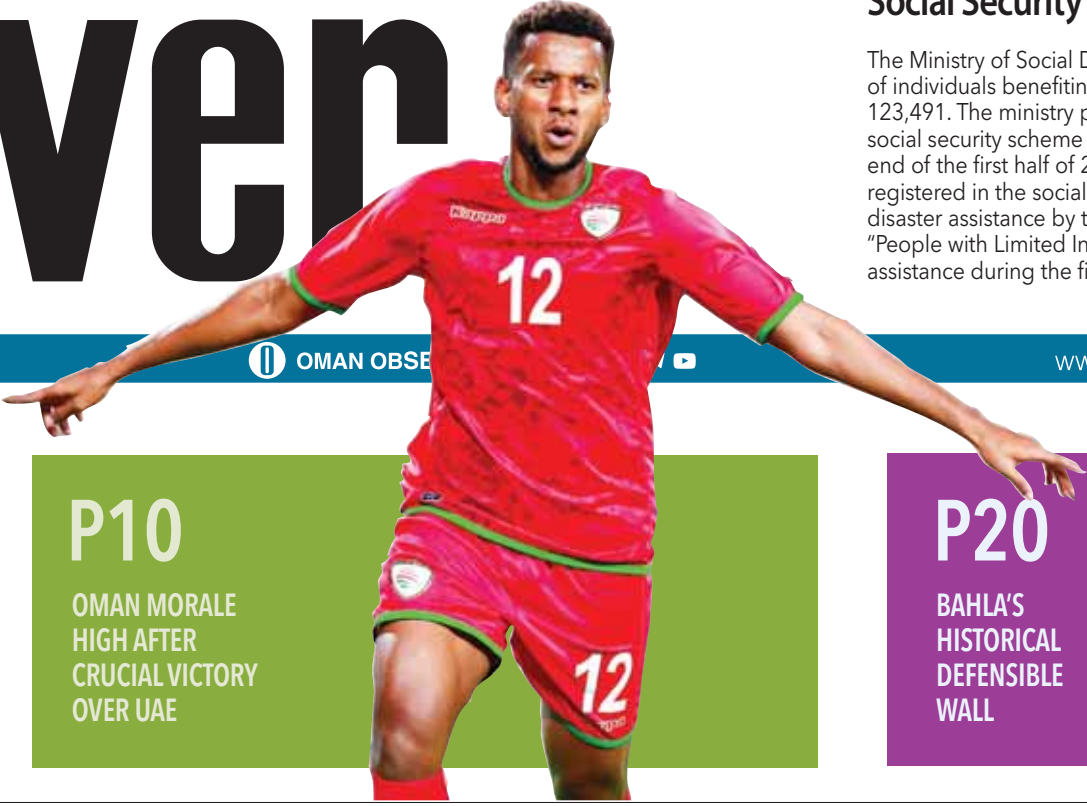


OMAN  DAILY

Observer



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OMAN OBSERVER

www.omanobserver.om editor@omanobserver.om

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SPACE:
OMAN'S
NEXT NEW
FRONTIER



P10

OMAN MORALE
HIGH AFTER
CRUCIAL VICTORY
OVER UAE



P20

BAHLA'S
HISTORICAL
DEFENSIBLE
WALL





MUSCAT

1.6 MILLION VEHICLES REGISTERED

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CBO TERMINATES USE OF SOME BANKNOTES



The Central Bank of Oman (CBO) issued a circular on Sunday terminating the use of certain denominations of currency which will be withdrawn from circulation within a maximum period of 360 days from its date. After December 31, 2024, these denominations will be out of circulation and have no legal tender value. The denominations that the bank announced the end of their use include the banknotes of the fifth issue (1995), the banknotes of the upgraded issue (2000), the banknote of the denomination of one riyal commemorative banknote (2005), the banknote of the denomination of RO 20 commemorative banknote (2010), the banknotes of the upgraded issue of (2011) and (2012), the banknote of the denomination of one riyal commemorative banknote, and the upgraded RO 50 banknote (2019). The Central Bank of Oman directed all banks operating in the Sultanate of Oman to accept the aforementioned banknotes and replace them with banknotes of the sixth issue during the aforementioned period. The Central Bank of Oman also directed all institutions and retailers to accept these banknotes from the public and then deposit them with the banks operating in Oman. — ONA

Royal Oman Police celebrates Annual Day

HM CONFERS ORDER OF ROYAL COMMENDATION ON SENIOR OFFICERS



The Royal Oman Police celebrated its annual day on Sunday. (Right) HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said pinning the medals.



MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander, on Sunday conferred the Order of Royal Commendation and medals of Excellent Service and Competence on senior officers of the Royal Oman Police (ROP). The medals were pinned by HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs. The ceremony took place at the Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences. HH Sayyid Shihab congratulated the officers on the Royal felicitation which, he said, reflects appreciation for

the continuous efforts exerted by ROP personnel under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander. The ceremony was attended by Lt Gen Hassan Mohsin al Shraiqi, Inspector General of Police and Customs, Maj Gen Abdullah bin Ali al Harthy, Assistant Inspector General of Police and Customs for Operations, Maj Gen Khalifa bin Ali al Siyabi, Assistant Inspector General of Police and Customs for Administrative and Financial Affairs, and several senior ROP officers.

Earlier, the Royal Oman Police (ROP) celebrated its annual day, which falls on January 5 every year. HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said presided over the ceremony held at the military parade grounds of the Sultan Qaboos Academy of Police Sciences in the Wilayat of Nizwa. The ceremony saw the passing out of the 46th batch of cadet officers — holders of Diploma in Law and Police Sciences, the 43rd batch of university cadet officers, the 10th batch of service system cadet officers and the 54th batch of specialised

cadet officers. The batches included officers from the Internal Security Service and the Royal Court Affairs. The celebration began with a salute to HH Sayyid Shihab. The commandant of the parade requested HH Sayyid Shihab to inspect the front row of the column. The graduates presented a military show before the dais. Then, the chief guest handed over awards to top graduate officers. This was followed by protocols of handing over the “Banner of Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences” from the 46th to the 47th batch of cadet officers. **SEE ALSO P2**



HM greetings conveyed to Bahrain King

MANAMA: King Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa of the Kingdom of Bahrain, received HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth at Al Safriya Palace in Manama. During the audience, HH Sayyid Theyazin conveyed the greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to King Hamad and His Majesty the Sultan's wishes of good health and happiness to the Bahraini monarch, along with

His Majesty's wishes of further progress and prosperity to the Bahraini people. For his part, King Hamad asked HH Sayyid Theyazin to convey his greetings and sincere wishes to His Majesty the Sultan. He wished the people of Oman further progress and prosperity. The meeting reviewed bilateral relations between the two countries and matters of common concern. In appreciation of the

King of Bahrain to HH Sayyid Theyazin and, in a manifestation of the deep-rooted Oman-Bahrain relations, King Hamad conferred the Order of Shaikh Isa bin Salman al Khalifa, First Class, on HH Sayyid Theyazin. HH Sayyid Theyazin expressed his appreciation for King Hamad's sincere gesture, which, he said, reflects the strength of Omani-Bahraini relations. — ONA

400 participants to attend ME space forum

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Transport Communications and Information Technology, is hosting the first space conference in the Middle East region on Monday. Highlighting the significance of the event, Dr Ali bin Amer al Shaithani, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Communications and Information Technology, said that the conference will serve as a unique platform for all partners from the government and industry to communicate directly and develop areas for collaboration. He added that this conference also aims to raise awareness in the international space community about the opportunities in the



First Middle East space forum opens today.

space sector in the region. The Sultanate of Oman made significant strides in its nascent space sector in 2023. Led by the ministry, Oman has identified the sector, which was valued globally at \$337 billion in 2021, as a key driver for economic

diversification in line with Oman Vision 2040. According to ministry officials, more than 400 participants from the space sector are expected to participate in the forum which will spotlight related space industry policies, space applications and enablers. The event is also part of Oman's National Space Programme — a 10-year executive programme which aims to cement the country's role in the space industry. Dr Al Shaithani emphasised the pivotal role the conference will play in propelling Oman's space ambitions. Euroconsult, a leading space sector consulting firm, is supporting the ministry in the delivery of this landmark forum in Oman. **SEE ALSO P13**

5 ENDANGERED OWL SPECIES



Five species of rare and endangered owls were monitored in Al Buraimi Governorate. Mohammed bin Salim al Balushi, an environmental systems specialist at the Environment Authority, said the discovery was the result of four years of continuous efforts. He added that the owl species monitored in Al Buraimi Governorate were the Pharaoh eagle-owl, the short-eared owl, the barn owl, the little owl and the Pallid scops owl. **DETAILS ON P3**



King Hamad confers Order on Sayyid Theyazin



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SAYYID SHIHAB PRESIDES OVER ROP DAY CELEBRATION



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STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 7

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Correction and marking committees at the ministry level and marking centres in the governorates were also formed.

The examinations will be held in 361 centres.

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out in four centres in two morning and evening shifts. The number of graders in the various centres distributed across the governorates is expected to be about 800, while more than 6,000 teachers have been assigned to monitor the examinees in the examination centres.

As for the mechanisms used to prepare students for the exams, the ministry, represented by the Educational Directorates in the

governorates, has prepared the exam centres by providing an atmosphere that contributes to helping the examinee take the exam in an atmosphere of comfort and calm.

It is hoped that all students will prepare for the exams through optimal use of time in the process of studying and reviewing and focusing while taking the exams. One of the most important instructions that the examinee must follow is

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KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

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The annual competition comprises seven levels and was open to contestants from the age of 8. Names of winners in all categories were announced last week.

There were 1,638 male and female contestants participated in the competition's different levels.

During the award ceremony today, top three winners from each level of the competition will be felicitated, while consolation prizes will be given away to top three finishers from each level.

Speaking to the Observer, Sultan al Abri, in charge of the competition said that the competition is aimed at encouraging Omanis to memorise the Holy Quran and pursue the guidance of its teachings, in addition to enhancing the presence of the Sultanate of Oman

in international Quranic contests.

"The response from the general public was overwhelming and we had to finalise on 1,638 contestants for the various rounds. From these participants, the eminent panel of judges that comprise scholars of the holy book and religious teachers have selected three winners from each category as well as three who have finished top," he said.

The competition, launched in 1991 with just three levels only, which is to memorise five parts with the interpretation of one part and a few participants has grown today to be one of the largest Holy Quran contests in the region.

Competitions were held in as many as 25 centres in different regions of the Sultanate of Oman, and they are distributed as Nizwa, Samayil, Ibra, Suhar, Shinas, Al Rustaq, Al Suwaiq, Bahla, Dibba, Mad'ha, Khasab, Sur, Jaalan Bani Bu Hassan, Qurayat, Al Amerat, Salalah, Thamrait, Ibri, Al Buraimi, Barka, Sinaw, Al Duqm, Al Khoud, Al Khuwair, and in Central Prison.

Oman registers 1.6m vehicles by Nov 2023

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Most vehicles come in the color 'white' (comprising 42.7 per cent) to stand at 709,525.

Further, vehicles with commercial registration constituted 14.7 per cent (243,834), while the number of rental cars stood at 33,305 (2 per cent).

Meanwhile, the number of taxi vehicles reached 27,889 (comprising 1.7 per cent).

As far as vehicles weights are concerned, the number of vehicles weighing less than 3 tonnes stood 1,503,627, comprising 90.5 per cent of the total registered vehicles in the Sultanate of Oman.

— **ONA**



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Fines revised for sale of e-cigarettes

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Salim bin Ali al Hakamani, Chairman of the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA), has issued a decision 756/2023 banning the circulation of electronic cigarettes, shisha, and their accessories.

The decision also mentions penalties for those who violate the decision, which include an administrative fine not exceeding RO1,000. The fine shall be doubled in the event of a repeat violation.

If this violation continues, an administrative fine of RO50 will be imposed for each day that the violation continues, provided that its total does not exceed RO2,000.

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'My Wilayat Reads 2024' contest fosters reading skills

SIHAM AL SAIDI
SAHAM, JAN 7

To promote reading and Arabic, a group in Saham in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and the office of the Governor of Al Batinah North organised a competition titled 'My Wilayat Reads 2024'.

The initiative underscores the vital role of reading as a key skill but also champions the transformative power of collaborative efforts in shaping the leaders of tomorrow and expanding their knowledge.

