK, appealed for better protection for journalists already reporting in the territory.

“Almost five months into the war in Gaza, foreign reporters are still being denied access to the territory, outside of the rare and escorted trips with the Israeli military,” said the letter, quoted by multiple local media outlets.

“We urge the Governments of Israel and Egypt to allow free and unfettered access to Gaza for all

foreign media.”

It called on Israel to openly state its permission for international journalists to operate in Gaza and for the Egyptian authorities to allow international journalists access to the Rafah Crossing between Egypt and Gaza.

Journalists who signed the letter include Alex Crawford from Sky News, Jeremy Bowen from the BBC and Christiane Amanpour from CNN.

“There is intense global interest in the events in Gaza and for now the only reporting has come from journalists who were already based there,” said the letter.

“It’s vital that local journalists’ safety is respected and that their efforts are bolstered by the journalism of members of the international media.

United Nations reports

indicate that at least 122 journalists and other media workers have been killed and many others wounded in the Gaza Strip since war erupted there following attacks inside Israel on October 7.

Israel’s supreme court on January 9 rejected a request from international media for free access to Gaza.

The fighting in Gaza was triggered by assault on southern Israel, the worst since the country’s 1948 founding. Around 1,140 people died in the attack, most of them civilians, according to a tally based on Israeli figures. The health ministry in Gaza said on Wednesday that at least 29,954 people have been killed in the territory during the war between Palestinians and Israel.

— AFP



A person holds a placard at a vigil and protest held outside a US military recruiting centre for US Airman Aaron Bushnell, who died after setting himself on fire in front of the Israeli Embassy in Washington. – Reuters



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In brief

■ SAN FRANCISCO



GOOGLE SLAMS 'UNACCEPTABLE' GEMINI AI ERRORS

Google CEO Sundar Pichai slammed “completely unacceptable” errors by its Gemini AI app, after gaffes such as images of ethnically diverse World War II troops forced it to stop users from creating pictures of people.

The controversy emerged within weeks of Google’s high-profile rebranding of its ChatGPT-style AI to “Gemini”, giving the app unprecedented prominence in its products as it competes with OpenAI and its backer Microsoft.

Users criticised Google for the inaccurate Gemini-generated images, such as US senators from the 1800s that were ethnically diverse. — AFP

■ N'DJAMENA



SEVERAL KILLED IN ATTACK ON CHAD INTELLIGENCE OFFICE

An overnight attack on the offices of Chad’s internal security agency in the capital N’Djamena has killed several people, the government said on Wednesday, accusing “elements” of an opposition party.

All the roads leading to the national security agency are blocked off. The attack came after a member of the PSF was arrested and accused of an “assassination attempt against the president of the supreme court”, the government said.

It said the situation appeared to have “taken a dramatic turn” with “a deliberate attack by accomplices of this individual led by elements of the PSF” against security offices. — AFP

■ WARSAW



NAVALNY’S FUNERAL IS PLANNED TO BE ON FRIDAY IN MOSCOW

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny’s funeral is planned for Friday in a Moscow church, his allies said two weeks after his shock death in an Arctic prison. The burial is set to take place at the nearby Borisov cemetery, a short walk from the banks of the river Moskva.

“Alexei’s funeral will be held at the ‘Mother of God Quench My Sorrows’ church in Maryino on 1 March at 14:00. Come in advance,” his team said in a social media post on Wednesday. Russian authorities said Navalny died of “natural causes” after he lost consciousness following a walk in his prison colony. — AFP

Zelensky rallies allies for support at Balkan

TIRANA: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met with Balkan leaders in Albania on Wednesday, seeking to keep support and weapons flowing to Kyiv as Russia makes gains on the battlefield two years after attacking its neighbour.

Zelensky has been crisscrossing the globe in recent weeks to rally support for his beleaguered country, as Ukraine’s armed forces face a critical shortage of ammunition and struggle to hold back Russia’s military advances on the ground.

He arrived in Albania late on Tuesday and on Wednesday met in Tirana with several leaders from across the region during the “Ukraine-Southeast Europe Summit” -- his first visit to the Balkan nation since Russia’s attack in February 2022.

Following a sitdown with Albania’s Prime Minister Edi Rama, the Ukrainian president said the two sides were exploring further defence cooperation.

“Since the first days of the full-scale attack, Albania has supported Ukraine in our struggle for freedom and territorial integrity,” Zelensky wrote on X.



Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama speaks, as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy looks on, during the summit of Southeastern European countries on peace, in Tirana, Albania. — Reuters

“Today we also discussed Ukraine’s defence needs and potential joint arms production,” he added.

Zelensky has repeatedly pleaded with allies for more aid, warning that Ukrainian victory “depends” on the West boosting support.

Already massively outgunned, his country is fending off a

renewed Russian offensive with dwindling ammunition that has had to be rationed.

EU allies are rallying to address that shortfall with a Czech-led plan to buy artillery from outside the bloc.

French President Emmanuel Macron meanwhile provoked backlash from fellow allies and a warning from the Kremlin

this week when he raised the possibility of sending Western troops into Ukraine.

Meanwhile, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen called on Wednesday for profits from Russian assets frozen in the West to be used to fund military equipment for Ukraine.

Calls have been mounting to find ways to support Kyiv’s

Zelensky has been crisscrossing the globe in recent weeks to rally support for his beleaguered country, as Ukraine’s armed forces face a critical shortage of ammunition

war effort by tapping the bank accounts, investments and other assets frozen after Russia attacked its neighbour in 2022.

Simply confiscating the funds is not seen as an option but the EU is working on ways to use the profits they generate, which alone could represent billions of euros a year.

“It is time to start a conversation about using the windfall profits of frozen Russian assets to jointly purchase military equipment for Ukraine,” von der Leyen said in a speech to the European Parliament. Kyiv says it desperately needs more military and financial assistance, with a fresh \$60 billion US package stalled in Congress. — AFP

Greeks strike to mark train crash anniversary

ATHENS: Rail services in Greece ground to a halt and ships were held up in ports near Athens on Wednesday as rail workers walked off the job to mark the anniversary of the country’s deadliest train crash - and demand justice and bigger pay rises.

On Feb. 28 2023, a passenger train from the capital to the northern city of Thessaloniki collided head-on with a freight train, killing 57 people and stirring mass protests over what many viewed as the result of decades of neglect of the rail sector.

On Wednesday, churches across the country rang their bells 57 times to represent the number of those killed, many of them young students returning home after a long weekend.

Protesters, ranging from rail and hospital workers to seafarers and school teachers, joined the 24-hour walkout by Greece’s largest public sector union ADEDY, which represents about half a million workers.

Many of them, including students, started rallying at meetings points in central Athens as they geared for a march to parliament.

Some held up a black banner reading: “We don’t forget, we demand justice.”

A station master was arrested hours after the crash and a judge

is investigating the case. The government says a trial is likely to begin in June.

But many survivors and victims’ relatives say that politicians, who are protected under Greek law from prosecution with only parliament able to investigate them, should also assume responsibility for safety system deficiencies.

Grieving families and survivors will hold a memorial service at the site of the crash in the Tempi valley in central Greece later in the day.

Demonstrators also protested against what they said were insufficient pay rises, the first after 14 years in the public sector. They say the increases are not big enough to offset the impact of rising living costs. Workers want a 10 per cent across-the-board rise instead and more hirings.

Greece has been recovering from a decade-long debt crisis and three international bailouts which it received in return for cutting wages and scrapping holiday bonuses in the public sector.

The conservative government has increased the minimum monthly salary by 20 per cent to 780 euros since it took office in 2019 and has vowed to lift it to 950 euros by 2027. But the country’s monthly salaries still lag behind the European Union average. — Reuters



The empty train central station of Thessaloniki is pictured during a 24-hour strike, Greece. — AFP

Armenia, Azerbaijan to make peace push in Berlin

BERLIN: Armenia and Azerbaijan’s foreign ministers are due to hold peace talks in Berlin, in a new push to resolve a decades-long conflict between the neighbouring Caucasus countries.

The dialogue involving Armenia’s Ararat Mirzoyan and Azerbaijan’s Jeyhun Bayramov builds on a surprise direct meeting between the two nations’ leaders on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference earlier this month.

Under German Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s mediation, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev had agreed then to push on with peace negotiations.

The leaders also pledged to resolve differences “exclusively through peaceful means and without the use of force,” Scholz’s spokesman had said.

The Munich meeting had marked a sharp easing of tensions after a new spate of volatility on the border region, when both sides accused each other of opening fire. Armenia had said the skirmish left four of its soldiers dead.

Armenia and Azerbaijan fought two wars, in the 1990s and in 2020, before Azerbaijani forces last September retook control of the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh in a lightning offensive that ended three decades of Armenian separatist rule over the enclave.

Tensions between the two countries have remained high since Baku re-captured the region of Nagorno-Karabakh in an operation that triggered the exodus of most of the enclave’s entire ethnic-Armenian population -- more than 100,000 people -- to Armenia.

Yerevan is concerned that Azerbaijan, emboldened by



An Armenian soldier looks through binoculars as he stands at fighting positions near divided Taghavard village in Nagorno-Karabakh region. — Reuters file photo

The Munich meeting had marked a sharp easing of tensions after a new spate of volatility on the border region, when both sides accused each other of opening fire

its success in Karabakh, could invade Armenian territory in order to create a land bridge to its Nakhchivan enclave.

Aliyev, who won re-election this month, had said in an inauguration speech it was Armenia, not Azerbaijan, that had outstanding territorial claims. And Pashinyan had warned

after a deadly clash along the two countries’ border earlier February that Azerbaijan was preparing for a “full-scale war” with its historic foe.

In Berlin, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock will hold talks separately with her Armenia and Azerbaijani counterparts, before bringing them both together for a trilateral discussion.

Baerbock, who will host the two-day peace talks, travelled to both countries in November to urge the arch-foes to revive dialogue.

Pashinyan and Aliyev previously said a peace agreement could have been signed by the end of last year, but internationally mediated peace talks have failed to yield a breakthrough.

The European Union and United States had played a lead role in mediating Azerbaijani-Armenian normalisation talks. — AFP

Reviving Spanish culture through Anda Jaleo



Rasha Al Raisi

The writer is author of The World According to Bahja

While the world was busy devising their New Year’s resolution, I was occupied with a more serious matter: the music album to start the New Year with.

This is not an easy task as music – just like perfumes can remind you instantly of good or bad times depending on the year. For example, in 2020 I decided to start the year with Rosalía’s album Los Ángeles and the year didn’t turn out to be as magical as expected.

Now whenever I hear Rosalía’s girl-like voice singing “the world is leagues and leagues,” it takes me back to driving through Muscat’s semi-empty roads during the pandemic. This year – and just like the past two years I chose to listen to my favourite Spanish singer Rozalén’s new album Matriz (matrix).

The album celebrates the diversity of Spanish culture and contains some revived traditional songs in Spain’s official languages: Spanish, Catalan, Galician and Vasque. One of the tracks that attracted my attention was a Bulería style song called Anda Jaleo (Come on shout!).

It wasn’t like any other flamenco song I heard

before where singers are all lovesick and begging for poison to end their misery (to which my typical Arab response is always: “Ya aa’mi buy it yourself! It’s cheap!). This song was deep and literate as the opening verse is: “I came upon a pine tree, to see if I could catch a glimpse of her, but I only saw the dust, raised by the car she travelled in.”

I decided to research the song and was surprised to know that the lyrics were written by Fredrico Garcia Lorca, Spain’s iconic poet. But what’s the story behind this song and its significance to Spanish culture?

It all started in the twenties of the last century when Spaniards started considering flamenco old-fashioned and preferring modern music to it.