Shayma al Fazari, the head

of the group, said 'My Wilayat Reads 2024' competition in Saham aims to cultivate among youths a love for Arabic reading, writing and speaking; develop critical thinking and creativity; and to develop other soft skills.

Targeting youths aged 11 to 17 in Saham, this initiative addresses the decline in recreational reading among the young generation.

Participants are expected to read not less than 20 books from various fields, summarise them and present them for discussion.

By advancing reading skills, the initiative also intends to fortify problem-solving,



Targeting youths aged 11 to 17 in Saham, the initiative addresses the decline in recreational reading among the young generation

effective communication, and planning.

There was tremendous response to this initiative among youths in Saham, which was launched as a pilot project.

The organisers plan to continue 'My Wilayat Reads 2024' as an annual event in other wilayats, fostering a nationwide culture of reading.

One of the unique aspects

of enriching reading through initiatives like 'My Wilayat Reads 2024', according to Al Fazari, is its role in supplementing the school curriculum. It contains valuable information crucial for students and parents alike, offering insights beyond their immediate interests and empowering young minds.

'My Wilayat Reads 2024' aims to highlight the transformative power of reading, not just as a pastime but as a strategy for nurturing well-rounded individuals equipped to navigate the challenges of a complex world dominated by technology.

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Areen Foods Unveils Major Expansion, Announcing New Brands Under Its Umbrella



Abstract: This journal article explores Areen Foods' strategic expansion in the Food and Beverage Industry, introducing six distinct brands to meet evolving market demands and explore international export opportunities. Rooted in extensive market research and a deep understanding of consumer preferences, Areen Foods showcases a commitment to innovation, quality, and customer satisfaction.

Introduction: Areen Foods, a prominent Omani Hospitality and Guest Service company, has taken a significant step forward with the introduction of six unique brands in the Food and Beverage Industry. This expansion is strategically designed to address dynamic market demands and tap into international export prospects.

Market Research and Consumer Insights: Areen Foods' commitment to meeting guest expectations and aligning with market trends is underpinned by rigorous market research and a profound understanding of evolving consumer preferences. Through comprehensive analysis and engagement with consumer insights, Areen Foods identifies emerging culinary trends and anticipates changing tastes, ensuring the creation of brands that not only satisfy immediate desires but also set new benchmarks for culinary experiences.

Innovative Culinary Experiences: The unveiled restaurant brands showcase Areen Foods' dedication to research-backed innovation, resonating authentically with diverse clientele. Each brand is meticulously crafted to cater to specific culinary niches, fostering a sense of connection and loyalty within the communities they serve.

- Hen:** Specializing in delivery/fast-casual crispy chicken, Hen offers flavorful options on homemade buns with a range of accompanying sides and beverages.
- Oak:** A chocolate boutique and specialty coffee shop redefining dessert experiences with the finest Belgian cacao, located in Bowsher and Mawaleh.
- Tender:** A steak cuisine haven located in the Muscat City Centre, showcasing high-quality meat and

innovative dessert styles for a unique and interactive dining adventure.

- 4. Reveal:** Located in Al Khuwair, Jasmine Complex, Reveal blends tradition with innovation in crafting casual comfort food with a healthy twist in a contemporary urban setting.
- 5. Mash:** A fast-casual burger joint delighting Al Khodh and Bowsher customers with irresistible smashed burgers and fries.
- 6. Diet Box:** Catering to health-conscious individuals, Diet Box offers diverse, delicious, and healthy meal subscriptions with no repetition throughout the subscription period and free delivery within Muscat.

Mission and Vision: Areen Foods' mission is to provide an innovative and healthy environment, nurturing specialized competencies and expertise to ensure guest satisfaction. The company aims to establish enduring relationships by proactively meeting guests' needs and fostering open communication channels.

Corporate Commitments: Areen Foods remains dedicated to employing qualified professionals, fostering long-term guest relationships, and consistently prioritizing proactive communication and databases to surpass expectations.

Conclusion: In conclusion, Areen Foods' expansion into the Food and Beverage Industry with six distinctive brands signifies a commitment to innovation, quality, and customer satisfaction. The company's mission to provide an innovative and healthy environment aligns with its dedication to meeting evolving market demands and fostering enduring relationships within the community.

For more information about Areen Foods and its brands, please visit their website or follow their social media channels.

About Areen Foods: Areen Foods is an Omani company committed to revolutionizing hospitality and guest services in the Sultanate, operating across various F&B sectors, including premium casual dining, fast-casual, Grab & Go, Central Kitchens, and Delivery.

www.aareenfoods.com

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
@afrahalbalushia

WINTER is a time when most people tend to eat more but exercise less. But one should not ignore physical activity to stay healthy. Exposure to sunlight and fresh air in the early morning while walking or running can help you to ward off lethargy and make you more productive during the day.

Dr Saleh bin Saif al Hinai, senior consultant in family medicine, tweeted recently that exercising in cold weather has many health benefits, including burning fat. Studies have shown that exercising in cold weather helps burn more calories as the body makes a greater effort to keep warm.

A study conducted by the Canadian Lawrence University showed that the best period to get rid of body bulge and strengthen the immune system is winter. This holds true for countries like Oman when scorching summers make outdoor exercises.

The results of the study revealed that burning fat during winter is on average 358 per cent greater than in moderate weather, when the temperature is about 21 degrees Celsius. Although the intensity of exercise is also important, the temperature of the environment plays an essential role in reducing weight.

Overweight people between the ages of 18 and 30 participated in the study. During the exercise, the researchers recorded the test subjects' pulse, blood sugar level, and body temperature. The amount of oxygen emitted by the thigh muscles was also measured, and after exercise, the participants received a rich drink with proteins and carbohydrates, followed by a rich fat-rich breakfast.

Avoid winter weight gain In the cold months, it is very easy to turn to comfort foods, because they are very satisfying and make us feel happy. This is why winter is usually a period of weight gain, with the average person gaining 4 kg during these months. Therefore, to stabilise your weight, you must return to healthy habits through regular exercise and healthy meal replacements, to combat the excess sugar and calories that we may consume.

Get sunshine vitamin While there are a limited number of foods that can provide your body with vitamin D, the easiest source is exposure to sunlight. Sunlight strengthens bones and muscles, takes care of your skin and keeps your immune system strong.

Ensure blood circulation and keep you warm Sports in winter warm up your body naturally as



the rise in your body temperature during exercise has a calming effect on your body.

Strengthens immunity Regular exercise strengthens your immune system so it can fight off the flu. When you exercise and get your blood pumping, immune cells circulate in your body more quickly to help find and eliminate infections. But this only lasts for a few hours, so exercise should be regular for long term benefits.

Reduces depression daily exercise releases feel-good brain chemicals like dopamine and serotonin that relieve stress and helps relieve depression and anxiety. Various studies have also proven that exercising in winter makes the brain obtain more energy, which in turn improves brain performance. Other studies have also shown that memory performance is better in cold weather.

Many people are ignorant of the importance of exercising, especially in the winter. Specialists advise taking advantage of this season to make exercise an essential part of daily life, because of its significant impact on health.



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The organisers plan to continue 'My Wilayat Reads 2024' as an annual event in other wilayats, fostering a nationwide culture of reading.

One of the unique aspects

of enriching reading through initiatives like 'My Wilayat Reads 2024', according to Al Fazari, is its role in supplementing the school curriculum. It contains valuable information crucial for students and parents alike, offering insights beyond their immediate interests and empowering young minds.

'My Wilayat Reads 2024' aims to highlight the transformative power of reading, not just as a pastime but as a strategy for nurturing well-rounded individuals equipped to navigate the challenges of a complex world dominated by technology.

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Israeli army pounds civilians as war enters 4th month

GAZA: The war raging in Gaza entered its fourth month on Sunday as the Israeli army again pounded the besieged Palestinian territory.

Israeli airstrikes overnight and early on Sunday killed at least 64 people in the Palestinian territory, said its health ministry.

Israeli bombardment claimed other civilian lives in the southern city of Khan Yunis and in the Rafah area near the Egyptian border, where many of the territory's displaced people have sought refuge, correspondents reported.

Relatives were mourning the dead at Khan Yunis' European Hospital, among them Mohamed Awad, who wept over the body of a 12-year-old boy and listed other family members killed.

"My brother, his wife, his children, his relatives and the brothers of his wife — there are more than 20 martyrs," he said.

The Israeli army reported that its forces had killed more of

The Israeli army reported that its forces had killed more of Palestinian groups in central Gaza, including in a drone strike in the Bureij refugee camp

Palestinian groups in central Gaza, including in a drone strike in the Bureij refugee camp, a built-up urban area.

The military added it had disabled dozens of rocket launchers at a compound in northern Gaza's Beit Lahia area, from where Palestinians have been targeting southern Israel.

Israel is carrying out a relentless bombardment and ground invasion that have killed at least 22,738 people, most of them women and children, according to Gaza health ministry.

Prime Minister Benjamin



The widow (C-R) is supported by a relative during the funeral of her husband, who was killed in a reported Israeli air strike in Rafah. — AFP

Netanyahu vowed again that Israel would continue its campaign to "eliminate Hamas, return our captives and ensure that Gaza will no longer be a threat to Israel".

Families and friends of the captives again rallied in Tel Aviv late on Saturday, demanding steps leading to their release but many also voicing anger at his government.

The Netanyahu government

is "ruining Israel and they are destroying everything we hoped and dreamed of," one demonstrator, Shachaf Netzer said.

On Israel's tense northern border with Lebanon, on Saturday said it had fired 62 rockets at an Israeli military base, days after a strike in Beirut killed Hamas deputy leader Saleh al-Aruri.

A US Defense Department official said that Israel carried out the strike that killed Aruri.

The Israeli military said it had struck "military sites" in response to the rocket barrage, while army spokesman Daniel Hagari warned the armed group against "dragging Lebanon into an unnecessary war".

Civilians in Gaza have borne the brunt of the conflict that has reduced swathes of the coastal territory to rubble and triggered a deepening humanitarian crisis.

"Gaza has simply become uninhabitable," UN humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths said.

— AFP

Israeli strike kills two Palestinian journalists in Gaza, officials say



People check the car in which two journalists, Mustafa Thuria and Hamza Wael Dahdouh were killed in a reported Israeli strike in Rafah. — AFP

CAIRO: An Israeli air strike on a car near Rafah in southern Gaza on Sunday killed two Palestinian journalists who were out reporting, according to health officials in Gaza and the journalists' union there.

Hamza Al-Dahdouh and Mustafa Thuraya were both freelancers. Al-Dahdouh had done freelance work for Al Jazeera and was the son of the Qatar-based TV station's chief correspondent in Gaza, Wael Al-Dahdouh. A third freelancer, Hazem Rajab, was wounded.

The Israel Defence Forces did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the strike.

The Gaza government's media office said the two new deaths raised its own tally of journalists killed by the Israeli offensive to 109.

A video posted on an Al Jazeera-linked YouTube channel showed Wael Al-Dahdouh crying next to his son's body and holding his hand. Later, after his son's burial, he said in televised remarks that journalists in Gaza would keep doing their job.

"All the world needs to see what is happening here," he said.

Wael Al-Dahdouh is particularly well known to viewers across the Middle East after he learned during a live broadcast last month that his wife, another son, daughter and grandson had been killed in an Israeli air strike. Among journalists who have died covering the conflict was Reuters visuals journalist Issam Abdallah. A Lebanese citizen, he was killed on Oct. 13 by an Israeli tank crew while filming cross-border shelling in Lebanon, a Reuters investigation has found. — Reuters

Jordan king presses Blinken on ceasefire, aid

AMMAN: Jordan's king urged the top United States diplomat on Sunday to push for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and an end to the humanitarian crisis brought by three months of war, the royal palace said.

King Abdullah II made the remarks to Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who is on a Middle East tour aiming to ensure the Gaza war does not spread.

The war that began on October 7 triggered relentless retaliatory bombardment by Israel, leaving Gazans desperately in need of humanitarian aid.

King Abdullah warned Blinken against "the catastrophic repercussions of continuation of the aggression against Gaza, underlining the necessity of ending the tragic humanitarian crisis" there, a statement from the royal palace said.

The king reiterated "the important role of the United States in bringing pressure for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, protection of civilians, and guaranteeing delivery" of medical and humanitarian aid.