This concerned Lorca and a few of his friends who decided to revive this authentic Spanish art. They started gathering popular songs and ballads from the gypsies living in the caves of Granada where he came from.

The song Anda Jaleo was not only sang by the gypsies, but also mentioned in 19th century Spanish songs compilation by authors José Hurtado and Francisco Ocón. The song Anda Jaleo was originally called The Diligence and the Smugglers of Ronda.

WHAT BEGAN AS A REVIVAL EFFORT BY FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA AND FRIENDS IN THE 1920S IS NOW A TIMELESS PIECE, REFLECTING LORCA’S ENCHANTING TOUCH ON SPANISH MUSIC

The opening verse of the song had the singer cry after coming upon a pine tree and marvelling how green it was, which Lorca changed to become instead an enamoured climbing the pine tree in hope of catching a glimpse of his beloved but all he sees is the dust raised by her car.

However, he kept the original chorus Anda Jaleo (come on shout!) and the second verse where the roughness of the smugglers is felt: Now we’re done with the ruckus, let’s get on with the shooting! This roughness is suddenly overridden with a gentle plea to a pigeon not to come out as he’s a hunter who’ll feel remorse if he kills her (and later finds a dead pigeon on the street of Los Muros that he makes a crown of flowers for).

Lorca’s version of the song became popular when it was recorded in 1931, where he played the piano and La Argentinita sang it among other traditional songs. These songs were part of Lorca’s travelling theatre company La Barraca that travelled throughout Spain to raise social awareness among peasants, especially that of their rights.

The song was banned after Lorca’s assassination in 1936 and during Franco’s regime. Now 93 years later Anda Jaleo continues thriving as everything else with Lorca’s enchanting touch. Listening is recommended.

Harmful waste generation set to jump, UN warns

AARON ROSS

Waste produced by the public will surge by 2050, causing hundreds of billions of dollars of damage through biodiversity loss, climate change and deadly pollution, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) said in a report.

The United Nations Environment Programme is responsible for coordinating responses to environmental issues within the United Nations system. It was established by Maurice Strong, its first director, after the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in June 1972.

The report said unless urgent measures were taken global waste generation would soar, driven largely by fast-growing economies, including in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa where many countries are already struggling to manage current production levels. UNEP projected the cost at \$640 billion annually by the middle of the century, representing a more than 75 per cent increase compared to 2020, when the world produced an estimated 2.1 billion tonnes of municipal solid waste, which excludes industrial waste.

Of the total, \$443 billion would be externalities, including biodiversity loss, climate-altering gases produced by the breakdown of organic waste and pollution that contributes to between 400,000 and 1 million deaths per year, the report said.

The report, released during this week’s UN Environment Assembly in Kenya, warned humanity has “moved backwards” over the past decade, “generating more waste, more pollution and more greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.”

Waste prevention measures and improved waste management could reduce those costs, but there are significant barriers to change, such as weak enforcement mechanisms, the report said.

A treaty to address plastics pollution, which does not biodegrade and can cause serious health impacts, is being negotiated, with a fourth round of talks scheduled for April.

UNEP Executive Director Inger Andersen said she was hopeful the treaty could be concluded by the end of this year despite differences between environmentalists and fossil fuel producers over how much the deal should focus on curbing plastics production versus promoting recycling and re-use.

“There is an interest, and especially among the countries that are producing raw polymer, but as I keep telling them, this is not an anti-plastic treaty,” Andersen said. — Reuters

The mysteries behind our shared yawns



Dr Khalfan Hamed Al Harrasi @khalfan.alharrasi

The writer is Country Manager, University of Cambridge in Oman

Yawning — it’s something we all do, often without much thought. But have you ever noticed how yawning seems to be contagious?

You see someone yawn, and suddenly, you’re doing the same. You might now be actually already yawning as you read this.

This curious phenomenon has intrigued scientists and researchers for years, prompting investigations into its underlying causes and implications.

Let’s delve into the world of contagious yawning and unravel its mysteries.

Contagious yawning refers to the phenomenon where witnessing or even just thinking about yawning can trigger a yawn in someone else. It’s a widespread behaviour observed not only in humans but also in some other animals, including chimpanzees, dogs, and other animals.

While yawning itself serves various physiological purposes, such as regulating brain temperature and promoting alertness, the contagious aspect adds an intriguing layer to its study.

Numerous studies have attempted to shed light on the mechanisms behind contagious yawning. One prominent theory suggests that it’s linked to empathy and social bonding, similar to the act of smiling when someone is talking to you and smiling.

Research published in the journal *Current Biology* in 2011 found that individuals who scored higher on tests measuring empathy were more likely to yawn in response to seeing others yawn.

This correlation hints at a possible connection between contagious yawning and the ability to understand and share the feelings of others.

Furthermore, neuroimaging studies have shown that areas of the brain associated with empathy and social cognition (such as the anterior cingulate cortex and the precuneus) are activated when witnessing contagious yawning. These findings support the idea that contagious yawning may serve a social function, helping to strengthen social bonds within groups.

Mirror neurons, a type of brain



cell that fires both when an individual performs an action and when they observe someone else performing the same action, have also been implicated

AS RESEARCHERS CONTINUE TO EXPLORE THE MYSTERIES OF YAWNING, ONE THING WHICH REMAINS CERTAIN IS THAT THIS SIMPLE ACT MAY HOLD PROFOUND SECRETS WAITING TO BE DISCOVERED

in contagious yawning. These neurons are thought to play a crucial role in imitation and social learning.

Studies involving brain imaging and electrophysiological techniques have provided evidence of mirror neuron activation during contagious yawning, suggesting that these neurons may contribute to the spread of yawning behaviour.

While contagious yawning is most commonly associated with humans, it has also been observed in several animal species. For example, a study published in ‘Biology Letters’ in 2008 documented contagious yawning in chimpanzees, suggesting that this behaviour may have evolutionary roots dating back to our primate ancestors.

Similarly, experiments with dogs have shown that they are capable of contagious yawning, particularly when they observe familiar humans yawning. These findings hint at the possibility of shared underlying mechanisms for

contagious yawning across species.

The study of contagious yawning extends beyond mere curiosity about a peculiar behaviour. It offers valuable insights into social cognition, empathy, and even certain neurological disorders.

Conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and schizophrenia, which are characterised by deficits in social functioning and empathy, have been associated with reduced susceptibility to contagious yawning.

By unravelling the mechanisms behind contagious yawning, researchers hope to gain a better understanding of these conditions and develop more effective interventions.

Yawning serves various physiological and social functions, including brain cooling, oxygenation, and social bonding. However, excessive yawning can sometimes indicate underlying health issues or sleep disorders, warranting further evaluation.

Various cultural beliefs and myths surround yawning, such as it being a sign of disrespect, tiredness, or boredom. While these perceptions persist, scientists continue to understand the true nature of yawning.

Contagious yawning continues to captivate researchers and enthusiasts alike, offering a fascinating window into the complexities of social behaviour and empathy.

From its neurological underpinnings to its implications for understanding human and animal cognition, the study of contagious yawning holds promise for unlocking new insights into the workings of the mind.

Patience to endure...

Through difficult times, a man with patience can calmly sail through rough waters.

Patience is the hardest skill to master as once said by Conor McGregor. Patience is a virtue and there's a reason it's a tough skill to master.

Imagine having spent time in completing your project, through sleepless nights only for it to be rejected. What do you do? The answer, have patience.

My patience was tested most recently. It was that time of the month, when the hypermarket is calling, and the fridge is asking to be filled.

The wife knows it's the salary day, the list is ready, my wallet is ready to take a hit.

Thinking to myself, since when shopping becomes hard, I mean not the sense of shopping, the process I enjoy. But what spoils it is when I look at the price of each item being added to the trolley.

I patiently proceed to the counter to pay, and my wife quietly wonders so her eyes don't see the final bill. We said this is expensive, even buying basic needs makes you think twice, we've become selective in what we buy.

Ramadhan is just few weeks away and in my mind we would save a little, but that will be short-lived, the fact that Eid is just round the corner.

We have to be grateful for what we have, appreciate that we can afford basic needs.

But the way we felt that our salaries are only good for the first two weeks, then we have to survive until our next salary. My wife keeps reminding me, that we can't just live every month paycheck to paycheck.



Saif Saleh al Shaibany

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I agree, but we have tired finding other sources of income, but failed, nothing ever worked.

I said to her that I lost hope and no longer have the patience to bear anymore failures.

That's when she said, abandon it or endure while the latter requires dedication and belief in yourself and hard work, more importantly it requires patience to withstand the onslaughts of rejections and heartaches to push through the seas of dead hopes and finally reaching victory.

I remember at the college one of my classmates was in tears, after class I found him by the hall trying to control his emotions.

Being concerned, I approached him and asked if he is fine and if there is anything I could do. That's when he said, I don't know if I could continue studying. Unsure how to respond, he started to explain that his father has lost his business after so many years of hard work and all his sacrifice is gone. He was worried now how will his family survive, and he thought of dropping out of the college to support his father.

Remembering the incident had made me think no matter how painful mastering patience is but it will bear fruits.

We are naturally impatient and quick in getting frustrated when stuck in traffic or when the queue is long.

We are quick to make a decision without giving it a thought and jump to a conclusion when the situation turns against us.

The matter of fact is that we have been taught all our lives to be patient. I was once told that time is in our hands but we wasted it by being impatient.

NO MATTER HOW PAINFUL MASTERING PATIENCE IS BUT IT WILL BEAR FRUITS

ERAS TOUR TRAIL!



Fans of US singer Taylor Swift, also known as a Swifties, take pictures next to an installation in the 'Eras Tour Trail' that depicts different eras of the pop star's career at the Marina Bay Sands complex in Singapore on Wednesday. More than 300,000 Swifties from Singapore and neighbouring countries will attend the US superstar's six sold-out Eras Tour shows at the National Stadium from March 2-9. —AFP

A global cash-transfer fund could end extreme poverty

For decades, the international community has grappled with the challenge of ending extreme poverty, which is the leading Sustainable Development Goal for 2030. Despite some progress, we remain far off track, with an estimated 700 million people still struggling to survive on less than \$2.15 per day. Unlike in previous decades, however, we now have a solution that can be scaled up rapidly to accelerate the end of extreme poverty: direct cash transfers to the poorest households.

The concept itself is not new. Cash aid has proven effective, especially in the face of emergencies. During the Covid-19 pandemic, one of every six people in the world received some cash assistance. Direct transfers are powerful tools for helping individuals to take control of their lives and invest in their families' well-being. That is why high- and middle-income countries are increasingly incorporating cash aid as a central part of their social safety nets. Still, it is estimated that less than 5 per cent of the \$200 billion spent annually on international development is allocated to cash transfers.

The positive impact of cash transfers is well-documented and undeniable. The upshot from more than 300 randomised control trials is that transfers can boost incomes more than twofold; increase school enrollment and entrepreneurship; decrease skipped meals, illness, and depression; and reduce domestic violence. Importantly, they neither



Cina Lawson

The writer is Minister of Digital Economy and Digital Transformation of Togo



Rory Stewart

The writer, a former foreign aid minister of the United Kingdom, is a senior adviser at GiveDirectly

reduce hours worked nor increase spending on temptation goods like tobacco and alcohol. Better still, every \$1 transfer has a spillover effect of around \$2.50 in the local economy. Three years after the transfer, recipients are still earning more and are better educated. Recent research from Kenya showed that a \$500 lump-sum cash transfer was particularly effective in empowering families to make income-generating investments.

Equally important, we now have the technology to reach the world's poorest people en masse with direct transfers. New digital technologies have dramatically lowered the cost and expanded our capacity to deliver money safely to the poorest parts of the world. During the pandemic, Togo used mobile-phone data and satellite imagery to identify and target people in need of relief. Its NOVISSI programme leveraged the basic USSD technology on all mobile devices (similar to SMS text messaging) to reach and validate recipients, distributing \$34 million to 920,000 beneficiaries.

Having been carefully studied, Togo's successful pilot is now being scaled up to a \$100 million programme, with World Bank support. Similarly, India enrolled 1.3 billion people in its digital ID system in the space of just six years, facilitating rapid growth in digital payments and enabling seamless cash transfers to the

country's remotest areas.

Now that these and many other programmes have demonstrated the effectiveness of cash transfers, the question is how to globalise this solution. Building on the insights of an international working group we recently co-chaired, we propose establishing a new global fund dedicated to eradicating extreme poverty through lump-sum direct cash transfers. This solution would help countries expand their use of digital cash transfers by expanding existing social-protection programmes or starting new ones. The money required would come from a mix of philanthropists, institutions, and governments, similar to how the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis, and Malaria raises its funds. Crucially, these

transfers would be offered not as a substitute for other interventions, but rather as a complement.

After all, if families still lack access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, additional cash will not help as much as it could. As a complementary measure, however, the benefits of that cash would extend beyond the initial payment. Individuals and families equipped with mobile money accounts would gain access to a financial lifeline, enabling them to save, start businesses, or receive remittances from abroad. At scale, this infrastructure accelerates underserved communities' financial inclusion, and empowers national governments to provide emergency cash support during disasters and to offer long-term benefits to vulnerable

populations.

While direct transfers alone will not end extreme poverty, they represent a concrete first step towards catalysing wider action. As with the strategy for tackling HIV – whereby an agreement to distribute anti-retroviral treatment preceded larger reforms to health systems and measures to encourage behavioral changes – a swift, unified initial step can make a daunting problem more manageable than we thought.

It should be unacceptable in today's world that hundreds of millions of families still struggle for food and adequate shelter. Children shouldn't face stunted growth and development, or be unable to complete their education. This type of poverty isn't just painful; it is a tragic waste of human potential.

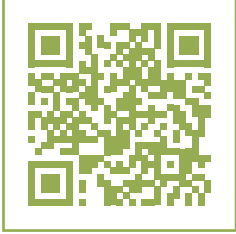
By improving dozens of outcomes simultaneously, cash transfers offer a transformative solution to multidimensional poverty. They have already proven effective, adaptable, and replicable, and now they are becoming more attainable every year with growing mobile coverage and improved digital infrastructure. This technological diffusion offers a historic opportunity to break the cycle of extreme poverty and desperation. For the first time, the world has both the money and the methods to succeed. What are we waiting for?



The positive impact of cash transfers is well-documented and undeniable.

sport

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DHOFAR, BAHLA PLAY OUT GOALLESS DRAW IN HM CUP FIRST LEG SEMIS

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 28

Salalah giants, Dhofar and Bahla played out a goalless draw on Wednesday at Nizwa Sports Stadium, in the first leg of semifinal of the His Majesty's Football Cup championship. The draw kept both teams hopes alive to move into the final match of the coveted cup.

The second leg match will take place at Al Saada Sports Stadium on March 10, as the winner will

move to the final, which will be decided later. Dhofar missed the service of his player Nayef Faraj in the 62nd minute after he received the second yellow card, to continue the match with ten men until the end.

Both teams failed to score a goal in the match after many scoring attempts were missed throughout the encounter. Ten times winner entered to the game with an objective to get inch closer to the final match and then to raise the

record to 11th title. On the other hand, the hosts Bahla began the match with an eye to progress into the final and get closer to chase up for their first title ever.

Dhofar began the match with a start-up list that comprised goalie Mazin al Kasbi while the defender Abdul Salam Amer was the star in the defending line beside Thani al Rushaidi, Omega and Ali Salim. The rest players of Dhofar were Nayef Faraj, Moutaz Saleh, Ammar Abed, Sultan Badar, Hussain al

Shahri and Mohammed al Oraibi.

In the first half, the defending line of both teams managed to broke all the attempts as Salalah giants created some attacking chances. Despite Bahla's position in the Omantel league as they are struggling in the danger area, they showed top game as Rafael Bastos and Junior made good efforts but it did not found the target.

In the second half, in the 62nd minute Dhofar played with one man less after the international

referee Omar al Yaqoobi showed the red card to Dhofar's Nayf Faraj as he fall down in the box without any interface from Bahla's defender.

Bahla's Rafael Bastos was very close to score the first goal for his team in the 77th minute as he received a ball inside the box but his strong ball was saved by Mazin al Kasbi in style. Bahla pressed hard in the dying minutes to score at least a goal, but all the attempts were broke by Dhofar's strong defending line. The referee

Omar al Yaqoobi added eight minutes of additional time but without any new in the result as the match ended with a goalless draw.

Earlier on Tuesday, defending champions Al Nahda played out a 1-1 draw with five times winner Al Nasr in the His Majesty's Cup semifinal first leg match at Al Buraimi Sports Complex. Both teams will meet in the second leg match of semifinals at Al Saada Sports Complex on March 11.

Hurricane of ACL injuries points to lack of awareness

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, FEB 28

A senior sports medicine physician who had a career spanning more than 40 years at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth warned of the rising threat of anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries in Oman recently.

"I believe the number (ACL injuries) is rising due to not following the protocols of playing sports, especially football in Oman among the general population," Dr Mahmoud Shehabullah told *Observer*.

"When I recently visited my clinic at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex, I could see several ACL



Dr Mahmoud Shehabullah

injuries being reported daily and the figures are alarming compared to the population who are playing the game in Oman."

"Though it's mostly a non-contact injury, one must know how to land while tackling a ball aerially. If one of the knees is twisted or a direct kick on the knee means absolutely there is no point of return.

"I worked in this part of the world for more than 40 years but the injury curve is the same but recently it's above the previous year's statistics."

The facilities have improved in Oman regarding the ACL surgery and reconstruction.

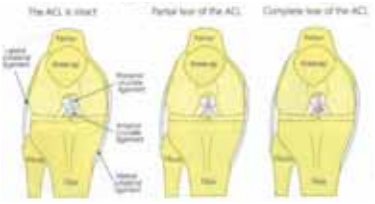
"There are at least 10 institutions ready to reconstruct ACL and they are giving good attention to the ill-fated victims. But no one bothers to show minimum interest to spread

awareness among the public and athletes on how to prevent injuries. Though there are some seminars and symposiums being organised in this regard we need more intensive campaigns given the alarming rate of ACL injuries in Oman," the veteran physician said.

So there is an urgent need for a precision awareness programme for the sports loving, soccer playing individuals, he said.

LISTEN TO YOUR BODY

In his message to Omani



sportspersons and sports lovers, he said: "The general crowd is very much interested to take part in sports specially soccer but unfortunately they don't follow the rules of the game. Because ignorance is playing a major part in a major injury."

"So always listen to your body. Get assessed before taking part in any sports."

Most of the major injuries are coming from the general population who are playing for fun and they are very serious about playing soccer regularly, he said.

These injuries are mainly due to ignorance of the sport, lack of education, no assessment before joining sports, playing

on hard surfaces, uneven beach, biomechanical deficits and lack of discipline. Other factors include faulty shoes and lack of stretching before involving in any training or sports.

"Most of the knee injuries are suicidal. Wrong training/ failure to land properly/ wrong surface/ wrong equipment/ no proper stretching or warming up / dehydration etc are causing the injuries to the fun loving soccer playing groups. They outnumber the professional or club playing athletes also," Shehabullah added.

"The community / family/ friends must make a distress call to enlighten such individuals playing football," he concluded.

Muscat to host series of ITPF meetings



Mohammed al Fayrouz, ITPF President

SPORTS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 28

The Sultanate of Oman will host meetings of the International Tent Pegging Federation (ITPF), which is based in Muscat. The first meeting will begin on Friday with a joint meeting between the board members of the ITPF and the committee heads at the Hormuz Grand Hotel in Muscat. The meeting will serve as preparation for the second meeting which is scheduled on Saturday which will be held at same venue. Meetings will be head by Mohammed bin Issa al Fayrouz, President of the ITPF. The third meeting will take place on Sunday and will be the main meeting represented by the Annual General Assembly Meeting that will feature attendance of all the members of the ITPF at the Marjan Hall in the Civil Aviation Club. During these meetings, various topics will be discussed including the future of Tent Pegging sports worldwide level. The Sultanate of Oman has been hosting the headquarters of ITPF since its establishment in 2013 and it has been making steady progress. The sport of Tent Pegging has witnessed popularity across different continents.



Al Harthy all set for first season with BMW in FIA World Endurance meet



Ahmad al Harthy's BMW car

MUSCAT: Losail International Circuit in Qatar is the venue for Ahmad Al Harthy's eagerly awaited first race with Team WRT and BMW on Saturday, as the new FIA World Endurance Championship season gets underway with the Qatar Airways 1812 km.

Oman's Al Harthy, who officially launched his exciting 2024 motor racing campaign just over a week ago, is embarking on his most ambitious and high-profile year of competition yet as team-mate to global sporting icon Valentino Rossi and BMW pro driver Maxime Martin.

Partnering up in the new LMGT3 class, the trio heads into the first round of the FIA WEC season in positive mood after this week's two-day 'Prologue' test

at Losail which took place on Monday, 26th February, and Tuesday, 27th February.

Marking Al Harthy's first official outing in the No.46 car, the team-mates utilised the time to get as settled as possible in the stunning new BMW M4 LMGT3 and to prepare well for free practice and qualifying over the next couple of days in Qatar.

Al Harthy, who is supported throughout 2024 by prestigious partners OQ, Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Omantel and BMW Oman, enjoyed an excellent first season in FIA WEC last year where he achieved two podium results.

Now, with a fantastic new challenge ahead, Al Harthy is absolutely relishing

the opportunity to once again fly the flag for Oman – aiming to get the campaign underway positively in Saturday's 10-hour endurance contest.

For FIA WEC round one, 18 cars are set to do battle in LMGT3 with a combined entry of close to 40 cars when including the Hypercar class. Featuring some of the globe's most highly respected and successful professional racing drivers as well, it's a very exciting prospect.

Ahmad al Harthy said, "This weekend marks the start of an amazing new chapter in my career and I cannot wait to be out on track, racing the new BMW M4 LMGT3 for the first time. It's great to be starting the season so close to home as well, meaning we have a huge amount of support coming to Qatar with our

incredible partners, family and friends.

"It's been a very busy few weeks getting everything in place, so it was great to get behind the wheel in the Prologue this week. Now we're focused on putting together some positive free practice sessions so we can go into qualifying on Friday in the best shape possible. Everything is new for me this year, the team, my team-mates and, of course, the BMW, but it's an incredible new challenge and one I'm absolutely ready for," he ended.

Two free practice sessions will take place in Losail today, with a third practice run and qualifying following on Friday, the latter beginning at 16:00 local time. Round one of the FIA WEC season begins at 11:00 local time on Saturday.

Carlos triumphs International Series Oman

MUSCAT: In a spectacular display of skill and sportsmanship, the International Series Oman 2024 at Al Mouj Golf, part of the Asian Tour, concluded with Carlos Ortiz from Mexico clinching the title. The event, which ran from February 22 to 25, featured a compelling finish with Carlos Ortiz overcoming Louis Oosthuizen from South Africa by 4 shots. This year's tournament, backed by Saudi-owned LIV Golf, solidified Al Mouj Golf's reputation as a world-class golfing destination.