Washington has twice exercised its veto at the United Nations Security Council over ceasefire calls, drawing outrage in the Arab world, and Blinken has bypassed Congress to rush weapons to



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken speaks as he visits a World Food Program (WFP) regional warehouse, in Amman, Jordan. — Reuters

Israel.

He and other US officials have, however, become increasingly vocal about the need for Israel to protect civilians in Gaza, where the health ministry says 22,835 people have been killed since October 7.

Blinken, who is seeking to get more aid into besieged Gaza, visited the World Food Programme's regional coordination warehouse near the Jordanian capital.

Inside the warehouse, stocked with pallets of canned food aid, the senior UN official in Jordan, Sheri Ritsema-Anderson, described the situation in Gaza as unlike anything she had seen during 15 years in the Middle East. It is "catastrophic," she told reporters.

Blinken said "it is imperative that we maximise assistance to

King Abdullah warned Blinken against "the catastrophic repercussions of continuation of the aggression against Gaza, underlining the necessity of ending the tragic humanitarian crisis"

people in need", by getting the aid in and distributing it effectively.

"We'll be working on that as well in the days to come," he said at the warehouse.

King Abdullah also reaffirmed the need for a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian question and underlined Jordan's "total rejection" of any forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza and the occupied West Bank.

Washington also insists on a two-state solution, something rejected by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, some of whose cabinet members have called for Palestinian inhabitants of Gaza to leave.

Blinken was also travelling on Sunday to the Gulf emirate of Qatar and to Abu Dhabi, capital of the United Arab Emirates. — AFP

Seven Palestinians, two Israelis killed in West Bank

RAMALLAH: Nine people were killed on Sunday in the occupied West Bank, including seven Palestinians who were targeted in an air strike by the Israeli army, sources on both sides said.

Violence in the West Bank since the start of Israel's war has surged to levels unseen in nearly two decades. Israeli forces carry out regular raids in the occupied territory, especially in Jenin and its adjacent refugee camp.

"An Israeli occupation bombardment on a group of citizens killed seven people in Jenin," said the Palestinian Ministry of Health, which is based in Ramallah.

The army, however, said "six were killed when an aircraft struck a person who hurled explosive

A footage from the strike showed residents inspecting patches of blood and splintered glass on a pavement near the camp hours after the strike

devices" at troops in an operation in Jenin refugee camp.

Police said an Israeli police officer was killed during an operation at the refugee camp.

"She (officer) was in an operational vehicle that was hit by an explosive device," the force said, adding three other officers were also wounded.

In another incident north of



A man checks the damage in a building following an Israeli raid in Jenin in the occupied West Bank. — AFP

Ramallah, an Israeli was shot dead, the army said.

He was "killed adjacent to the British police junction" north of Ramallah, the army said, adding police were searching for the

attacker. The official Palestinian news agency Wafa reported early on Sunday that a major deployment of Israeli forces was under way in Jenin.

It said the six Palestinians, including four brothers, were killed in an "Israeli drone strike" in Jenin, and a seventh died later from wounds.

Suleiman Moussa, a resident of Jenin, said the "air strike" followed sounds of gunfire.

"We came here and saw people thrown to the ground, some with heads cut off, some body parts. It was an unbelievable scene and we didn't know what to do," Moussa said.

"Later people called the ambulance which came and took six martyrs and another person in

a critical situation."

A footage from the strike showed residents inspecting patches of blood and splintered glass on a pavement near the camp hours after the strike.

Residents also attended the funeral of the four brothers.

Israeli army raids on the Jenin area often trigger gun battles between troops and Palestinian groups.

The army says it is targeting attackers in its raids, but the Palestinian health ministry says many civilians are among the dead.

Since the Gaza war began on October 7 at least 328 people in the West Bank have been killed by either soldiers or Israeli settlers, according to the Palestinian health ministry. — AFP



In brief

PARIS



FRANCE TO BUILD SIX NEW NUCLEAR PLANTS

France is set to build eight new nuclear plants on top of six already announced, the energy minister has said, arguing more reactors are needed to hit carbon reduction targets.

A draft law set to be presented soon recognises that “we will need nuclear power beyond the six first European Pressurised Reactors” (EPRs) announced by President Emmanuel Macron in early 2022, Agnes Pannier-Runacher told Sunday’s edition of weekly newspaper Tribune Dimanche.

The bill will include a further eight plants that had until now been discussed as an “option” by the government, Pannier-Runacher said. — AFP

DHAKA



SHEIKH HASINA WINS RE-ELECTION FIFTH TIME

Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has won re-election for a fifth time following an opposition boycott, with her party taking at least half of seats and counting ongoing, an election official said. “The ruling Awami League party has won more than 50 per cent seats,” an Election Commission spokesman said. Hasina has presided over breakneck economic growth in a country once beset by grinding poverty. Her party faced almost no effective rivals in the seats it contested, but it avoided fielding candidates in a few constituencies, an apparent effort to avoid the legislature being branded a one-party institution. — AFP

BRUSSELS



EU COUNCIL PRESIDENT SAYS TO STEP DOWN EARLY

Belgian politician Charles Michel has announced he will step down early as European Council president after he runs in the European Parliament elections set for June. “I’ve decided to stand as a candidate for the European elections in June 2024,” he told Belgian media. The surprise move is likely to heighten speculation about who will be the next European Union leaders as negotiations begin for a new round of top jobs in November.

Under EU procedures, the national leader of the country holding the EU’s rotating presidency, would assume the role until the November election.

— AFP

N Korea conducts live-fire drills near maritime border



South Korean marines walk past a shelter sign in a village of Yeonpyeong island, near the ‘northern limit line’ sea boundary with North Korea. — AFP

SEOUL: North Korea conducted live-fire drills on its western coast, Seoul’s military said on Sunday, the third consecutive day of military exercises near its contested maritime border with the South.

Seoul’s military said that North Korea had “conducted artillery fire with over 90 rounds north of Yeonpyeong island from 1600 to 1710 on Sunday”.

They accused the North of “repeated artillery fire” within a buffer zone created in 2018 under a now-defunct tension-reducing deal, saying the bombardment posed “a threat to the peace on the Korean Peninsula.”

North Korea’s military said it had carried out “maritime live-fire training” with 88 rounds of artillery but said the drills were “directionally unrelated” to the maritime border.

The exercises “did not pose any intentional threat” to South Korea and were part of the North’s “normal training system of our military,” it said in a statement carried by the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

Residents on the South Korean border island of Yeonpyeong were warned to stay inside due to the drills and any possible countermeasures

No North Korean artillery shells fell south of the Northern Limit Line, the de facto maritime border in the Yellow Sea, and no casualties were reported, according to the Yonhap news agency.

Residents on the South Korean border island of Yeonpyeong were warned to stay inside due to the drills and any possible countermeasures.

“North Korean gunfire is currently being heard,” said a text message sent to all residents on Sunday afternoon.

“Troops on Yeonpyeong Island are currently responding, but residents are advised to be careful of outdoor activities,” said the message.

On both Friday and Saturday,

North Korea fired artillery rounds in the same area — near Yeonpyeong and Baengnyeong, two sparsely populated islands situated just south of the Northern Limit Line.

Residents of the two islands were ordered to evacuate to shelters and ferries were suspended during one of the most serious military escalations on the peninsula since Pyongyang fired shells at one of the islands in 2010.

On both days, Seoul said North Korea’s shells landed in the buffer zone created under the 2018 deal, which fell apart in November after the North launched a spy satellite.

On Sunday, Kim Jong Un’s powerful sister denied Seoul’s claims that Pyongyang had fired dozens of artillery rounds near their border on Saturday, saying North Korea had instead conducted a “deceptive operation”.

At Pyongyang’s year-end policy meetings, Kim threatened a nuclear attack on the South and called for a build-up of his country’s military arsenal ahead of armed conflict that he warned could “break out any time”. — AFP

PM Sunak makes election appeal for Britain to ‘stick with’ his plan

LONDON: British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak urged voters and his own party on Sunday to “stick to the plan” for “long-term change” at an election he has signalled will most probably come in the second half of this year.

After firing the starting gun on election campaigning last week by saying it was his “working assumption” the vote’s timing would be later this year, Sunak listed what he described as the progress he had overseen since taking office in late 2022.

With his governing Conservatives heavily trailing the opposition Labour Party in the polls, Sunak is hoping to turn the tide by giving more time to his agenda including cutting taxes, health service waiting lists and the number of migrant arrivals — issues he said he had started to tackle.

“Of course there’s more to do, but progress is being made. The country is now pointing in the right direction,” he said.

“And if we stick to the plan and we can continue to deliver that long-term change the country needs ... that’s ultimately how we’ll provide everybody with the peace of mind that the future is going to be better for their children ... That’s what I’m setting out to deliver.”

Sunak has so far struggled to make progress on his main pledges and heads a deeply fractious party, with some lawmakers threatening to oust him unless he cuts more



Britain’s Prime Minister Rishi Sunak speaks to members of the Environment Agency during a visit to Oxford, England. — Reuters

taxes. He has hit one target of halving inflation by the end of 2023 — a goal economists say that has little to do with government policy.

On Sunday, he expressed confidence he could get his much-criticised plan to send asylum-seekers to Rwanda through parliament and said he wanted to deliver further tax cuts by controlling spending, particularly welfare benefits, describing the number of people deemed unfit to work as “concerning”.

But Labour has accused Sunak of “squatting” in his Number 10 office and party leader Keir Starmer told Sky News he wanted the election “to be as soon as possible” but that he feared Sunak just wanted to reach the two-year mark for his premiership.

“I can’t help feeling that all he really wants to do is to get two years clocked up of his own premiership and that means is putting vanity before country,” Starmer said. — Reuters

Russia launches 28 drones, three missiles at Ukraine

KYIV: Russia launched 28 attack drones and three cruise missile at Ukraine, Ukraine’s air force said on Sunday, adding that its air defence systems destroyed 21 of the drones.

The air force said on its Telegram messaging channel that Russia targeted mainly the south and east of Ukraine, and did not say what happened to the three cruise missiles.

“The enemy is shifting the focus of attack to the frontline territories — Kherson and Dnipropetrovsk regions were attacked by drones,” Air Force spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat told national television.

There was no immediate comment from Russia.

Dnipropetrovsk regional authorities said that 12 people were injured in a drone attack in Dnipro city.

They also said an educational institution and its dormitory, two multi-apartment buildings and one administrative building were damaged.

Ihnat said drones were predominantly destroyed by mobile teams, saving “scarce” air defence missiles.

He said Ukrainian forces used some missiles to repel two recent major Russian attacks and “processes are under way to continue to provide Ukraine with



Rescuers with a dog work at the site of a Russian missile strike in an area in the village of Rivne near the Pokrovsk town, in Donetsk region, Ukraine. — Reuters

the number of missiles needed to repel air attacks.”

Russia deployed almost 300 missiles and more than 200 drones in attacks in the last days of 2023 and the first days of 2024.

Russia’s attack on Ukraine can

be defeated, President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said on Sunday, adding that the situation on the battlefield at this time remains relatively stable.

“Even Russia can be brought back within the framework of

international law. Its aggression can be defeated,” Zelenskiy told a conference in Sweden via video link.

The war in Ukraine has shown that Europe must develop joint weapons production to ensure

Russia deployed almost 300 missiles and more than 200 drones in attacks in the last days of 2023 and the first days of 2024

that the continent can “preserve itself” under any global situation that might arise, the Ukrainian president said.

“Two years of this war have proven that Europe needs its own sufficient arsenal for the defence of freedom, its own capabilities to ensure defence,” he said.

Meanwhile, foreign minister Yoko Kamikawa pledged Japan’s continued support for Ukraine as she visited Kyiv on Sunday in the midst of the country’s war with Russia.

“Japan is determined to continue to support Ukraine so that peace can return to Ukraine,” Kamikawa said through an interpreter at a joint news conference with Ukrainian minister Dmytro Kuleba.