Building on the success of the previous year, the 2024 edition featured an impressive player list of 144 from over 25 countries, including renowned golfers Joaquin Niemann, Louis Oosthuizen, and defending champion Takumi Kanaya. The event was a true testament to Al Mouj Golf's commitment to excellence, underscoring its recent accolade as the Asian Tour's 2023 Golf Course of the Year and its consistent ranking among the top 100 courses worldwide.

Nasser al Shaibani, CEO of Al Mouj Golf, expressed



Mexican Carlos Ortiz lifts the International Series Oman Cup

his delight at the successful conclusion of the tournament: "We are thrilled to have hosted another spectacular edition of the International Series Oman. Congratulations to Carlos Ortiz on a well-deserved victory. This event showcases Al Mouj Golf's exceptional facilities while highlighting Oman as a prime golfing and tourist destination. We remain committed to hosting more prestigious events in the future and elevating Oman's profile internationally

in both sports and tourism.

Al Mouj Golf, designed by Greg Norman, is a paragon of golfing excellence. The course, known for its challenging links-style layout along the picturesque coastline of the Indian Ocean and the Al Hajar Mountains, attracted over 51,000 guests this year. With 23 international awards and a growing reputation, Al Mouj Golf continues to offer an unparalleled golfing experience to athletes and enthusiasts alike.

Djokovic thrilled to return to Indian Wells after a five-year hiatus

LOS ANGELES: Novak Djokovic on Tuesday said he was excited to be back in Indian Wells to compete at the BNP Paribas Open for the first time since 2019 after US travel restrictions related to Covid-19 had kept him away.

The world number one is seeking an unprecedented sixth title at the Masters 1,000 event that begins next week and is regarded as the biggest tennis tournament outside of the four Grand Slams.

"It has been five years, way too long to not be part of the Tennis Paradise tournament, one of the best tournaments in the world without a doubt," Djokovic said in a video from the small, picturesque city in the Southern California desert.

"It's probably the favourite Masters tournament of so many players including myself. I can't wait to come and perform once again in front of some of the best tennis fans that we have on the tour."

The Serb won the first of his 24 Grand Slams at the



Serbia's Novak Djokovic

Australian Open in 2008 and backed that up a few months later by capturing his first Indian Wells crown.

"The first time I won the title in Indian Wells, it was one of the greatest titles of my career at that point. I remember I played Mardy Fish in the finals," he

said.

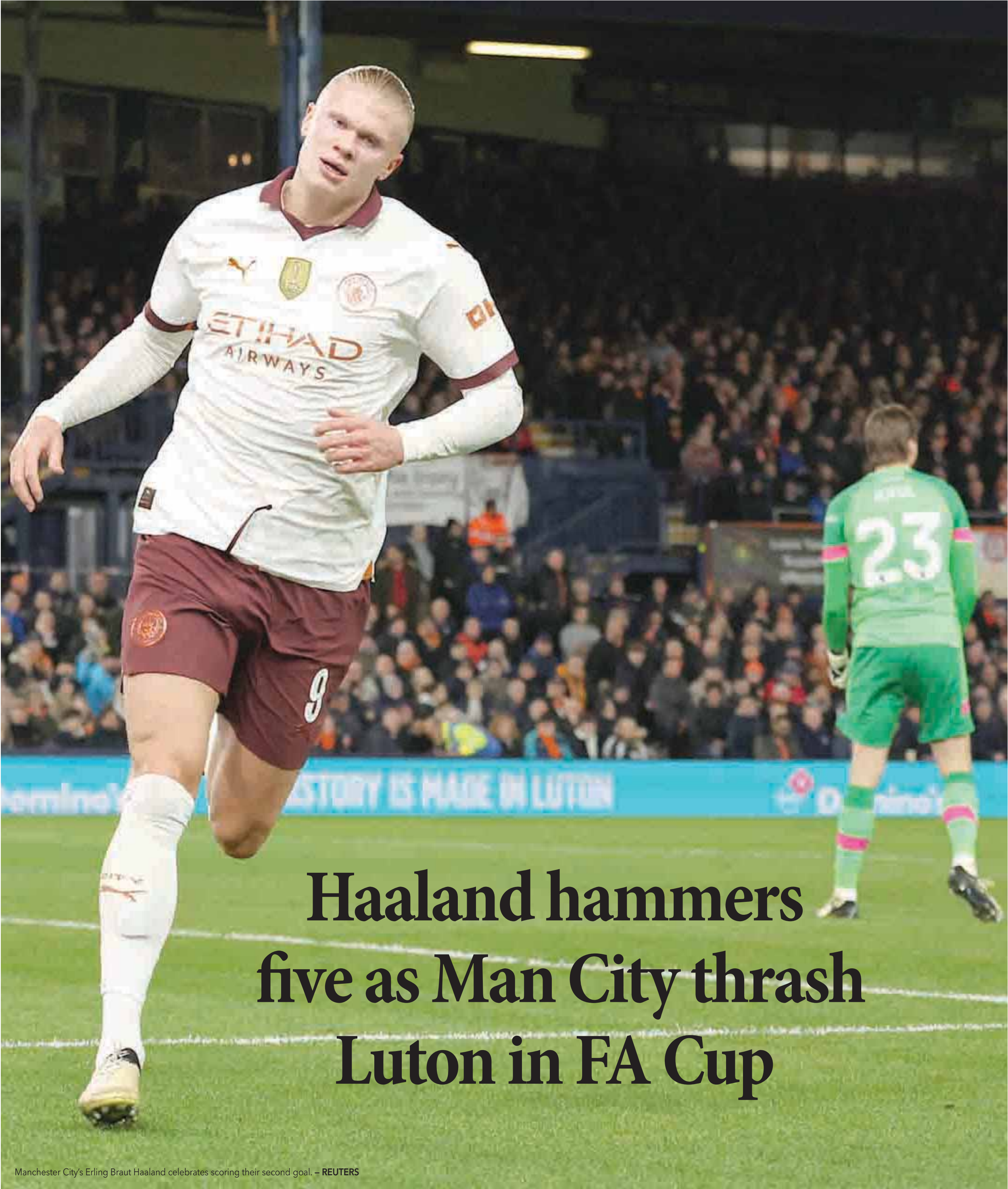
"I was fortunate to win the tournament another four times and played some epic matches in the finals against (Roger) Federer and (Rafa) Nadal and many of the great players in that era. I'm really looking forward to coming back."

Three-times Indian Wells champion Nadal is set to compete at the tournament after missing last month's Australian Open due to a muscle tear.

The 2020 BNP Paribas Open was cancelled due to the Covid-19 outbreak and Djokovic missed the next three editions as the United States did not allow unvaccinated foreigners to enter the country.

Djokovic was spotted in Los Angeles on Sunday night watching fellow sporting great Lionel Messi and his Major League Soccer side Inter Miami take on LA Galaxy.

Carlos Alcaraz and Elena Rybakina are the defending champions at this year's BNP Paribas Open, which runs from March 3-17. — **Reuters**



Haaland hammers five as Man City thrash Luton in FA Cup

Manchester City's Erling Braut Haaland celebrates scoring their second goal. – REUTERS

LUTON: Erling Haaland roared back to his best form with a five-goal salvo as Manchester City thumped Luton Town 6-2 at Kenilworth Road to reach the quarterfinals of the FA Cup on Tuesday.

Luton had no answer to the marauding Norwegian who bagged his eighth City hat-trick before halftime and then scored twice more after the break to kill off a stirring Luton revival.

The 23-year-old Haaland's first four goals were all created by Kevin De Bruyne. Mateo Kovacic also got on the scoresheet for holders City who are unbeaten in 18 games in all competitions.

Luton threatened an unlikely

comeback when Jordan Clark found the top corner with a sublime effort on the stroke of halftime and netted again early in the second half.

But a strong City side instantly found another gear to cruise into the hat for the last eight.

Second-tier leaders Leicester City joined Pep Guardiola's side in the quarterfinals as they beat Premier League Bournemouth 1-0 thanks to Abdul Fatawu's extra-time goal.

Newcastle United squeezed through in a penalty shootout at Blackburn Rovers after the tie ended 1-1.

The night belonged to the unstoppable Haaland though

as he became the first top-flight player to score five goals in an FA Cup tie since George Best struck six for Manchester United against Northampton Town in 1970.

"Kevin De Bruyne is massive. He is doing what he is best at. It's a pleasure playing with him," Haaland, whose hat-trick was his first for City away from home, told ITV.

"We know what we both want from each other. It clicks well. I am getting back to my best. Finally I am feeling good. It's an amazing feeling. It's coming, we're coming. Exciting times ahead. We are ready to attack."

The only blemish for City, who face Manchester United in the

Premier League on Sunday, was an injury to Jack Grealish who was forced off before halftime with a recurrence of a groin injury.

HAALAND ON FIRE

Haaland had scored only five goals in his previous 11 appearances for City -- a spell interrupted by a foot injury that some suggested had taken the edge off his game.

But he blew away any doubts in emphatic fashion with a sensational display of centre forward play.

"Erling was on fire and Kevin was perfect," was Guardiola's verdict. "The connection they have. Erling needs a player like Kevin and Kevin needs a player

like Erling."

City meant business from the start and went ahead in the fourth minute as Matheus Nunes played in De Bruyne who cut back a perfect pass for Haaland to fire past Tim Krul.

De Bruyne played Haaland through in the 18th minute to make it 2-0 and Haaland's hat-trick goal was almost a carbon copy as he again rolled his marker and surged on to a De Bruyne pass before dinking a deft shot over Krul.

Clark gave the home fans some cheer when he curled a perfect shot past Stefan Ortega and Luton punished City for some slack defending just after the restart

with Clark finishing well.

But Haaland tapped in a De Bruyne pass a couple of minutes later and then grabbed his fifth from Bernardo Silva's assist before being substituted, much to Luton's relief.

Newcastle were given a big scare at Championship strugglers Blackburn. Anthony Gordon gave them the lead at Ewood Park but Rovers hit back with Samuel Szmodics taking the game to extra time in which both sides were close to nicking it.

The visitors edged through 4-3 on penalties with Blackburn captain Dominic Hyam having his kick saved by Martin Dubravka.

— Reuters



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Oman, South Korea ink MoU to boost investment cooperation

MUSCAT: Oman's Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) and the Republic of Korea's Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy yesterday signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on consolidating cooperation between the two countries in the field of investment promotion.

The signing ceremony took place in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, during the Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation.

The agreement was signed by Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and Inkyo Cheong, Minister of Trade, Industry and Energy, Republic of Korea.

The MoU reflects a keenness

to enhance economic prosperity and sustainability in the two countries, as well as flexibility in minimising trade barriers and facilitating customs procedures.

It will also lead to transparency and the establishment of better supply chain channels. Earlier, the GCC states initialled the first version of a free trade agreement (FTA) with the Republic of Korea to implement economic integration and develop commercial relations between the two sides.

The signing ceremony was attended by Sayyid Dr Ahmed bin Hilal al Busaidi, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the United Arab Emirates, Shaikh Salim al Kathiri, Head of Oman Commercial Office in Dubai, among officials from both sides.

— ONA

Oman charts path to recovery in 10th Five-Year Development Plan



The Ministry outlined a multi-pronged approach to tackle these challenges and stimulate economic growth.

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, FEB 28

Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, outlined the government's plan for navigating Oman's economic recovery in its presentation to Majlis Ash'shura on Wednesday, February 28, 2024.

The 10th Five-Year Development Plan acknowledges the significant challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, including a 3.4-per cent decline in GDP in 2020, translating to a loss of RO 1.176 billion.

The Ministry outlined a multi-pronged approach to tackle these challenges and stimulate economic growth. The plan emphasises direct support for healthcare,

education and essential services, forming the bedrock of a healthy and functioning society.

In addition, targeted economic stimulus packages aim to ensure the continued provision of essential services, mitigating disruptions caused by the pandemic.

Measures like tax exemptions, low-interest financing and direct financial support aim to alleviate the burden on businesses and institutions disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Beyond immediate recovery, the plan emphasises long-term investments in critical infrastructure:

■ **Upgrading healthcare and education:** The government

will invest in modernising hospitals, medical facilities and educational institutions.

Additionally, the plan prioritises enhancing technology to improve the quality of distance learning, ensuring educational continuity during unforeseen circumstances.

■ **E-commerce boost:** Recognising the growing importance of online commerce, the plan outlines initiatives to develop the e-commerce infrastructure and encourage businesses to adopt online platforms, catering to evolving consumer preferences.

■ **Supporting entrepreneurs:** The plan recognises the importance

of fostering innovation and entrepreneurship. It proposes funding programmes, training opportunities, and the creation of co-working spaces to empower aspiring entrepreneurs and nurture new business ventures.

■ **Attracting foreign investment:** The government intends to streamline procedures and offer tax incentives to attract foreign investment, further bolstering economic activity in Oman.

The 10th Five-Year Development Plan signifies Oman's commitment to navigating the post-pandemic landscape and building a resilient and dynamic economy for the future.

Oman advances 39 places in 2024 Economic Freedom Index

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman rose 39 places in the 2024 Economic Freedom Index issued by the Heritage Foundation, ranking 56th in the world compared to its 95th rank in 2023.

The index covers 184 economies to measure the level of economic freedom based on 12 sub-indices divided into four pillars: the rule of law, government size, regulatory efficiency and open markets.

The Economic Freedom Index documents the positive relationship between economic freedom and a range of social and economic goals, and economic freedom is closely linked to healthier societies, a cleaner environment, increased per capita wealth, human development, democracy and the eradication of poverty.

Oman's score advanced to about 62.9 out of 100, classifying its economy as "somewhat free"



Oman achieved 76.2 points out of 100 in the trade freedom index, which measures the extent of impact of tariffs and non-tariff barriers on imports and exports of goods and services inside and outside the country.

instead of "mostly not free" last year, as it exceeded the global and regional average, noting that the classification includes 5 groups.

The more it advanced towards 100, the freer its economy was.

The Sultanate of Oman recorded the largest noticeable progress in the financial health index, as its score rose from 12.1 in 2023 to 73.8 out of 100 this year.

This progress is attributed to clear reasons, the most important of which is the decrease in the proportion of public debt to the gross domestic product and the recording of a surplus in the public financial budget.

It also achieved high results in other indicators, most notably the tax burden index, which reflects marginal tax rates on both personal and corporate income and the general level of taxes as a percentage of GDP, where it obtained a score of 97.6 out of 100.

In the monetary freedom index, which analyses the extent of price stability and the extent of microeconomic intervention, Oman received a score of 80.3 out of 100.

In the trade freedom index, which measures the extent of the impact of tariffs and non-tariff barriers on imports and exports of goods and services inside and outside the country, Oman achieved the result 76.2 out of 100.

Oman, represented by the National Competitiveness Office, in cooperation with the National Programme for Investment and Export Development (Nazdaher), seeks to achieve a high rank in the index by developing an action plan in partnership with other concerned parties to reach the goals of Oman Vision 2040 so that the country is among the top 40 countries in the world. — ONA

Oman oil price drops \$ 0.41/barrel

MUSCAT: Oman oil price (April delivery 2024) yesterday reached \$81.66 per barrel, comprising a drop by 41 cents compared to the price on Tuesday, which stood at \$82.07.

The average price of Oman oil (February delivery 2024) has stabilised at \$77.21 per barrel, thus \$5.96 per barrel lower than January delivery 2024.

Meanwhile, oil prices pulled back on Wednesday as the prospect of delays to US interest rate cuts and a rise in US crude stocks offset a boost from a potential extension to Opec+ supply curbs.

Brent crude futures fell 90 cents, or 1.08%, to \$81.74 a barrel by 09:02 GMT. US West Texas Intermediate futures (WTI) were down 92 cents, or 1.17%, at \$78.03. — ONA

bp Oman launches book to celebrate 10-year social investment programme anniversary

MUSCAT: bp Oman celebrated the 10-year anniversary of its social investment programme at the Royal Opera House Muscat under the auspices of Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, the Minister of Energy and Minerals.

During the ceremony, bp released its publication '10 years of empowering Omani capabilities' to mark this milestone. The book shares the journey of bp's social investment programme and its impact on Oman's people.

Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals commented: "I am proud to witness the impact of bp's social investment programme so far, which have extended across all governorates in Oman.

The programme has supported many sectors of the local communities with tangible economic impact.



Yousef al Ojaili, bp Oman president.

This was achieved alongside bp's commitment to maximise Block 61's gas production while setting goals to be a net-zero company by 2050."

Since 2014, the programme benefitted over 180,000 Omanis

through more than 150 initiatives including over 16,000 women, 80,000 children, 12,000 youth, 13,500 job-seekers, 1,000 people with disabilities, 200 retirees and 100 SMEs.

Yousef al Ojaili, bp Oman

president, said: "Over the past 10 years, we worked closely with our social investment partners to improve people's lives and care for our planet. Our programmes support our sustainability framework and several pillars of Oman's Vision 2040 which allow for the sustainable development of Oman."

He added: "We remain committed to creating a positive impact in Oman. We would like to thank the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, OQ, PTTEP, Petronas – our joint venture partners at Block 61 for their continuous support." On the sidelines of the ceremony, bp Oman's social investment partners and beneficiaries showcased their diverse range of programmes and how it improved people's lives in the fields of education, enterprise development and energy

sustainability. Rihab al Muqbali, Destination sustainability's project manager, said, "I started as a beneficiary of bp's social investment programme 'Teqdar' which aims to train job-seekers in Oman.

After receiving a training opportunity, I got a chance to work with destination sustainability which is responsible for implementing bp's social investment programmes. I am proud to have been able to support the programme's growth over the years and witness its impact to the local community."

Over the coming week, Innotech's FabTech mobile lab — one of bp's social investment programmes — will stop at Al Dhahirah and Al Dakhiliyah governorates to celebrate and showcase bp's programme journey over the past decade.

Discover lasting moments with your loved ones in Kia Sorento

MUSCAT: Kia Sorento SUV is one of Kia's most popular SUVs offering many reasons to make the most of every moment. The Sorento with its impressive profile, spacious interior, power-packed performance and more is a good choice for those looking for a dependable travel partner.

The Sorento makes a fine mark with its stylish design. This is complemented by its attractive alloy wheels, LED headlamps, LED daytime running lights, LED front and rear fog lamps, LED rear combination lamps and remote engine start.

Like its exterior, the Sorento has an equally impressive interior too. Elevating passenger comfort and contributing to making memorable journeys are features that include power windows, Bluetooth, 60:40 split rear seats, smart phone wireless charger, Android auto and car play, 8" audio display, audio remote control, fabric seats, dual full automatic



A/C, 3rd row AC vents and more. Powering the Sorento is a 2.5L engine with 177 HP and 23.7 kg.m. torque. The engine is paired to a 6-speed automatic transmission. Adding to driving delights is the drive mode select offering the driver choices to enjoy exciting driving experiences on varied terrains.

Reliable International Automotive (RIA), the distributor for Kia in Oman provides a rewarding ownership experience for customers. Excellent product attributes and unmatched facilities easily ensure their absolute satisfaction, every mile of the way.

Shell Oman introduces enhanced V-Power

MUSCAT: Aligned with its mission to enhance motorists' journeys, Shell Oman Marketing Company (Shell Oman) has unveiled the new and improved Shell V-Power, the latest iteration of its premium fuel line, now available in Oman.

This premium performance fuel is designed to effectively clean up to 100 per cent of critical engine components, providing optimum engine performance for drivers.

Beyond the realm of conventional fuels, Shell V-Power is meticulously designed to maximise engine performance.

In addition to our offering of a diverse range of fuels and a retail experience centred on convenience, quality and choice, the new and improved Shell V-Power endeavors to surpass customer expectations.



This premium performance fuel is designed to effectively clean up to 100% of critical engine components.

Through its advanced formulation, new and improved Shell V-Power cleans up to 100% of critical engine parts, e.g., fuel injectors and/or inlet valves, therefore optimises airflow and combustion, culminating in an ideal driving experience for the customers.

The new and improved Shell

V-Power underscores Shell's dedication to relentless innovation through its rigorous Research & Development accomplishments.

A new fuel formulation that ensures our new and improved Shell V-Power not only meets current market demands, but also the evolving expectations of customers, solidifying its position

as a symbol of driving excellence and a testament to Shell Oman's commitment to innovation in the Sultanate of Oman.

Suresh Nair, General Manager-Mobility at Shell Oman, stated, "With the introduction of the new Shell V-Power, we are not merely launching a product; we are pioneering a new era of driving excellence in Oman.

Symbolising our unwavering commitment to delivering a driving experience characterised by optimal smoothness, cleanliness and efficiency, the enhanced Shell V-Power ensures extended and extraordinary journeys.

We firmly believe that this pioneering innovation will not only meet but exceed the expectations of our discerning customers, setting a benchmark for fuel excellence in Oman."

Bank Muscat launches EAGLEs programme: A pioneering leadership engagement across branch network

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the Sultanate of Oman, proudly announced the launch of its transformative Leadership Engagement Programme, "EAGLEs" which stands for Engage, Align, Grow, Learn, Evolve. The EAGLEs programme aims to seamlessly collaborate, communicate and share ideas, reinforcing a culture of growth and excellence.

EAGLEs programme is Bank Muscat's steadfast commitment to empowering its branch staff through a meaningful participation in transformation initiatives, originated and executed by them, that will potentially have a long-term positive impact on the business.

EAGLEs programme is projected to provide employees a unique platform to honing their skills and improve their talents.

It underscores the Bank's belief that every team member, plays a pivotal role in the success of the



To achieve the programme's objectives, the Bank selected 78 employees from different branches covering all regions across Oman.

entire organisation.

To achieve the programme's objectives, the Bank selected 78 employees from different branches covering all governorates across the Sultanate of Oman, who will participate in various projects, training programmes, initiatives and workshops.

The programme is designed to offer tailored professional development opportunities for the selected batch of employees. Through mentorship, skill-

building workshops, action learning projects and trainings sessions conducted by external trainers, EAGLEs will help nurture a culture of continuous learning and growth.

To announce the launch of the programme, Bank Muscat organised an event attended by Shaikh Waleed K al Hashar, Chief Executive Officer, Bank Muscat, along with a number of Executive Management members and the employees selected to join

EAGLEs from the Bank's branches across the Sultanate of Oman.

On this occasion, Ahmed bin Faqir al Balushi, Chief Banking Officer, Bank Muscat, said: "Bank Muscat branch employees have an essential role in supporting the development of the products and services offered for our valued customers. The EAGLEs programme is an innovative initiative designed specifically to help branch employees to contribute towards

transformation initiatives that will enhance customers' experience.

Our valued customers have greatly contributed to the success of Bank Muscat's journey for years, so we are keen to continue launching such initiatives to enhance our services and make them align with the recent banking needs and aspirations of our customers. We would like to wish all participants best of luck in this new journey."

For his part, Said bin Salim al

Aufi, General Manager — Human Resources & Administration, Bank Muscat, said: "The EAGLEs programme is a bold and dynamic endeavour designed to foster creativity, collaboration, ingenuity and provide a culture of constant learning.