Ukraine has repeatedly asked its allies to provide it with modern aircraft and air defence systems to repel Russian attacks, targeting both military and civilian infrastructure. — Reuters

How museums can help with mental health



Sandhya Rao Mehta

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

One of the most visited places during the Oman National Day holidays a couple of months ago was Oman Across Ages Museum, located in Manah, about a 15-minute drive from the city of Nizwa. Its popularity is a very good sign because research is now suggesting that museums not only show us our past but are also effective in ensuring mental health. According to the World Health Organization, more than 20 per cent of children suffer from mental health issues worldwide. This is manifested in short attention span, depression and anxiety. Research now suggests that visits to museums can contribute to alleviating the stress that children face on an everyday basis. The quiet and inspiring nature of museums is what primarily makes it a place of possibilities. They are essential de-stressing environments where the audience is left alone to ponder over whatever interests them, leading to new ideas and new ways of looking at the past and future. Museum Next, a portal of some of the world's

most popular museums, points to a study which concluded that engaging with artwork and artifacts in museums positively impacted children who were undergoing mental distress as it made them feel like they were part of a community and could be diverted into creative work that made them feel fulfilled. According to Jenny Waldman, director of Art Fund which is a national charity in the United Kingdom, museums are more than quiet physical spaces. In fact, “studies show that these are spaces where you can discuss major societal issues in a neutral space and open up ideas, inviting you to explore and promote a sense of well-being”. Studies also show that engaging with art like painting, sculpture and even music and theatre is therapeutic. Young adults often see themselves in these pieces, inspiring them to discover themselves. This is empowering and powerful for the individual. The sight of a child staring at an ancient piece of art or history evokes a world of possibilities — who knows what the child is thinking.

MUSEUMS HAVE BRUSHED OFF THEIR OLD REPUTATIONS OF BEING DUSTY BUILDINGS WITH ARTIFACTS OF THE PAST BUT RATHER THEY ARE PLACES OF IDEAS, INSPIRATION, COMMUNITY BUILDING AND HOPE

Beyond the individual level, museums also form communities. Festivals, public exhibitions and talks relating to them bring people together, forming communities with shared interests and passions. This kind of social life brings meaning, purpose and inspiration that can be self-sustaining. For all this to be possible, museums need to be engaging and aware of their role in promoting the health and happiness of entire communities, especially children. There are some common strategies used worldwide to make museums attractive places to visit. These include using interactive techniques, having activities for children and young adults to be engaged with the items on display, creating spaces for children's creative pieces to be displayed and having engaging guides to make a visit fun and purposeful, not only educational. Today, museums have brushed off their old reputations of being dusty buildings with artifacts of the past. They are places of ideas, inspiration, community building and hope. Recognising the true value of museums will go a long way in promoting mental health.

Bhutan to vote as economic strife hits ‘happiness’

DECHEN WANGDI

The picturesque Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan holds general elections on Tuesday with serious economic challenges calling into question its longstanding policy of prioritising “Gross National Happiness” over growth. Both parties contesting the vote are committed to a constitutionally enshrined philosophy of a government that measures its success by the “happiness and well-being of the people”. Some voters are expected to trek for days to cast their ballots in the landlocked and sparsely populated country, similar in size to Switzerland. Foremost in the minds of many are the struggles facing the kingdom's younger generation, with chronic youth unemployment and a brain drain of migration abroad. “We don't need more new roads or bridges,” farmer Kinley Wangchuk, 46, said. “What we really need is more jobs for young people.” Bhutan's youth unemployment rate stands at 29 per cent, according to the World Bank, while economic growth has sputtered along at an average of 1.7 per cent over the past five years. Young citizens have left in record numbers searching for better financial and educational opportunities abroad since the last elections, with Australia the top destination. Around 15,000 Bhutanese were issued visas there in the 12 months to last July, according to a local news report — more than the preceding six years combined, and almost two per cent of the kingdom's population. The issue is front and centre for both parties contesting the poll. Career civil servant Pema Chewang of the Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP), said the country was losing the “cream of the nation”. — AFP

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A psychohistorian’s dilemma in 21st century American politics



Ross Douthat

The writer is an American political analyst, blogger, author and NYT columnist

TRUMP MAY BE JUST AN AMERICAN EXPRESSION OF THE TRENDS THAT HAVE REVIVED NATIONALISM ALL OVER THE WORLD, PRECISELY THE SORT OF FIGURE A ‘PSYCHOHISTORY’ OF OUR ERA WOULD HAVE ANTICIPATED

In Isaac Asimov's Foundation novels, a 'psychohistorian' in a far-flung galactic empire figures out a way to predict the future so exactly that he can anticipate both the empire's fall and the way that civilisation can be painstakingly rebuilt. This enables him to plan a project — the “foundation” of the title — that will long outlast his death, complete with periodic messages to his heirs that always show foreknowledge of their challenges and crises. Until one day the foreknowledge fails, because an inherently unpredictable figure has come upon the scene — the Mule, a Napoleon of galactic politics, whose advent was hard for even a psychohistorian to see coming because he's literally a mutant, graced by some genetic twist with the power of telepathy. Donald Trump is not a mutant telepath. (Or so I assume — fact-checkers are still at work.) But the debates about how to deal with his challenge to the American political system turn, in part, on how much you think that he resembles Asimov's Mule. Was there a more normal, conventional, stable-seeming timeline for 21st century American politics that Trump, with his unique blend of tabloid celebrity, reality-TV charisma, personal shamelessness and demagogic intuition, somehow wrenched us off? Or is Trump just an American expression of the trends that have revived nationalism all over the world, precisely the sort of figure a “psychohistory” of our era would have anticipated? In which case, are attempts to find some elite removal mechanism likely to just heighten the contradictions that yielded Trumpism in the first place, widening the gyre and bringing the rough beast slouching in much faster? I have basically changed sides in this debate. Into the early part of Trump's presidency I was an apologist for elite machinations: I wanted party unity against his primary candidacy, a convention rebellion against his nomination, even a 25th Amendment option when he appeared initially



Former US President and Republican presidential hopeful Donald Trump arrives for a ‘Commit to Caucus’ rally in Clinton, Iowa. — AFP

overmastered by the office of the presidency. Past a certain point, though, I became convinced that these efforts were not only vain but counterproductive. In part, this reflected strategic considerations: The plausible moment for unified intraparty resistance had passed, and the united front of elite institutions had failed spectacularly to prevent Trump from capturing the White House. In part, it reflected my sense that “Resistance” politics were driving liberal institutions deep into their own kind of paranoia and conspiracism. But above all, my shift reflected a reading of our times as increasingly and ineradicably populist, permanently Trumpy in some sense, with inescapable conflicts between insider and outsider factions, institutionalists and rebels — conflicts that seemed likely to worsen the more that insider power plays cement the populist belief that the outsiders would never be allowed to truly govern. This shift doesn't mean, however, that I am immune to the arguments that still treat Trump as unique, even Mule-ish, with a capacity for chaos unequalled by any other populist. You can see this distinctiveness in the failures of various Republican candidates who have tried to ape his style. And you can reasonably doubt that a different populist would have gone all the way to the disgrace of

January 6, 2021 — or inspired as many followers. So, as much as I find the legal case for the 14th Amendment disqualification entirely unpersuasive, I can almost make myself see the return-to-normalcy future that some of its advocates seem to be imagining. Start with a 7-2 decision, maybe written by Brett Kavanaugh, disqualifying Trump. Then comes a lot of ranting and rage that mostly works itself out online. Then a sense of relief among Republican officeholders who move on to a Nikki Haley vs Ron DeSantis primary. Then various Trump-backed spoiler-ish and third-party options emerge but fizzle out. Then, quite possibly, you have a DeSantis or Haley presidency — in which partisan loyalty binds Republicans to their new leader, and an aging Trump eventually fades away. I will concede to partisans of disqualification that such a scenario is theoretically possible. I certainly would find some versions of it eminently desirable. But what I would ask them in turn is whether, having lived through the past eight years of not just American but global politics, they actually find it likely that normalcy will be restored through this kind of expedient — a judicial fiat that millions of Americans will immediately regard as the most illegitimate governmental action of their lifetimes? — **The New York Times**

Tribute to peace-makers

Heartfelt tribute and salute to all Royal Oman Police (ROP) personnel on celebrating their annual day. January 5 is a day of honour and pride for all police personnel. Everyone is really proud of you all, heroes of the nation and peace-makers! With respect to all military and armed forces in the country, Royal Oman Police are having a special respect indeed.

Just imagine how would you feel without having police on the roads?! It is not an overstated confession that our lives would be abnormal of course! Nobody can deny the fact that whenever there is a police officer, safety and stability are guaranteed. Truthfully, the dignity of police officers has been a wish for every child! To be a policeman has always been a dream for many children when asked, what do you want to be in the future? The common answer is to be a policeman!

Probably, some people are not in good terms with ROP personnel due to some experiences. They might have got in trouble with an officer or received a traffic ticket for speeding or unfastened seatbelt. Other than that, they got trapped by a speed control radar and received a couple of frustrating fines when renewing their car's registration. This is just to name a few cases why some are getting annoyed by police!

However, police officers are just doing their job and minding their must-to-do daily duties. Some of these tasks and responsibilities are undesirable by some people, but rules are made to be obeyed. They are to be implemented and monitored; otherwise there is no use of having authorities.

To tell the truth, police personnel are messengers on a mission; they sacrifice their life and strive hard to maintain security, safety and stability round the clock in every corner of the country. They deserve a word of thanks and appreciation from all, citizens and residents alike. In all aspects of duties



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

POLICE PERSONNEL ARE MESSENGERS ON A MISSION; THEY SACRIFICE THEIR LIFE AND STRIVE HARD TO MAINTAIN SECURITY, SAFETY AND STABILITY

such as rescue missions, fire-fighting operations, traffic control, immigration along with other tough responsibilities, police personnel have proven remarkable competency and excellence as heroes.

The Royal Oman Police are honoured indeed as the late Sultan Qaboos has accorded a special attention and designated January 5 as the ROP Annual Day. This day was first announced during a special occasion held on November 4, 1974, when the police force received its flag from the late Sultan.

On this day, the late Sultan addressed the police personnel saying: "In handing you our and your flag today, we have decided to confer a new name on the police force. From now on you will be known as the Royal Oman Police."

In a very inspiring note to highlight the privilege of ROP personnel, the late Sultan said, "Although the policeman's job is difficult, he is proud of it. The work first requires him to be sincere, honest and also to continue the efforts pleasantly, smilingly and good-hearted".

All these Royal gestures of the late Sultan to Royal Oman Police are a source of pride to all its personnel as well as a real motivation to devote more efforts in their tasks and responsibilities. Being a police officer is not an easy job, but we all trust that ROP are up to it.

The ROP Annual Day is an event for all personnel to express their loyalty, devotion to the Sultan, the country and the people. The words of thanks and tribute are not enough to thank all personnel of the Royal Oman Police for sparing no efforts to help citizens and residents as well as striving to ensure public stability, safety.

Dear ROP personnel may the Almighty Allah bless you all and bestow you strength, health and prosperity. Staying awake on every single night all over the country while others are enjoying a deep sleep is not an easy responsibility to shoulder. You are our heroes who risk their lives everyday to protect our country and make it a safe place.

DRESSED FOR THE OCCASION!



A boy dressed as Hindu deity Hanuman takes part in a carnival during an ongoing Gujarati festival in Hyderabad, India, on Sunday. – AFP

Haley vs DeSantis: Why the Republican undercard matters

With Donald Trump so far ahead in the race for the Republican presidential nomination, Americans could be forgiven for dismissing it as a coronation rather than a genuine contest.

Yet with days to go until the first votes in Iowa and New Hampshire, the ex-president's rivals insist there is much more at stake in the "undercard" contest than a second-place consolation prize.

They point to polling data showing voters turning against Trump in the all-important swing states if he is convicted in any of the four criminal trials he faces as he runs for a second White House term.

The 77-year-old tycoon is also contending with efforts in multiple states to disqualify him from primary contests under the 14th Amendment, which bans from office government officials who have engaged in insurrection.

With surging poll numbers and a slew of high-profile endorsements, former South Carolina governor Nikki Haley looks best placed to capitalise in the unlikely — but not inconceivable — event of a Trump implosion.

Poll after poll has shown her beating President Joe Biden in November by larger margins than Trump or Florida governor Ron DeSantis, her closest rival in the



Frankie Taggart is US politics correspondent in Washington for AFP

WITH SURGING POLL NUMBERS AND A SLEW OF HIGH-PROFILE ENDORSEMENTS, NIKKI HALEY LOOKS BEST PLACED TO CAPITALISE IN THE UNLIKELY EVENT OF A TRUMP IMPLOSION

chasing pack. "Regarding a path to the nomination for DeSantis or Haley — while challenging, it's not impossible. Political landscapes can shift rapidly, and primary races often have unexpected turns," top Republican strategist Charlie Kolean said.