The programme is set to redefine leadership engagement in the Banking sector, positioning Bank Muscat as an industry leader committed to the well-being and success of its employees."

Al Aufi added that "suitable opportunities are provided to employees from the moment they join the Bank to equip them with skills in work-related processes and procedures.

The Bank is steadfast in advancing its strategy in developing and empowering Omani youth to enable them to perform their duties in the best possible manner while concurrently striving to attain their goals and support them meet their aspirations."

Sneak peek at my Mobile World Congress 2024 experience



TARIQ AL BARWANI

Couldn't miss this opportunity to write about my presence and experience here at the Mobile World Congress (MWC) 2024 in Barcelona, Spain.

This premier annual event gathers some of the biggest names in the ICT industry to showcase their latest technological advancements.

I understand over 95,000 visitors are in attendance this year, for the whole week, to share the latest and best of what technology can offer to the society.

A key and notable exhibitor at MWC 2024 is Huawei who kicked off the event with its Huawei Cloud Summit under the theme of "Accelerating Intelligence in the Region" which highlighted Huawei's Cloud's achievements and experiences across various industries.

During the event, Huawei showcased about 10 AI innovations aimed at accelerating intelligence across various industries – indeed a great time to announce when AI is unlocking a new level of intelligence, growth, and innovation in our society.

It's predicted that by 2026, more than 80 per cent of businesses will harness AI-generate Content in production, transforming 70 per cent of design and development work.

By 2028, 75 per cent of software engineers will have AI assistants by their side, up from just 10 per cent at the start of 2023 – exciting for some, alarming for others.

Quoting Jacqueline Shi, President of Huawei Cloud Global Marketing and Sales Service, who spoke at the summit, that Huawei Cloud is one of the fastest growing cloud service providers in the world, pushing boundaries and bringing cutting-edge tech to customers around the world.

Furthermore, Jacqueline noted that a series of local cloud has been already launched in regions such as in Saudi Arabia, Ireland, Türkiye and Indonesia.

Huawei cloud hopes to build an open ecosystem/platform that will allow customers and partners to enjoy not only cloud services but also new opportunities and businesses as well.

The 10 Ai innovations that was launched by Huawei Cloud are KooVerse, Distributed QingTian architecture, AI compute, AI-Native storage, E2E security, GaussDB, Data-

AI convergence, Media infrastructure, Landing Zone, and Flexible deployment.

It was mentioned that the Huawei Cloud is currently available in 85 zones in 30 Regions across over 170 countries.

For Oman, last week, Omantel, announced its partnership with Huawei on building a National Cloud which helped propel Omantel to a prominent position in the cloud arena.

With this partnership, Omantel is now equipped to provide the latest technology, global experience, data security, and local data hosting services to the entire nation, that includes government entities, state-owned companies, the financial sector, the energy sector, and SMEs.

Such an alliance will enable these organisations to accelerate digital transformation and support Oman's Digital Economy drive.

Last year, Ooredoo Oman has also signed a ICT and managed services agreement with Huawei focus on optimising Ooredoo's digital operations using state-of-the-art artificial intelligence and machine learning-based technologies and tools.

Last year, Huawei Cloud introduced Pangu Model 3.0, the first-of-its-kind commercial Arabic model that is trained with hundreds of billions of parameters, surpassing peer models in understanding and generation capabilities.

At MWC event, Huawei presented a range of innovative products such as the Pangu models for automotive, weather, virtual human, and R&D.

Explaining the use case for the Pangu automotive model, the CTO of Huawei Cloud, Bruno Zhang explained, "Using real-scene photos and videos, Pangu can create a digital twin space with movable objects, customisable weather, and lighting.

This allows you to generate scenario samples for autonomous driving learning, such as overtaking vehicles in the borrowing lane and encountering animals on the road.

This Pangu model also covers services such as automotive design, production, marketing and R&D. Jobs can now be done more efficiently and easily."

Innovative solutions in a form of presentations are delivered throughout the one-week packed event, demonstrating commitments to pushing the boundaries of technology and fostering digital transformation.

Yes, I continue to learn and do not miss the opportunity to share. Stay tuned for more knowledge-sharing excitements as my journey at MWC 2024 continues.

(The author is Knowledge Oman Founder. knowledgeoman.com)

Salalah Port explores transport options to offset Red Sea impacts

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, FEB 28

Port of Salalah, the leading transshipment hub of the Sultanate of Oman, has warned that ongoing disruptions to commercial shipping in the Red Sea is anticipated to negatively impact container volumes at the maritime gateway during Q1 2024 as well.

The port, along with impacted customers and shipping lines, are now exploring "alternative solutions", including multimodal options to transport containers by road from Salalah to destinations further into the Gulf and the Middle East, a top official said.

Since November, the Yemeni Ansar Allah movement has been targeting merchant ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden that are owned or operated by Israeli companies or transporting cargo to and from Israel in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza currently under brutal assault by Israeli forces. The months-long disruptions have forced many carriers to skip the Suez Canal and Red Sea in favour of longer, alternative shipping routes.

Port of Salalah, coincidentally the first major port of call for ships emerging from the Gulf of Aden and sailing into the Indian Ocean and Arabian Gulf, has witnessed its share of impacts as well, according to Braik bin Musallam al Amri, Chairman of



Salalah Port, together with shipping lines and customers, is studying options to move containers by road to ultimate destinations in the Middle East.

the Board of Directors, Salalah Port Services Co SAOG.

"In the fourth quarter, geopolitical tensions exerted a considerable influence on global and regional trade, resulting in disruptions to liner networks, service rerouting and escalating insurance and freight expenses," said Al Amri.

"Notably, in December '23, the situation in the Red Sea prompted vessel diversions and network disturbances, profoundly impacting business performance and operational efficiency. Despite ongoing uncertainties surrounding liner services, both carriers and customers are actively seeking alternative solutions," he stated in the company's financial report for fiscal 2023.

According to the Chairman, a notable 22% decline in

container volume was recorded in December 2023 as vessels diverted away from the Red Sea region. "This trend is projected to persist into the first quarter of 2024, signalling a pessimistic outlook for the year ahead unless there are positive developments in the political landscape. Such developments could potentially lead to reduced container volumes, exacerbating space shortages for exporters and importers and driving up freight costs due to surcharges," he warned.

On the other hand, these challenges can be converted into opportunities for Salalah Port, Al Amri pointed out. "Cargo can now be offloaded in Salalah and transported via road to final destinations within the GCC. Customers in Jordan are

also exploring these alternative options, indicating a shift towards more flexible and adaptable transportation solutions," he stated.

Reflecting some of the challenges faced by the port during 2023, container volumes dipped to 3.794 million TEUs, down from 4.504 million TEUs in 2022. General cargo volumes, however, climbed 12% to 20.5 million tonnes, up from 18.400 million tonnes a year earlier, boosted by growing exports of gypsum and limestone.

Consolidated revenue from operations totalled RO 68.578 million in 2023, a decrease of 3.30% over 2022. Consolidated Net Profit for the year also declined to RO 2.804 million, as compared to RO 3.222 million in 2022.

Pact signed to revolutionise oil extraction in Oman

MUSCAT: ARA Petroleum (ARA), the energy & natural resources arm of The Zubair Corporation, proudly announces the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with X2E, a sustainability-focused enterprise. The signing ceremony, led by Omar al Jaaidi, General manager of ARA, and John Jones, CEO of X2E, underscores a commitment to pioneering



environment-friendly practices in oil production.

The agreement signifies ARA's dedication to implementing international best practices, with a particular emphasis on minimising the environmental impact of operations. Sultan al Ghaithi, the CEO of ARA, highlighted the strategic objective of the agreement which ties in seamlessly with the Oman Vision 2040 goals.

The project aims to treat 1000 m3/day of saline water produced from ARA's operations. The focus of this endeavour is to repurpose the treated produced water for agricultural irrigation, specifically in cultivating crops for biofuel production.

Expressing enthusiasm for the collaboration, Eyhab al Hajj, Co-founder of X2E, commented on the project aim of establishing

a comprehensive value chain, treating waste not as a liability but as an opportunity. To realise this concept, the ground-breaking BioChain will integrate all components seamlessly while ensuring that each waste stream leads to either energy generation or the creation of reusable by-products.

He also detailed the technological innovations involved, including the introduction of Algae-based Brine Removal. This pioneering approach utilises algae-based systems to eliminate residual brine and contaminants from treated water. The biomass generated during brine removal serves as a valuable feedstock to produce biogas, contributing significantly to the overall goal of renewable energy production.

Investment volume in Sohar Industrial City reaches RO 2.2bn

SUHAS: The number of companies and factories that were localised in the Sohar Industrial City during the past year 2023 reached 44 projects with an investment value of approximately RO 84 million, bringing the total number of localised projects to 383 projects with an investment volume exceeding RO 2.2 billion.

Engineer Abdullah bin Ahmed al Mayasi, Director General of Sohar Industrial City, said: The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), represented by Sohar Industrial City, continues its efforts in developing industry and encouraging the private sector to move towards industrialisation and contribute to economic development in the Sultanate of



Eight factories have completed the construction and preparation phase and will begin the production phase soon.

Oman, as it is making strenuous efforts.

By localising projects and providing a suitable environment for their establishment, the city achieved remarkable growth in performance indicators over the past year.

He added to the Oman News Agency (ONA) that there are eight factories that have

completed the construction and preparation phase and will begin the production phase soon, adding that last year witnessed the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Madayn and OQ to develop a plastic industries complex in Sohar Industrial City, where land with an area of one million square meters was allocated in the area.

Sohar Industrial City will establish a complex for the production of plastic products with high added value, where Madayn will provide lands for projects at incentive prices and reduced service fees.

He explained that the complex is expected to provide many investment opportunities, especially in the field of plastic manufacturing industries.

He mentioned the presence of various sectors in the Sohar Industrial City, including: petrochemical industries, building materials, chemical industries, information technology, warehouses and logistics, clothing and fabrics, medicines, metal and food manufacturing, in addition to plastic industries. — ONA

Strengthening partnerships for private sector competitiveness



HAIDER AL LAWATI
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The author is a Muscat-based economic analyst who previously worked for CBO and OCCI

Governments and private sector institutions in the world show great importance for partnerships between the two sectors according to the Public Private Partnership (PPP) approach.

Such partnership between the two sides will achieve the purpose of providing a project or service a success in the future and serve a lot of citizens.

Since the early seventies of the last century, Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, has practiced the “partnership” policy between the government and the private sector in projects implemented in the housing sector, as Qaboos City is a witness to this partnership, which is considered the first of its kind between the two sectors.

Over the past decades, this

relationship has increased in the establishment of many vital projects that include the health, education, services, airports and other sectors.

So, Oman's experience with the private sector is not new today, but dates to the dawn of the blessed renaissance in the seventies of the last century, at a time when the government, over the past years, supported electricity and water production projects, port management, communications, housing projects, and others.

This cooperation has been continuing between the two sectors since that time through many activities and forums that talk about the importance of partnership and competitiveness in the private sector as they aim to establish projects that have future importance to the nation and citizens.

Such partnerships aim to implement projects concerned with strengthening the infrastructure that communities need in the field of establishing, building, equipping and managing schools, hospitals, transportation systems, water and sanitation systems and other vital projects. Partnership in this regard can increase the quality, efficiency and competitiveness of public services, in addition to strengthening and complementing the limited capabilities of the public sector to raise additional financing for proposed projects and working to make optimal use of the operational efficiencies of the private sector.

Participatory projects confirm the government's interest in working with the private sector, and its full confidence in the capabilities of this sector to take the initiative to lead economic

diversification efforts and enhance the competitiveness of the Omani economy.