Neither challenger has gone for the jugular over the many legal issues facing Trump, who is accused of leading a criminal conspiracy to stop the rightfully-elected Joe Biden from becoming president, culminating in the 2021 assault on the US Capitol.

This reticence has led critics of the undercard — which also features political newcomer Vivek Ramaswamy and longshot former New Jersey governor Chris Christie — to argue that the contenders aren't really trying to win.

Accepting the inevitability of the Trump juggernaut, they are looking instead to 2028, the theory goes — or, in the case of Ramaswamy, for a position in the next Trump cabinet.

To be clear, Trump takes a larger share in opinion polling than Haley and DeSantis combined in each of the four early nominating states. But both say they see a path to victory over the ex-president.

DeSantis — a hard-line

populist in the Trump mold — remains in number two spot in Iowa, and is pinning his hopes on an above-par outcome propelling him into New Hampshire with a wind in his sails.

The more moderate Haley has overtaken DeSantis nationally, however, buoyed by solid performances in the primary debates and major endorsements from the business community and political establishment.

Shying from the cultural battles that have been a mainstay of the DeSantis campaign, Haley

has stressed the need for reform of the welfare system, finding political consensus on issues and support for aid to Ukraine.

The more isolationist DeSantis points to his record of getting domestic conservative priorities onto Florida's statute books.

Haley has avoided the negative headlines for runaway spending and staff churn that have dogged DeSantis, although her failure at a recent town hall to identify slavery as the cause of the Civil War gave aides heartburn.

She is still well-placed to mount a serious challenge in New Hampshire, say her backers, especially if Trump underperforms in Iowa.

For Henry Olsen, a senior fellow at the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Center think tank, the undercard contest provides insights into a post-Trump Republican Party.

"We should care because, unlikely as it is, miracles do occasionally happen and the winner will be a top candidate in 2028, when Trump will be either termed out or will likely not run due to age, legal issues and losing," he said.

Analysts concede however that both Haley and DeSantis have a mountain to climb.

The latest edition of the influential Des Moines Register Iowa Poll shows 51 per cent of likely Republican caucus-goers picking Trump, up from 43 per cent in October.

"It's not just about who finishes second; it's about shaping the future of the Republican Party," Kolean, the Republican strategist, said.

"Understanding the positions and support bases of Haley and DeSantis reveals emerging trends and factions within the party, which could influence its direction beyond 2024."



Republican presidential candidate Florida Governor Ron DeSantis makes a campaign visit in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, US, on Saturday. – Reuters

sport

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Abdullah Fawaz celebrated after scoring the first goal

Omani, Esam al Subhi in action

OMAN MORALE HIGH AFTER CRUCIAL VICTORY OVER UAE

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 7

Red Warriors are all in best shape to begin their action in the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 after registering positive moral wins against UAE and China in the friendly matches during the concluded overseas camp in UAE.

Oman national team ended their long external preparatory camp in Abu Dhabi on a bright note after they blanked UAE 1-0 on Saturday at Al Nahyan Stadium. The match goal was scored by Abdullah Fawaz in the fifth minute of the game after he sent a strong ball which found the net.

Earlier on December 29, Red Warriors

had claimed their first win in the camp against China 2-0 in Abu Dhabi. Oman's both goals were scored in the second half by Arshad al Alawi (49th minute) and Mohsin al Ghassani (65th minute) respectively.

Oman players showed top technical performance during the match especially in the first half as they determined the game through many scoring attempts. The defending line produced good show and managed to break all the experiments from the rivals team. Coach Branko Ivankovic began the final warm up game with a starting line up that featured from Ibrahim al Mukhaini as a goalkeeper. The defending line comprised from Ahmed al Khamisi, Ahmed al Kaabi, Kahlid al

Buraiki and Arshad al Alawi. Harib al Saadi captain of the team monitored the middle line accompanied by Abdullah Fawaz, Jameel al Yahmadi and Salah al Yahyaee. The strikers in the front were Esam al Subhi and Mohsin al Ghassani. Salah al Yahyaee was the active man from the national team side as he created many chances towards the opponents goalie of Khalid Issa. Esam al Subhi and Jameel al Yahmadi got some chances in front of the target but they missed. The level of the national team dropped in the second half of the team as the hosts worked hard to score the equaliser but they faced strong defending line and good saver by goalie Ibrahim al Mukhaini. Coach Ivankovic made many substitutes by entering Zahir

al Aghbari, Ali al Busaidy, Motaz Saleh, Abdulrahman al Mushaifri, Abdullah al Musharafi and Fahmi Dorbeen.

MAJOR PARTICIPATION

The Oman national team delegation will be heading off to Qatar's capital city Doha on Monday to take part in the 18th edition of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 which will be held from January 12 to February 10. The player's are under positive and high ambitious to raise the flag of the country high in this continental major participation. Oman team will chase going away in this edition of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 by reaching further in the knockout stage as Red Warriors had reached in last 16

round in the previous edition in the UAE.

Red Warriors completed all their planned training sessions under the watchful eyes of head coach Branko Ivankovic and his assistant coaching staff ahead of their key Asian Cup opening match against Saudi Arabia on January 16 at Khalifa International Stadium in Doha. Then, they will face a confident Southeast Asian team Thailand on January 21 at Abdullah bin Khalifa Stadium before concluding their group matches against Kyrgyzstan on January 25 in the same venue. Oman squad are fit and raring to go and there is no injury.

The team will commence their training sessions in Doha at Qatar's University Complex.

Milan ease to 3-0 win at Empoli

EMPOLI, ITALY: Third-placed AC Milan secured a comfortable 3-0 win at Empoli thanks to goals from Ruben Loftus-Cheek, Olivier Giroud and Chaka Traore in Serie A on Sunday.

Milan seized the lead after 11 minutes when Rafael Leao surged past his marker on the wing, delivering a precise pass to Loftus-Cheek inside the box, who sidefooted the ball into the bottom corner. The visitors extended their lead as Giroud scored from the penalty spot after 31 minutes, following a handball by Empoli's Youssef Maleh.

Substitute Traore scored Milan's third goal two minutes before stoppage time, capitalising on a counter-attack assisted by Christian Pulisic.

Milan are third in the standings with 39 points, nine behind leaders Inter Milan and four behind second-placed

Juventus, who are in action later on Sunday. Empoli are second-from-bottom with 13 points.

In the heavy rain, Empoli encountered difficulties in creating significant scoring opportunities and was restricted to mostly long-range attempts, while Milan maintained control for most of the match.

Milan manager Stefano Pioli faced another injury concern as defender Alessandro Florenzi was substituted off in the first half due to a suspected hamstring injury.

Pioli already had several players out injured, including Malick Thiaw, Fikayo Tomori, and Tommaso Pobega.

The hosts became more dangerous after the hour mark, as Milan keeper Mike Maignan blocked a threatening attempt by Matteo Cancellieri as well as Francesco Caputo's subsequent effort. — Reuters



AC Milan's Chaka Traore celebrates scoring their third goal with teammates. – REUTERS

Eight nations in fray as ITF Asia U14 qualifiers begin today

ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, JAN 7

Players from eight countries will compete in the West and Central Asia regional qualifying tournaments for the International Tennis Federation (ITF) Asia 14 and Under Development Championships 2024 at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex tennis courts from January 8 to 16.

The Oman Tennis Association is hosting international tennis events after a gap of nearly six years. Oman last hosted Davis Cup Asia Group 4 Championships which Oman emerged champions in 2018.

The qualifying event will consist of two tournaments from January 8 to 11 and January 13 to 16 respectively.

Tournament director Mohammed al Balushi said players from eight countries would compete in the two tournaments for boys and girls that will have ranking points.

Players of the age of 14 and under from hosts Oman, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates and Yemen are taking part in the event.

"The participating countries have two boys and three girls for the tournaments that will have singles and doubles competitions," Al Balushi said.

An ITF team will be selected from the West and Central Asia qualifying event that include two top boys and two top girls plus one coach.

All singles matches will be the best of three tie-break sets. In doubles, a 10-point match tie-break will be played at one set.

Two nations from the qualifiers will be promoted to

the finals of 2025.

The four lowest-ranked nations based on the standings at the finals in 2024 will be relegated to the regional qualifying events of 2025.

OMAN TEAM

The Oman team include Abdulrahman al Rahbi and Motaz al Mazroui in the boys section, while Areen al Azkawi, Talya al Busaidy and Salma al Riyami are in fray for the girl's category.

The players expressed confidence to make an impact at the regional qualifying event. "This will be a good opportunity for us to improve our rankings and gain international experience," the players said.

Oman boys coach Sofiane Doub from Algeria said the players are ready for the challenge. "We had a good training programme that included daily exercises and an internal camp that lasted for several days at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex," Doub said. Oman girls coach Sergey Pershian from Russia expressed confidence that his players would show a promising display.

"The girls are well prepared and look forward to giving their best performance in the ITF qualifiers," Pershian said.

Aseel al Shaheen of Kuwait is the ITF referee while Amir Borghei is the ITF representative for the qualifying tournaments.

The Oman Tennis Association has made all arrangements for the teams at the venue for practice and the players are put up at Al Murooj Grand Hotel.

Iraq, who came on Sunday, was the last team to arrive for the competition while Turkmenistan were the first foreign team to reach Muscat.



Rockets hold off Bucks despite Antetokounmpo's big night



Alperen Sengun (28) attempts to get a rebound away from Brook Lopez (11). — USA TODAY Sports

LOS ANGELES: Alperen Sengun scored 21 points to lead seven Houston players in double figures and the Rockets withstood a 48-point performance from Milwaukee star Giannis Antetokounmpo in a 112-108 NBA victory over the Bucks on Saturday.

Two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Antetokounmpo added 17 rebounds for a seventh straight double-double, but it wasn't enough in a game that saw Houston take control early before fending off a fourth-quarter Bucks charge.

Sengun added 11 rebounds and four assists and Jeff Green and Jalen Green added 16 points apiece for the Rockets, who emerged from a tight

first quarter with an 11-point lead that they pushed to 20 at half-time.

The Bucks trailed by as many as 18 early in the fourth quarter but cut the deficit to 110-105 on Antetokounmpo's put-back basket with 7.9 seconds remaining.

Houston's Fred VanVleet made a pair of free throws to finally put it out of reach.

"We just relied on our defence," Jeff Green said. "We've been in these situations plenty of times, we've relied on each other. We got the stops when we needed them and made big shots."

Antetokounmpo's 18th career game of 45 or more points tied Kareem Abdul-Jabbar for the most

in Bucks franchise history.

CELTICS COOL OFF PACERS

In Indianapolis, Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown combined for 69 points and the Boston Celtics again kept the potent Indiana Pacers offense in check in a 118-101 victory.

Tatum scored 38 points and Brown added 31 for the league-leading Celtics, who held the Pacers to a season-low in points as they snapped Indiana's six-game winning streak.

Boston, who restricted the Pacers to their previous season low in points in their 155-104 win on November 1, were dialed in defensively, holding the Pacers to 17 points in the first quarter.

But the Celtics suffered an early blow when Kristaps Porzingis exited in the first quarter with an eye laceration and the Pacers clawed back.

Aided by 18 Celtics turnovers — 12 of them in the first half — the Pacers chipped away at a 16-point deficit and trailed 58-49 at half-time.

Indiana, who eliminated the Celtics from the NBA in-season tournament in December, cut the deficit to 84-81 heading into the fourth, but the Celtics powered away in the final period.

Tatum made a season-high eight three-pointers — half of the Celtics' 16. He added 13 rebounds and six assists. — AFP

JSIS to be official partner of FIH Hockey5s World Cup

MUSCAT: Jindal Shaded Iron and Steel (JSIS), the largest privately owned integrated steel producer in the GCC region, is proud to announce its sponsorship of the inaugural FIH Hockey5s World Cup Oman 2024 in collaboration with Oman Hockey Association (OHA).