It is expected that partnership programmes between the public and private sectors in the next phase will result in achieving sustainable development goals by encouraging private sector investments, benefiting from its expertise and specialised capabilities in establishing, financing and improving the quality of services in addition to creating new job opportunities in the market for Omanis graduating from private and foreign universities.

Recently, the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) organised the “Partnership and Integration” programme, attended by several ministers concerned with trade, economics, finance and labour.

The work programme aimed to

complement the Chamber's role in resolving the challenges facing the Omani private sector, raising the level of performance and keeping pace with its aspirations considering the objectives of the Oman Vision 2040, towards a dynamic, effective and proactive private sector.

The presentation made by the Chairman of the Chamber highlighted the participatory paths with the government, with its legislative and executive arms, and creating a favourable climate to achieve integration between the two sectors and adopt sustainable solutions that strengthen the national economic system.

These issues require strengthening the pivotal role of the private sector in stimulating the comprehensive development process and moving towards competitiveness.

Opportunity Oman: Unlocking growth through UK partnership



DR YOUSUF BIN
HAMED AL BALUSHI

The author is Founder and CEO - Smart Investment Gateway, Economists, Board Advisor & Business Transformation Mentor

The partnership goes beyond mere economic exchange; it's anchored in a strong strategic alliance. The two nations collaborate closely on military cooperation and share common geopolitical interests, fostering stability in the region.

This shared vision creates a solid foundation for a lasting and mutually beneficial relationship. Additionally, the UK has been Oman's largest European market for goods and services, solidifying its position as a key economic partner.

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from the UK plays a significant role in Oman's economic diversification efforts. UK companies currently hold roughly 50% of Oman's FDI, focusing on key sectors like energy, renewables, logistics, and tourism.

This investment not only fuels economic diversification but also creates jobs and fosters knowledge transfer.

The recently signed Sovereign Investment Partnership further strengthens this collaboration by facilitating joint investments in infrastructure, energy, and technology, paving the way for a future built on shared prosperity.

The potential FTA between Oman and the UK is a game-changer, promising to unlock even greater economic potential.

Analysts predict a 16 per cent rise in bilateral trade, with green energy, trade facilitation, and investment promotion taking centre stage.

This agreement stands to benefit SMEs in both nations, boosting their growth and competitiveness through increased market access and simplified customs procedures.

For Omani businesses, the Oman-UK strategic alliance unlocks a treasure trove of potential.

Here's how you can leverage this partnership for success:

■ **Expanding exports:** Capitalise on the UK's growing



BILATERAL TRADE BETWEEN OMAN AND THE UK HAS WITNESSED A REMARKABLE SURGE, WITH TOTAL TRADE VOLUME REACHING £1.4 BILLION IN THE PAST FOUR QUARTERS, A 22.3% INCREASE COMPARED TO THE PREVIOUS PERIOD.

demand for Omani commodities like gas, oil, and metals. The potential FTA promises smoother market access, fuelling export growth and propelling your business forward.

■ **Strategic investments:** Leverage tax breaks and ease of doing business in economic zones like Duqm, Suhar, and Salalah. Attract foreign investment for oil & gas, logistics, and tourism projects, driving economic growth and creating a win-win situation.

■ **Regional expansion:** Use the UK as your springboard to conquer the wider European market. The FTA's potential for streamlined customs and preferential access paves the way for regional expansion and unlocks new opportunities.

■ **Diversifying portfolios:** Explore new export markets beyond traditional sectors. The

FTA may open doors to green energy, technology, and value-added industries, allowing you to diversify your export portfolio and mitigate risk.

■ **E-commerce boom:** Tap into the UK's booming e-commerce market. Sell directly to consumers, eliminate intermediaries, and maximise your profit margins, propelling your business to new heights.

■ **Sovereign investment partnership:** Utilise this framework to co-invest with UK companies in infrastructure, energy, and technology projects. Gain access to crucial funding and expertise for critical development projects, fostering sustainable growth and progress.

■ **Renewable energy revolution:** Partner with UK companies to capitalise on the growing demand for clean energy solutions. Invest

in solar, wind, and other renewable projects, benefit from government incentives, and contribute to a sustainable future.

■ **Tech innovation:** By working together with UK companies in healthcare, education, data, artificial intelligence, and fintech, we can combine our market insights with their technological strengths.

This powerful partnership will drive innovation, tackle local challenges, and deliver groundbreaking solutions.

We see particular promise in expanding cooperation in data and artificial intelligence, as both countries aim to leverage the potential of digitalisation. Beyond the immediate benefits, this strategic alliance extends support through dedicated organisations like the British Omani Society.

By participating in their events, forums, and initiatives, you can build valuable connections and gain cultural understanding, fostering deeper

market insights and paving the way for strategic partnerships with UK companies.

The Oman-UK partnership is a testament to the power of shared goals, mutual respect, and a commitment to building a brighter future together.

With a thriving trade landscape, strong investment ties, a strategic alliance, and the potential of a game-changing FTA, the future holds immense promise for both nations. As they continue to work hand-in-hand, their shared vision paves the way for economic prosperity, cultural understanding, and regional stability.

Oman, with its strategic location, diverse economy, and ambitious Vision 2040, presents a unique opportunity for businesses seeking to expand into the Middle East. The strong and growing partnership with the UK further enhances this attractiveness, making “Opportunity Oman” a reality for investors and entrepreneurs alike.

Zuckerberg discusses AI risks with Japan PM during Asia tour

TOKYO: Meta chief Mark Zuckerberg met Prime Minister Fumio Kishida during a visit to Japan, discussing the risks of generative AI, a government spokesman said on Wednesday.

Zuckerberg is on a mini-tour of Asia that includes stops in Japan, India and South Korea, where he travelled on Tuesday night.

The 39-year-old mixed business with pleasure while in Japan, going skiing with his family and learning about sword-making from a master craftsman.

Zuckerberg and Kishida met on Tuesday and "discussed a broad range of topics including the status of AI's technological advancement... (and) the risk surrounding generative AI", top Japanese government spokesman Yoshimasa Hayashi told reporters on Wednesday.

Japanese media quoted Zuckerberg as saying: "We had a good, productive conversation



Mark Zuckerberg gives a speech at the US Capitol in Washington. — Reuters

about AI and the future of technology." "I'm really excited for the work that is happening here in Japan," he said after the 30-minute meeting.

Spearheaded by OpenAI's ChatGPT, generative artificial intelligence is a technology that can conjure up text, images and audio from simple prompts in just seconds.

Its rapid development has been heralded as potentially revolutionary for everything from

video games to politics — but with negative as well as positive consequences.

Meta was one of 20 major tech firms, including OpenAI, to sign a pledge this month to crack down on AI content intended to deceive voters ahead of crucial elections around the world this year.

Tech groups had previously agreed to use a common watermarking standard that would tag images generated by AI applications such as ChatGPT, Meta's Llama, Microsoft's Copilot and Google's Gemini.

LG, Samsung meetings

Zuckerberg arrived in Seoul on a private flight on Tuesday night for the second leg of his Asia trip and is expected to meet South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, local media reported.

"We are coordinating with Meta to arrange a meeting," a spokesperson for Yoon's office said on Wednesday.

Zuckerberg met the CEO of consumer tech giant LG Electronics to discuss extended reality (XR) projects, South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported.

Meta is collaborating with LG to develop a premium headset that will compete with Apple's Vision Pro, *The Korea Economic Daily* reported.

South Korean media said the Meta boss also plans to meet the head of Samsung Electronics, one of the world's biggest producers of smartphones and computer chips.

Yonhap said Zuckerberg will also hold talks with XR startups at Meta's Seoul office. The agency said he will leave for India on Thursday.

Zuckerberg will attend the lavish March 1-3 pre-wedding celebrations of the son of Mukesh Ambani, chairman of Indian oil-to-telecoms giant Reliance, reports said. — AFP

Sweden trade surplus grows and producer prices fall further

COPENHAGEN: Sweden's foreign trade surplus increased in January from a year ago as imports fell faster than exports, figures from Statistics Sweden showed on Wednesday.

Separate official data showed that producer prices fell for the ninth successive month in January amid cheaper energy costs.

The trade surplus rose to 13.3 billion Swedish kronor (\$1.28 billion) in January from 9.4 billion Swedish kronor in the corresponding month last year.

In December, the surplus was 1.9 billion Swedish kronor. On an annual basis, exports declined 3.0%, and imports showed a fall of 5%.

The non-EU trade balance showed a surplus of 20.1 billion Swedish kronor in January, while the trade balance with the EU revealed a deficit of 6.8 billion Swedish kronor.



Man sells vegetables at Kungsgatan market next to the Drottninggatan in Stockholm, Sweden. — Reuters

On a seasonally adjusted basis, the trade surplus was 8.5 billion Swedish kronor in January, compared to 9 billion Swedish kronor in the previous month.

The producer price index dropped 2.3% year-on-year in January, much slower than the 7.7% fall in the previous month.

Further, this was the slowest decrease in six months. Prices for energy-related goods alone plunged by 10.9% annually in January, while those for capital goods rose by 4%. — dpa

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ACCOUNTANT & sales Executive, Indian male, 31 years, BA English, specialised in Accounting. 2 years experience in India & 6 years experience in Oman. Seeking position in Accounts/Sales fields (has Oman licence). Mob: 78805951. Gmail: akhilgopinath2017@gmail.com

A SUDANESE resident in Salalah, Bsc of administrative sciences with 21 years of experience in the fields of (sales/ management/ logistics and fleet). Contact: +968 98510880.

28 YEARS Experience in Oman in sales, marketing and management, Indian with DL and release. Looking for a good job change. Contact: 78501743.

HOTELS/ Resorts/ Restaurants operations/ F&B manager with 25+ years professional experience in Oman with valid driving licence. Contact: 98113944.

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

PART time accountant 22 years in Muscat. Please contact: 78293476

INDIAN male 6 years experience in accounts/ automobile/admin. Seeking for suitable opening in any field, currently in Oman. Contact: 78988055/ 92850930, email: ullasmon8@gmail.com

INDIAN male 14 years experience light/ heavy driver. Looking for suitable opening currently in Oman. Contact: 77050986/ 91280205, email: kokkadmou@gmail.com

CHARTERED Accountant 1 year of post qualification experience in financial management, auditing & compliance. Contact: 78079794. Ready to join immediately.

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EXPERIENCED Indian male with skills in online product marketing, e-commerce, US customer support, and product management is looking for suitable roles in product marketing, social, digital marketing, customer support, or business communication. Please contact: 95786144 or email: roshanantxav@gmail.com

INDIAN male with 4 years experience in accounts, seeking for a job in Accounts, data entry, logistics, transport, computer operating or any system related work. Contact: 95807206, Email: huzaiibng09@gmail.com

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FLATS and offices for rent in Muscat. 96379095, 98403020.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

ANNOUNCEMENT OF AMENDMENT TO THE LEGAL FORM

Based on the provisions of Article 13 of the law 18/2019 and its amendments announces, the company (Aal Tech Marine and Industrial) is registered at Commercial Registry under the number (1341764). It is in the process of changing the form of company from Individual Firm/Merchant to SPC (Sole proprietorship company). Anyone who has an objection to this must submit the reasons for his objection to the Secretariat of the Commercial Registry, The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion in Muscat within one month from the date of publication of this announcement.