FIH Hockey5s World Cup Oman 2024, organised by the International Hockey Federation, marks the debut of this premier international hockey event and will be held from January 24 to 31 in Muscat. The highly anticipated FIH Hockey5s World Cup will see 16 men's and women's teams from around the world vying to become the first-ever World Champions of the event.

Harssha Shetty, CEO of JSIS, and Dr Marwan bin Jumaa al Jumaa, Chairman of the OHA, signed the sponsorship agreement in the presence of Mohammed bin Sulaiman al Kindi, the Governor of Al Batinah North, and other dignitaries during a ceremony held in Suhar.

This exciting partnership reflects JSIS's commitment to supporting the nation's sports ecosystem and creating a lasting legacy for hockey development in Oman.

Harssha Shetty, CEO of JSIS,



Harssha Shetty, JSIS CEO and Dr Marwan al Jumaa, OHA Chairman, signed the sponsorship agreement

stated: "We are thrilled to partner with the FIH Hockey5s World Cup Oman 2024. Sports, like steel, build nations. Oman Vision 2040 recognises sports and youth as its key pillars. We are honoured to partner with OHA and contribute to the development of sports and youth in Oman. At JSIS, we believe in the power of sports to unite people from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Our partnership represents our dedication to fostering unity and collaboration on a global scale. This surely will be a great boost for the promotion of hockey in Oman and the

Middle East. Our support of the FIH Hockey5s World Cup Oman 2024 goes beyond sponsorship; it's an investment in the dreams and aspirations of countless individuals. We're committed to helping the Oman Hockey Association achieve its vision and, in turn, to see Oman shine brightly on the world sports stage."

JSIS's sponsorship of the FIH Hockey5s World Cup Oman 2024 reflects its ongoing commitment to support global events and initiatives that foster cooperation and unite people.

"We are very delighted to

sign this essential sponsorship agreement with one of the leading companies in the region represented by Jindal Shaded Iron & Steel Company LLC. It is a great moment to have the corporate sector support to ensure the success of the grand event of 2024 FIH Hockey5s World Cup which will be held during January 24 to 31, 2024 in Muscat. We really thank Jindal Shaded for their great trust and confidence and highly appreciate their continuous support to Oman Hockey. This strategic deal will play crucial rule in improving several technical aspects of domestic competitions and championships beside the big support towards the world major event of 2024 FIH Hockey5s World Cup in Muscat" Dr Marwan al Jumaa, Chairman of Oman Hockey Association (OHA), said.

"This key partnership will contribute to achieve further development in the human capabilities and improve the association's administrative work environment. Hence, it will enable us to achieve further success in the coming period. This is not the first deal signed with this leading company as our partnership has extended for many years since 2018 and until today."

Ketema breaks world record for fastest marathon debut

DUBAI: Ethiopian runner Tigist Ketema broke the world record for fastest marathon debut in Dubai on Sunday, shaving more than a minute off the course record.

Clocking a time of 2:16:07, the 25-year-old became the eighth fastest woman in marathon history as she took gold, breaking the Dubai course record by 61 seconds.

A former African Under-20 Championships gold medallist in the 800 metres, Ketema established herself as a long distance running prospect by winning the Great Ethiopian Run 10 km race in 2022.

Ethiopia swept the women's podium in Dubai as Ruti Aga (2:18:09) and Dera Dida (2:19:29) finished second and third. — Reuters



Zverev-led Germany beat Swiatek's Poland to win United Cup

SYDNEY: Alexander Zverev saved two match points in a gruelling three-set win over Hubert Hurkacz to help Germany upset top seeds Poland and clinch a maiden United Cup title in Sydney on Sunday.

The world number seven kept the tie alive with his never-say-die 6-7 (3/7), 7-6 (8/6), 6-4 victory after top-ranked Iga Swiatek had swept past Angelique Kerber 6-3, 6-0.

Zverev returned to partner Laura Siegemund and seal the title with a 6-4, 5-7, 10-4 win over Swiatek and Hurkacz in the deciding mixed doubles.

“It was a matter of millimetres today for you guys (Poland) to be the champions,” Zverev said at the presentation ceremony.

"To my team, it's been amazing and so much fun. I couldn't be happier."

Hurkacz and Zverev had not met since the 2021 ATP Finals, where the German was eventually crowned champion.

Both 26 years old and big servers, there were only small margins between them in the singles clash, with Hurkacz rising to the challenge in the first set tiebreak.

It went the distance again in the second set after the Pole saved two set points from Zverev at 5-6.

But this time, he lost his nerve in the tiebreak and blew two championship points as Zverev took it to a deciding set despite showing signs of fatigue.

With errors creeping in to Hurkacz's game, Zverev broke for a 4-3 lead in the third and, overcoming a bout of cramps, found a way to win.

"I was exhausted," said Zverev, with Germany's semi-final not finishing until 2.18am on Sunday.

"In the middle of the second set I was already exhausted and in the third set I was hanging on a lot of the time and somehow got the break," he added.

"Obviously mentally and physically, it was extremely difficult because playing three days in a row singles and mixed is tough."

REALLY PROUD

Swiatek is in imperious touch heading into the Australian Open, dropping just one set throughout the mixed teams tournament to be on a 16-match win streak that began with her runs through Beijing and Cancun to end last season.

She was on another level to former world number one Kerber, who is on the comeback from an 18-month maternity layoff, winning the last nine games in a row.

"I feel like I just really improved during the pre-season and I'm happy that I played such solid matches here," said the 22-year-old.

"I'm really proud of myself
that I could win all of my singles."

"I felt like she was really picking the right spots to play and she surprised me sometimes with her decision-making and choices," she added of Kerber.

"I knew she could play like that but I didn't have much time to get into the rhythm because sometimes she was really aiming these balls inside out.

“With the ball change, I felt like my game could be more dynamic and I could push



Team captain and his players Alexander Zverev, Angelique Kerber, Maximilian Marterer, Kai Wehnelt, Tatjana Maria and Laura Siegemund. – **REUTERS**



Alexander Zverev and Angelique Kerber pose with the trophy. – **REUTERS**



Angelique more after 4-3 (in the first set).”

Kerber put early pressure on Swiatek, who saved two break points to hold for 3-2.

But the match turned when the Pole overpowered Kerber's serve to break for 5-3 and it was a demolition job from then on as Swiatek ran riot.

She will head to the Australian Open with wins over Caroline Garcia, Beatriz Haddad Maia, Sara Sorribes Tormo and Zheng Qinwen, along with Kerber.

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Agreement signed for oil and gas exploration in Blocks 38 and 74

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 7

Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi, Minister of Energy and Minerals, signed a concession agreement with CC Energy Development (CCED) for the exploration and production of oil and gas in Blocks 38 and 74 in Dhofar Governorate.

As part of the agreement, CCED will conduct geological and geophysical studies as well as seismic surveys necessary to unlock the hydrocarbon potential of the two concessions.

Block 38, covering an area of 17,425 square kilometres, is located in the southwestern part of Dhofar Governorate, while Block 74 covers an area of 3,064 sq km and is located in the southeastern part of the governorate.

Al Aufi stated: “This agreement reflects the commitment of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals to expand the exploration and drilling operations for oil and gas resources in the Sultanate of Oman, and the confidence that Oman enjoys from local and international investors. It will also contribute to enhancing the productive capacity of the sector.”

“By signing this agreement, we look forward to strengthening existing partnerships and building new ones in this sector,



Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aufi (right), Minister of Energy and Minerals and Marwan Shafiq Salloum, President of CCED, sign the agreement.

achieving the maximum benefit from oil and gas resources, and using modern and sustainable technologies in exploration and prospecting operations.”

Marwan Shafiq Salloum, CEO of CC Energy Development, added: “We are proud of our partnership extending for more than 15 years with the Ministry,

which has resulted in our investments in Blocks 3 and 4.

We are pleased to consolidate this cooperation and sign two agreements for concession areas 38 and 74. We look forward to enhancing our investments in Sultanate of Oman in the coming years.”

He added: “We are optimistic

about oil and gas exploration work in the two regions, and we will employ all our knowledge, experience, and technology, as we hope to discover commercial quantities, which will raise the ceiling of production in Oman, adding this to the success the company has achieved in concession areas 3 and 4.”

Many airlines ground Boeing 737 MAX 9 jets for safety checks

NEW YORK: US authorities have appealed for public help as they begin a daylight search near Portland, Oregon, on Sunday for a missing panel that blew off a new Boeing 737 MAX 9 jet during a flight on Friday, as operators worldwide ground many of the aircraft for safety checks.

The so-called door plug tore off the left side of an Alaskan Airlines jet following takeoff from Portland en route to Ontario, California, forcing pilots to turn back and land safely with all 171 passengers and six crew on board, with only a few minor injuries reported.

The panel, put in place on some planes in lieu of an additional emergency exit, is likely to have landed somewhere in the western suburbs of Portland, but has not yet been found.

“I imagine this was a pretty terrifying event. We don’t often talk about psychological injuries but I am sure that occurred here,” National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) Chair Jennifer Homendy told reporters on Saturday, adding that it was too early to say what caused the event.

The accident has put Boeing back under scrutiny as it awaits certification of its smaller MAX 7 as well as the larger MAX 10, which is needed to compete with a hot-selling Airbus model.

The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) on Saturday grounded 171 Boeing jets installed with the same panel after the emergency landing of the plane that had been in service for just eight weeks. The grounding is expected to disrupt flight schedules for several days for certain carriers.

The vast majority of that model of plane used in the United States are operated by United Airlines and Alaska Airlines, while Turkish Airlines, Panama’s Copa Airlines and Aeromexico also grounded jets for inspections.

Airlines must inspect the panel and carry out any necessary

repairs. Before US airlines can start flying the planes, the FAA must additionally agree to detailed inspection criteria proposed by Boeing. It was unclear if it would do so on Sunday.

Alaska Airlines halted the use of 18 MAX 9 planes on Saturday that it had resumed using following earlier maintenance checks on the FAA’s order.

On Sunday, it canceled 163 flights, or 21 per cent, and said travel disruptions from the grounding are expected to last through at least mid-week. United canceled 230 flights on Sunday, or 8 per cent of scheduled departures.

The accident is the second to focus attention on the survivability of cabins coming within davs of a collision at

The Alaskan Airlines accident has put Boeing back under scrutiny as it awaits certification of its smaller MAX 7 as well as the larger MAX 10, which is needed to compete with a hot-selling Airbus model

Space: Oman’s next new frontier

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, JAN 7

The Sultanate of Oman made significant strides in its nascent space sector in 2023. Led by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, Oman identified the sector, which was valued globally at \$337 billion in 2021, as a key driver for economic diversification in line with Vision 2040.

The following is a brief recap of the country’s most notable achievements over the past year:

National Space Programme

In January 2023, the Ministry unveiled the National Space Programme — a 10-year framework that aims to put Oman on the global space industry map.

Based on the pillars of economic diversification, capacity building, national security, and environmental reservation, the Ministry aims to implement the executive plan through collaborations with the public and private sectors and civil society.

According to officials, Oman will focus primarily on down-



Oman’s space ambitions centre primarily on down-stream space activities.

stream space activities — terrestrial space operations and services — which account for 90 per cent of the sector’s activities.

The plan identified over 14 investment opportunities mainly targeted at global investors and technology firms. These include: the establishment of space cloud partnerships, satellite ground station hubs, direct receiving stations, a national space observatory among many others.

First spaceport in MENA

In January, the National Aerospace Services Company (NASCOM) announced its plans

of building the first space rocket launch port in Duqm, which the company shared was identified as one of “top 5 most efficient rocket launch latitudes in the world”.

The Etlaq Space Launch Complex will allow for the assembly, testing and launch of commercial, professional and educational rockets. Construction of the complex is expected to begin in the second quarter of this year, and will be fully operational by 2026.

Duqm to get Space Settlement Centre

In July, Global Space and

Technology Company announced its plans of establishing a scientific and economic space zone in al Duqm known as “Zone 88”.

The project will feature a Space Habitat Centre, Commercial Space Launching Area, Unmanned Vehicles Technology Centre, Artificial Intelligence and Advanced Technology Testing area and Ground Station.

Oman’s first satellite launches into space

In November, Oman’s first satellite “Aman-1” launched successfully into orbit onboard SpaceX’s Falcon 9 rocket mission from a California launch base following an earlier failed attempt in January.

The cube-satellite, also known as a non-satellite, is a result of a collaborative effort between Omani Space Company ETCO, data analysis and solutions provider TUATARA, and nanosatellite manufacturer SatRevolution.

The satellite will be used to collect data and images which will be transmuted to ETCO’s ground station in Oman and will cater to wide range of clientele.



A worker walks past Boeing’s new 737 MAX-9 under construction at their production facility in Renton, Washington. – Reuters file photo

Moody’s upgrades Bank Nizwa’s foreign currency rating and base credit assessment

MUSCAT: In a significant development that lauds its strategic growth and resilience, Bank Nizwa, the Sultanate of Oman’s leading Islamic bank, has been recognised for its exceptional performance as Moody’s Investors Service (Moody’s) upgraded its long-term foreign and local currency deposit ratings to Ba1 from Ba2.

Furthermore, Moody’s recent rating action included upgrading Bank Nizwa’s Base Credit Assessment (BCA) and Adjusted BCA ratings from b1 to ba3.

This significant achievement highlights the bank’s outstanding financial prowess and underscores the success of its strategic initiatives.

While the upgraded deposit rating is influenced by government support, the BCA rating serves



as a testament to Bank Nizwa’s standalone creditworthiness. With these upgrades, Bank Nizwa now stands on par with major banks, marking a significant milestone in its journey of excellence in the finance sector.

Commenting on the development, Khaled al Kayed, Chief Executive Officer at Bank Nizwa said, “The recent upgrades by Moody’s are a resounding

acknowledgment of Bank Nizwa’s resilience and stability.

Our robust capitalisation, coupled with the consistent trajectory of improving profitability, has been underscored by these upgrades, further solidifying our position in the financial landscape.”

He added saying, “The upgraded credibility bestowed by Moody’s upon Bank Nizwa

resonates powerfully with both investors and depositors. It signals not only a validation of our financial soundness but also instills confidence in our capacity to navigate economic uncertainties and financial challenges efficiently.

Furthermore, these upgrades represent a reiteration of the core value proposition we extend to our esteemed customers. It emphasises our commitment to

delivering fully Sharia-compliant financial solutions that align with their diverse needs and aspirations.”

Bank Nizwa has made strategic advancements, fostering cautious growth and fortifying Risk Management systems.

This concerted effort is distinctly reflected in the bank’s financial performance metrics and its robust capital position. The stable outlook for Bank Nizwa’s long-term deposit ratings mirrors the stable outlook assigned to the Sovereign Ratings of the Government of Oman.

Within this framework, Moody’s foresees the bank’s resilient solvency buffers playing a pivotal role in balancing factors such as asset risk, concentrated funding, and restricted liquid resources.

NBO inaugurates seamless banking branch in OAA



Special guests, clients and staff inaugurate the new branch.

MUSCAT: The National Bank of Oman (NBO) is delighted to announce the official opening of its new branch in the Oman Automobile Association (OAA) in Muscat.

The opening ceremony witnessed the presence of Brigadier Jamal bin Said al Taie, Director General of Financial Affairs of the Royal Oman Police and NBO’s Board Director, Abdullah Zahran al Hinai, Chief Executive Officer of NBO, esteemed clients and NBO staff.

Tariq Atiq, General Manager and Chief Retail and Digital Banking Officer at National Bank of Oman said: “We are delighted to inaugurate this new branch, which further strengthens our partnership with the Oman Automobile Association.

The branch, with its new look and seamless digital services, reflects our commitment to unlock opportunities for our customers by focusing on customer experience and digital transformation.

The branch features a modern design that is in line with the bank’s updated brand identity and located in the heart of the city for easy access.”

This newly inaugurated branch is just one of several that NBO plans to upgrade in the upcoming period.

This is part of NBO’s initiative to provide digital banking services that meet the needs of all customers and expand the bank’s digital presence in Oman, in line with the country’s digital transformation efforts.

The new branch introduces a 24/7 digital corner offering a variety of services.

A multi-purpose service kiosk conveniently addresses customers’ needs, including opening new accounts, issuing and renewing debit cards, handling cash and check deposits and withdrawals, processing bill payments, as well as an ATM and CDM.

Furthermore, the branch offers a dedicated Sadara Centre.

This exclusive service, crafted for NBO’s Priority Banking customers, offers personalised assistance and a host of premium banking services.

NBO has a partnership with the Oman Automobile Association to further facilitate the bank’s services and digital solutions, while both entities will also cooperate in other initiatives benefiting customers and team members alike.

NBO offers a diverse range of digital banking solutions and services for both its corporate and retail customers, including NBO App and Corporate Internet Banking (CIB) platform.



AAS allows students to track their progress semester by semester.

ZCW officially launches ASAPP and AAS

MUSCAT: Al-Zahra College for Women (ZCW) has formally observed the inauguration of the academic staff annual performance programme (ASAPP) and the academic advising system (AAS), under auspices of Dr Maryam bint Bel Arab al Nabhaniya, Director General of Private Universities and Colleges at the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

The Dean of the College Dr Musallam bin Ali al Maani, pointed out that ZCW has been able, over the past three years, to set forth and make clear by degrees an organised and established procedure for its quality system. As a result, many policies and procedures have been brought into practice to enhance the quality of education within the College.

The launch of ASAPP comes as a translation of the ZCW staff planning and development strategy, which is centred around three main areas, focusing on teaching and learning, scientific research and community service. The launch of AAS also comes as an outcome of the student-centred teaching philosophy adopted by ZCW.

AAS allows students to track their progress semester by semester per their study plan under the guidance of academic adviser. Both ASAPP and AAS were developed internally at ZCW by Omanis.

Bank Muscat hosts special event for customers in Muscat

MUSCAT: In line with its customer-centric vision, and to introduce customers to banking facilities and exclusive offers, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, hosted a special event for customers employed in the public and private sectors in Muscat Governorate, with the aim to consider their feedback and suggestions on the various banking products and services.

The event was attended by Abdunlasir N al Raisi, General Manager — Personal Banking, in addition to other senior officials.

On the occasion, Saleh bin Mohammed al Maaini, Deputy General Manager — Capital Regions, Bank Muscat, said: “Throughout the bank’s long history, we have been keenly and continuously keeping pace with the latest developments in the banking and financial sector.

We are proud of the many achievements so far and we look forward achieving many more

successes in the future. These events are important as they allow us to know more about customers’ feedback regarding the services and facilities offered, which are encouraging factors for development. I would like to take this opportunity to thank our valued customers on their continuous trust with the services and products provided by the bank.”

Addressing the gathering during the event, Radhiya bint Hassan al Lawatiyah, Head of Sales, Bank Muscat, said: “For the past years, Bank Muscat has been focusing on continuously enhancing banking services and facilities for the benefit of its customers across the Sultanate of Oman. We are continuously working to provide the most innovative banking solutions. The world is witnessing rapid changes brought about by the technological developments and digital transformations which have influenced the present



in many aspects including the lifestyle. Bank Muscat is working hard to keep base with the rapid technologies and continuously update customers and keep them well-informed.

We are pleased to once again enhance our partnership with our valued customers and offer them the best benefits and financing services. We will continue organising similar events to work together towards achieving our common goals.”

As a leading financial services provider, Bank Muscat has an extensive branch network with

180 branches and service centres and more than 850 devices, including ATMs, CDMs and omnichannel devices distributed in all governorates.

Bank Muscat is the first choice for more than two million customers in the Sultanate of Oman and plays a major role in enhancing financial inclusion in the country through the innovative products it develops continuously. Bank Muscat’s distinctive services and products reflect its commitment to market leadership in the Sultanate of Oman’s banking sector.

Chery Tiggo 8 series impresses with L2 level advanced driver assistance system

MUSCAT: With the rapid development of connectivity technology and artificial intelligence, “driverless” is considered the ultimate direction of autonomous driving.

In the process of realising the implementation of “driverless”, the mass production of ADAS not only provides automobile manufacturers with more differentiated product design but also delivers an improved driving experience and safety assurance for consumers.

Chery’s autonomous driving technology boasts over a decade of profound accumulation. From 2010 to 2013, Chery engaged in R&D of active safety technology, successfully implementing vehicle detection, FCW (forward collision warning), lane detection, and LDW (lane departure warning), among other technologies.

In 2014, Chery began constructing an intelligent driving platform and completed



the development of the first generation of intelligent vehicles.

By 2016, Chery’s second generation of intelligent vehicles had achieved autonomous driving based on map and positioning systems. In 2017, Chery achieved the development of the third generation of autonomous driving vehicles, with functionalities encompassing autonomous driving in high-speed road conditions and fixed areas within urban zones.

Currently, Chery has independently mastered intelligent processing technologies such as lane detection, millimetre-wave radar data processing, vehicle detection, local path planning, vehicle low-level control, and map data processing, achieving technological breakthroughs in the field of intelligent driving.

At the “Chery Tech Day 2023”, Chery unveiled two new development routes in the field

of intelligent driving. The first is the Chery Pilot, directly aimed at mass-produced vehicles.

Chery has already implemented the Chery Pilot 2.0 system, capable of achieving L2 level ADAS capabilities. The Chery Pilot 3.0 system can achieve L2 + level high-speed NOA (Navigation on AutoPilot) and is expected to enter mass production in the second quarter of 2024.

The Chery Pilot 4.0 system will realise L2++ level urban NOA capabilities and is expected to enter mass production in the first quarter of 2025. The second route is the L4 level solution developed around Robotaxi, named “Drive”.

In Oman, Chery vehicles are distributed by Saud Bahwan Group. For the latest press releases, test drive requests and more, please visit www.chery.om, www.youtube.com/@OmanChery, www.facebook.com/CheryAutoOman, and www.instagram.com/cheryoman.

Procurement process kicks off for 500 MW Ibri III Solar IPP

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 7

In alignment with Oman Vision 2040 and its commitment to Net-Zero plans, Nama Power and Water Procurement (PWP), is preparing to initiate a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the Ibri III Solar Independent Power Project (IPP).

The proposed 500 MW capacity solar PV project is planned for implementation on a 10 million m2 site adjoining the existing Ibri II Solar PV project in Al Dhahirah Governorate.

Announcing the initiative, Nama PWP said the new project marks a significant milestone in the pursuit of clean and efficient power generation in Oman.

“As part of its ongoing commitment to fostering sustainability and environment, Nama PWP invites qualified and experienced entities to submit their proposals for the Ibri III Solar IPP project.

The initiative aims to harness state-of-the-art solar technology to deliver a robust and environmentally friendly power solution with an anticipated capacity of 500 megawatts,” it said



THE INITIATIVE AIMS TO HARNESS STATE-OF-THE-ART SOLAR TECHNOLOGY TO DELIVER A ROBUST AND ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY POWER SOLUTION WITH AN ANTICIPATED CAPACITY OF 500 MEGAWATTS.

in a press statement.

The Ibri Solar III IPP, estimate to cost around RO 155 million, is anticipated to achieve its Scheduled Commercial Operation Date (SCOD) by the fourth quarter of 2026.

Ahmed bin Salim al Abri, Acting CEO of Nama PWP, commented: “The Sultanate of Oman has embarked on an

ambitious journey of increasing the renewable energy capacity by 3.84 GW by 2029. This stems from Oman Vision 2040’s strategic direction to support new infrastructure projects geared towards the green economy, green strategies and renewable energy production.

“The proposed renewable energy capacity addition will help the Sultanate of Oman increase the renewable energy proportion as part of the total energy mix to 30% and up to 39% by 2030 and 2040 respectively,” Al Abri further noted.

Ibri III Solar will help advance PWP’s renewable energy contribution of 1.5 TWh annually and reinforcing its commitment

to fostering sustainable practices within the power sector and contributing to the Net-Zero target.

It will also contribute to CO2 emission reductions by 505,000 tonnes per annum at full capacity.

As Nama PWP spearheads the procurement for this innovative project, it underscores the organisation’s dedication to driving advancements in power and water infrastructure while promoting environmentally conscious technologies.

“We encourage experienced and qualified entities to participate actively in this process, contributing to the realisation of a greener and more resilient energy future,” the power procurer said. The Ibri Solar III IPP stands as a testament to Nama PWP’s ongoing efforts to usher in a sustainable and resilient energy future for the communities it serves, it added.

A member of Nama Group, Nama PWP is the exclusive procurer of power and water for Independent Power Projects (IPP), Independent Water and Power Projects (IWPP), and Independent Water Projects (IWP) in the Sultanate of Oman.