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ENTERTAINMENT
Skiers use a chairlift in the Lebanese ski resort of Faraya, in Mount Lebanon, north of Beirut. — AFP



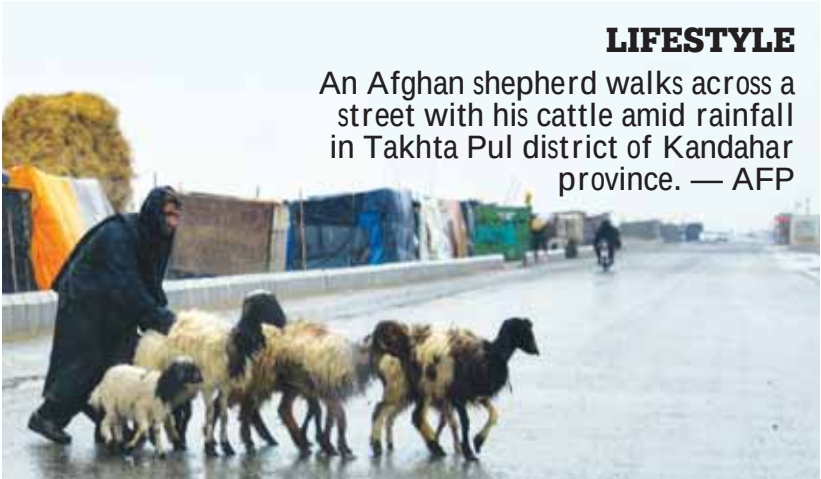
MUSIC
Mexican group Mana performs during the 63rd Via del Mar International Song Festival in Via del Mar, Chile. — AFP



ACTOR
French actress Judith Chemla poses for the movie (The Big Magic) during the 48th Deauville US Film Festival in Deauville, western France. — AFP



PIANIST
Franco-Lebanese pianist and composer Abdel Rahman El Bacha performs in Beirut. — AFP



LIFESTYLE
An Afghan shepherd walks across a street with his cattle amid rainfall in Takhta Pul district of Kandahar province. — AFP

art & life

THURSDAY | FEBRUARY 29, 2024 | SHAABAN 19, 1445 AH

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Winter camps... A delight for nature lovers

The camp provides space for a group of activities and events, such as a designated place for children, group games suitable for family members... P20

NATIONAL MUSEUM HOSTS FUTURE OF DESIGN ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

In collaboration with the National Museum, the Embassy of Italy in Muscat will celebrate the Italian Design Day in the World in its 8th edition with a roundtable discussion on the future of design under

the theme "Manufacturing Value: Inclusiveness, Innovation and Sustainability", as a step towards supporting the promotion of design and the internationalisation of a stra-

tegic industrial sector for Italian exports. The event will feature Prof Alba Cappellieri, Ambassador of Design to the Sultanate of Oman and Department Head of Design at the

Polytechnic University of Milan, as well as representatives from the Omani world of design. The event will take place on March 5, 2024 at the National Museum, targeting

fashion and design entrepreneurs and enthusiasts. This event aims to boost Italian-Omani cooperation in this field and support exchanges and education of youth

designers. Additionally, Prof Alba Cappellieri will conduct a lecture on the future of design, innovation and sustainability for the students of design at the Scientific College of Design in Muscat. The Italian Design Day is the annual theme-based review launched in 2017 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, in collaboration and with the support of the Ministry of Culture. It consists of an extensive programme of promotional events around the world, created by the network of embassies, consulates, Italian cultural institutes and ICE offices abroad.



Italian Design Day

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



SHARE A SLICE OF YOUR LIFE

We select three photos daily for our Instagram Top Picks of the Day. The rules are simple. Follow us on Instagram. Upload your photos. Tag us and use #OmanObserver and #BeAnObserver.



Heatwaves may be driving whale decline in the Pacific

THE NUMBER OF North Pacific humpback whales plummeted 20 per cent in less than a decade, and marine heatwaves may be the main culprit, according to a study released on Wednesday that spells a troubled future for the majestic sea mammals.

Thanks to conservation efforts and the end of commercial whaling in 1976, the region's humpback population steadily increased until 2012.

But over the last decade, whale numbers have declined sharply, researchers reported in the journal Royal Society Open Science.

A team of 75 scientists compiled the largest photo-identification data set ever created for a large marine mammal to track North Pacific humpback populations from 2002 to 2021.

Using images of the whale's unique tails the team was able to log some 200,000 sightings of more than 33,000 individuals.

Up to 2012 the humpback population steadily increased, and it was widely assumed it would eventually level off at their natural "carrying capacity" — the number of whales the ocean can support.

Instead, they saw a steep population decline.

From 2012 to 2021 the number of humpbacks fell 20 per cent from some 33,000 individuals to just over 26,600.

For a subset of whales that wintered in Hawaii, the drop was even more pronounced: 34 per cent.

That turned out to be a highly significant difference.

From 2014 through 2016 the strongest and longest marine heatwave ever recorded ravaged the Pacific north-east with temperate anomalies sometimes exceeding three to six degrees Celsius, altering the marine ecosystem and the availability of humpback prey.

"My jaw was on the floor," study author Ted Cheeseman, whale biologist and a PhD student at Southern Cross University in New South Wales, said. "This is a much bigger signal than we expected."

"Our estimation is that about 7,000 whales mostly starved to death," he said.

It is normal even in healthy populations for numbers to fluctuate, but such an abrupt decline for a long-lived species points to a major disruption in the oceans.

THE CEILING CRASHED

In this case, the scientists speculate, the extreme marine heat actually reduced the carrying capacity threshold for humpbacks.

"Instead of the whales coming up to the ceiling, the ceiling crashed down on the whales," Cheeseman said.

The fact that humpbacks were unable to shift their already flexible diet is a telltale indicator for overall ocean health.

"It's not just the whales' food that

declined," Cheeseman added, noting drops in the populations of tufted puffins, sea lions, and seals. "A warmer ocean produces less food."

Some commercial fisheries also felt the impact.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, marine heatwaves — already more frequent and intense — are projected to increase globally over the course of this century.

STILL A SUCCESS STORY

For hundreds of years, whalers from across the planet hunted humpback whales for their oil, meat and baleen, their feeding filtration system.

By 1986, the IUCN had listed the species as globally endangered.

Humpback whales continue to face threats today, primarily from ship strikes and entanglements in fishing nets.

But international restrictions on commercial whaling allowed the global humpback whale population to rebound to more than 80,000 mature individuals.

But today conservation goes hand-in-hand with climate action.

"It is a great success story that these whales are no longer in immediate danger of extinction like they were 50 years ago," Cheeseman said.

"And yet, there's a new reality of changing oceans that we have to live with." —AFP

FASHION

Saint Laurent reins in volumes with sheer, fitted looks at Paris Fashion Week



Saint Laurent designer Anthony Vaccarello trimmed down the label's silhouettes for winter, tightly wrapping models in sheer silk dresses in muted colours for a runway show on Tuesday.

Models cut through the centre of the set — two vast, circular rooms lined with green curtains in towering sling-back heels.

There were sleeveless tops that wound up around the neck, pussy bow blouses and bustiers, while skirts remained the same length — cut just below the knees.

"The length is classic, but the content is novel," said the show notes, tucked in envelopes left on each seat. They also cited the

looks were furry coats made of ultralight feathers, forming bulkier silhouettes.

The collection was "bursting with juxtaposition," said Simon Longland, director of buying at the London department store Harrods, noting "ladylike and conservative" styling delivered, however, a "slinky" allure.



famous gown worn by Marilyn Monroe, as a reference for the designer.

Adding contrast to the fitted

Paris fashion Week runs through March 5, with upcoming shows from Chanel, Hermes, Balenciaga and Louis Vuitton.

—REUTERS



TRAVEL

Winter camps... A delight for nature lovers



BALQEES ALORAIMI

As winter continues in the Sultanate of Oman, we find many people rushing to camps and enjoying the weather, the mountainous terrains, and beautiful beaches, to escape from the noise of the cities and the crowded streets, where there are open skies and stunning views.

Citizens and residents of Oman are keen to design their camps in different ways, usually by adding heritage touches, including furnishings that symbolise Omani heritage, as well as modern features such as sadu and others.

In a traditional atmosphere of poetry houses, aspects of Omani culture are reflected.

Winter camps have contributed in creating tourism activity in many governorates, in addition to enhancing economic activity and employing young people who manage them in a competitive environment.

We find some youth



projects adopting these winter camps. One of these projects is the Reveal Camp of Nooh al Wahaibi, which extends to Dibab Beach in the Wilayat of Qurayat. Nooh al Wahaibi runs this project with passion, love and diligence and promotes tourism in the country.

The camp is very popular with tourists and citizens, and it continues throughout the year, and witnesses great demand



during winter due to the wonderful climate.

The camp provides space for a group of activities and events, such as a designated place for children, group games suitable for family members, and a movie screen, with the character of Bedouin life, campgrounds and the facilities that come with it, and gives a competitive advantage and added value for the customers.

The biggest obstacle to such projects was the financial support needed for continuity and development. It is hoped that the authorities and private entities will support Omani youth in various projects that contribute to the economy.

People can get more details of these camps on Instagram and other social media platforms. These camps are also suitable for family and youth gatherings and end-of-year parties.

PHOTOS BY LAKSHMI KOTHANEH

THE CHANGING WORLD



Shaddad al Musalmy

Why is getting a driver's licence so expensive?

PAYING DRIVING instructors extra on the day of a test and, in particular, on passing has always been a common practice. The extra is said to compensate for the time the instructor lost waiting for his/her student's turn for the test or, in the case of passing, in celebration.

However, instructors are demanding RO 35 to RO 40 on test days, and up to RO 50 from students who pass. Nobody knows who set the system but it's holding learners to ransom.

I am troubled by how and why they charge this amount even when someone fails a driving test. It is high time the authorities intervened because instructors are taking advantage of the situation.

Paying extra after passing or to compensate for the lost hours waiting for their students to take the test is understandable, but RO 35 to RO 40 even when you fail is unacceptable. Who set this price?

Many years ago when I learned how to drive, instructors asked for a reasonable amount - RO 10 - from students who passed. Now, with RO 35 to RO 40 demanded even after failing a test, the whole process of getting a driving licence has become an expensive affair.

I don't see any sense in this system and hence appeal to the authorities to look into the matter. Having to pay such a high amount after failing is like paying for the failure, which to some may mean your teacher teaches you to fail.

I understand that the Royal Oman Police only charges RO 5 as a booking fee for the test but instructors charge a minimum of RO 35 just to take their students to the test in their cars for less than ten minutes.

When I enquired why driving students need to pay after failing, instructors did not have a valid reason, claiming it's just how everyone else does it. Something has to be done about this.

On the other side of the story, while chatting with one of many driving instructors, I came to learn that they also have expenses, mainly petrol price which has gone up. Additionally, there are insurance costs, which are high for them, and frequent car works that need to be done because of daily wear and tear.

One other instructor told me that he would be happy to lower the rates of driving tests, but unfortunately, there are so many factors to be considered. In his estimation, the cost of insurance for driving school vehicles has more than doubled compared to private vehicles.

In addition, there are different government fees that they have to pay. Also, on the day of the test, they spend time waiting for their student's turn to give the test. In doing so, they claim to lose actual instruction time.

They also claim that another issue is that each instructor is allowed only two tests per week. If they are allowed more than that, they would probably reduce the amount knowing that they can earn more as more tests are slotted for them.

He informed me that individual instructors fix the amount and that no authority is involved in this.

However, are these valid reasons? I leave this question to my readers to answer. Till next ...

Shaddad al Musalmy is a seasoned Omani journalist who worked for top newspapers in the country. He's currently one of Oman Observer's senior editors and contributes across different beats. His commentaries about life in general paints a vivid picture of the changing landscape in Oman.

FOR FEEDBACK, EMAIL THE AUTHOR AT shadadm75@gmail.com