Oman adopts ISO standards to enhance UAV quality and safety

NASRULAH AL AMI

MUSCAT, JAN 7

The Directorate General of Specifications and Metrology (DGSM) within the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), has announced the adoption of two key ISO standards showcasing the nation’s commitment to advancing innovation in the design of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV).

One of the adopted standards, ISO 24352:2023, now recognised as Omani standard OS ISO 24352:2023, stipulates the technical requirements and testing methods for small unmanned aircraft electric power systems. This comprehensive framework ensures the efficiency and safety of electric power systems for drones with a maximum takeoff mass of less than 25 kg.

The second standard, ISO 24355:2023, now Omani standard OS ISO 24355:2023, focuses on the flight control system for civil small and light multicopter unmanned aircraft systems. Addressing configuration, functional requirements, and performance criteria, this standard contributes to the safe and reliable operation of drones with multiple rotors weighing less than or equal to 25 kg.

According to Qais bin Saleh al Qasbi, Specialist in Information Specifications and Information Technology at the DGSM, the adoption of these international standards is driven by the Ministry’s dedication to promoting



technical excellence and ensuring the safe integration of unmanned aerial vehicles into Oman’s airspace.

“These standards not only provide technical specifications but also contribute to the overall quality, safety, and environmental protection in line with international best practices. By adhering to these standards, Oman is fostering a balanced and efficient approach to drone governance,” highlighted Al Qasbi.

Both adopted technical specifications, OS ISO 24352:2023 and OS ISO 24355:2023, are now available for purchase by the public at the Standards Store of the MoCIIP.

This move aims to facilitate access to these standards for drone operators, manufacturers, and regulatory authorities, ensuring a widespread understanding and implementation of the specified technical requirements.

The adoption of these ISO standards aligns with the broader vision of the MoCIIP and the nation. As emphasised by Al Qasbi, this step contributes to meeting the requirements of traders, manufacturers, and regulatory authorities while fostering economic, environmental, and societal sustainability.

Asyad harnesses wind power to transform shipping



MUSCAT: The maritime industry contributes around 3% of global greenhouse gas emissions, mainly due to oceangoing vessels relying on heavy-fuel oil. To combat this, wind power emerges as a game-changer, offering a promising solution. Ships, once reliant on wind, now lead efforts to limit/ reduce the usage of fossil fuels, with rotor sails emerging as a key technology in this transition.

In the dynamic sphere of sustainable shipping, Asyad Group strides boldly towards a greener future. As global industries grapple with the urgency of combating climate change, Asyad takes the helm in adopting wind-assisted propulsion technology, harnessing the transformative power of the winds to navigate this crucial transition.

Asyad’s commitment to sustainability is exemplified by its collaboration with Vale, the global mining company, and Anemoi Marine Technologies, a UK-based supplier of wind-assisted propulsion technology. The partnership involves installing five rotor sails, also known as ‘Flettner rotors,’ on the Very Large Ore Carrier (VLOC) Sohar Max, a 400,000-deadweight tonnage (dwt) Valemax vessel, owned by Asyad and leased by Vale in Oman.

These cylindrical sails, standing at an impressive 35 meters tall and 5 metres in diameter, are set to revolutionise the vessel’s propulsion system. What sets this project apart is the use of Anemoi’s folding deployment system, allowing the sails to be folded from a vertical position. This innovation minimises the impact on air draught and cargo handling operations, showcasing a thoughtful approach to integration.

The significance of this endeavour extends beyond a single vessel. Asyad’s collaboration with Anemoi aligns with the broader industry trend of embracing wind-assisted propulsion to address environmental concerns. Rotor sails, by harnessing wind power, offer additional thrust and significantly improve energy efficiency, leading to substantial cuts in carbon emissions.

The Valemax vessels, which typically navigate deep-sea routes between Brazil, China, and the Middle East, are well-suited for wind propulsion. Asyad’s proactive approach to integrating Anemoi rotor sails is projected to yield remarkable results, with an anticipated 6% reduction in fuel consumption and a corresponding decrease of up to 3,000 tonnes of CO2 equivalent emissions per ship annually.

Oman’s 2024 Budget: A blueprint for action



AV MANOHAR

The recently released 2024 Oman Budget sets out the objectives, priorities and strategies for achieving an all-round improvement in the socio-economic structure of the Sultanate of Oman for the year 2024.

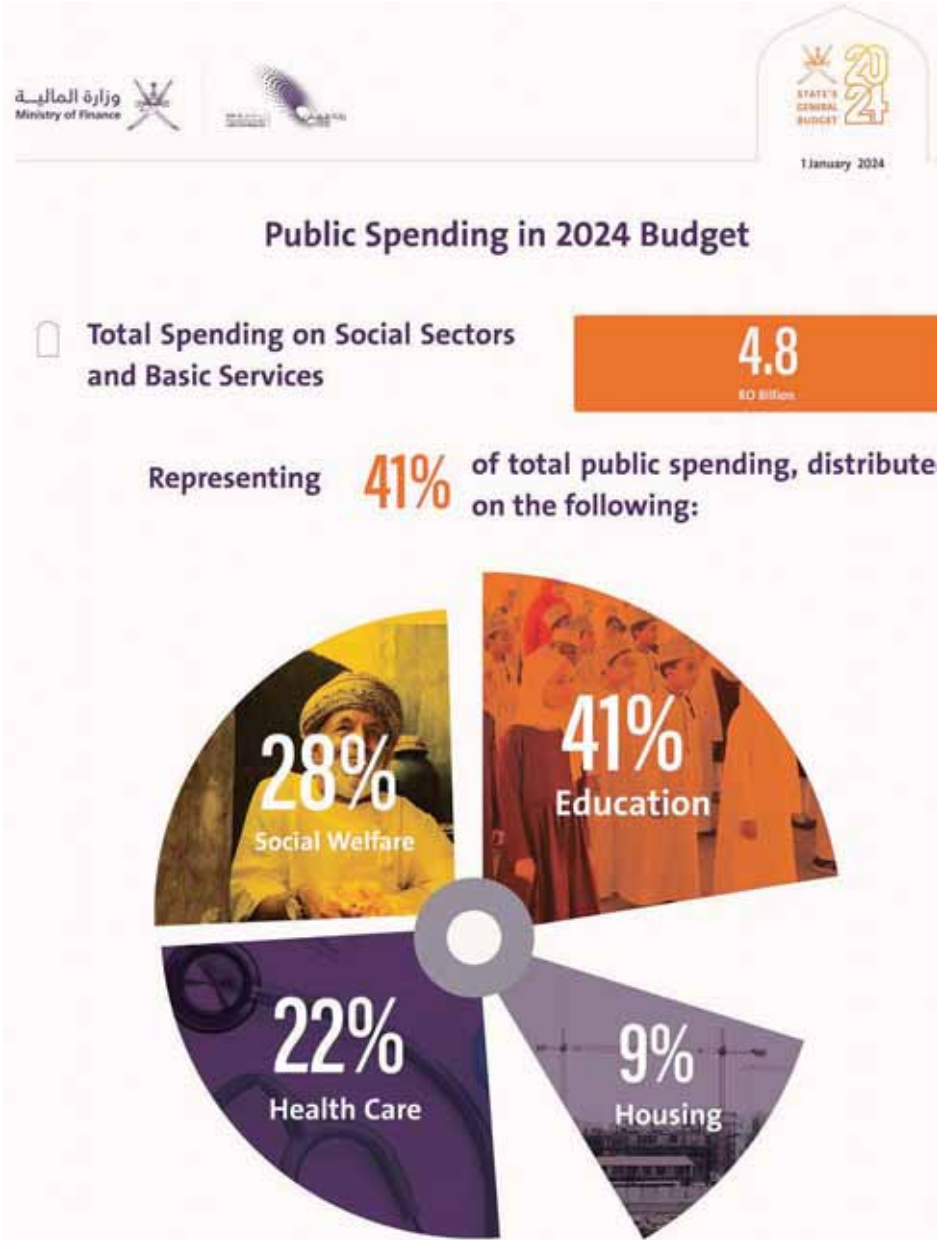
The budget has been crafted against the backdrop of numerous global challenges, as indicated by the International Monetary Fund, such as geo-political tensions, weakening economic growth, oil price volatility, increasing interest rates, climate change and natural disasters, which have all had a role in undermining global financial stability with consequences for individual countries as well.

The 2024 Budget lays down the guideposts for accelerating economic growth and creating a conducive business environment.

Priority areas identified by the Ministry of Finance are as follows: achieving fiscal sustainability, stimulating national economy, accelerating non-oil revenue, improving spending efficiency, attracting foreign investments, controlling deficit, lowering public debt, stabilising inflation, sustaining employment creation, implementing high-priority projects, fulfilling basic needs, continuing welfare subsidies and harnessing human resources.

It is heartening to note that the proactive steps taken in the earlier years towards the management of the economy under the broad framework of the Tenth Five Year Plan (2021 – 2025) have yielded positive results during 2021 to 2023.

The fiscal deficit declined by RO 1,233 million in 2021, with a fiscal



surplus of RO 1,146 million achieved in 2022, and a further surplus of RO 931 million anticipated in 2023.

Going by the Ministry’s track record in improving the country’s fiscal performance, it is likely that Fiscal 2024 will yield a reasonable surplus as well, although the 2024 Budget projects a fiscal deficit of RO 640 million.

Any upward swing in average oil prices above \$60 per barrel – the assumed price for the 2024 Budget - against the global average of USD 80 projected by IMF for 2024, will augur well for this optimism and favourable shift in the fiscal position.

In terms of real GDP growth, the main indicator for assessing the efficiency of

the economy, Oman will achieve 2.3% in 2023 and 2.4% in 2024.

However, the biggest impetus being given towards acceleration of investments in projects in the country will pave the way for enhancing the income stream and contributing to the growth of the economy in the future.

A notable achievement is the reduction in the public debt by RO 2.4 billion in 2023 to RO 15.2 billion in 2023, down from RO 17.6 billion in 2022.

The surplus generated from oil revenue has been substantially deployed to reduce the borrowings and consequently the debt service costs. Debt as a percentage of GDP works out to 35%

now and is aligned with well managed economies.

The expected fiscal deficit of RO 640 million is proposed to be funded by external borrowings of around RO 240 million (as opposed to RO 2 billion in 2020) and RO 400 million from sovereign reserves.

Despite the heightened financial shocks faced globally in 2023, domestic inflation was minimal at 1.03% in 2023, thanks to the measures taken towards curbing inflation in the area of subsidies on food and fuel.

These salient measures, notably the strengthening of public finance and reduction in public debt, coupled with the rebound in oil prices, have resulted in enhancing the Credit Rating from the various agencies such as Moody’s, S&P and Fitch and the outlook for Oman.

This will set the trend for generating higher investment inflows into the country.

While analysing the income stream, the ratio between hydrocarbons (Oil & Gas) and non-hydrocarbons was 72:28 in 2023, and is projected to become 68:32 in 2024, which is indeed a good development.

The 5.7% increase in non-oil revenue by RO 190 million has made this shift a welcome feature.

Gross revenue is estimated to grow by 9.5% in 2024 to touch RO 11,010 million (comprising hydrocarbon revenue RO 7,490 million and non-hydrocarbon revenue along with taxes aggregating to RO 3,520 million). Gross spending is likely to go up by 2.6% to RO 11,650 million.

As expenditure is more than revenue, the 2024 Budget comes a fiscal deficit of RO 640 million, representing 6% of the total revenue and 1.5% of the GDP.

Overall, the 2024 Budget a well-crafted blueprint for action, comprehensively covering different facets of the economy and balancing between the challenges on hand and the objectives set for achievement in the future.

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Opportunity Oman: Strategic partnership with China



DR YOUSUF BIN HAMED
AL BALUSHI

The author is the founder and CEO of Smart Investment Gateway; email: yousufh@omaninvestgateway.com

In the ever-evolving landscape of global politics and economics, countries are increasingly seeking strategic alliances to secure their future. This is particularly true for the Sultanate of Oman, which sits at a crossroads between Asia, Africa, and Europe. With its rich natural resources and strategic location, Oman is eyeing a potential strategic partnership with China, a powerhouse in the global market.

A strategic relationship between nations implies a high level of cooperation across economic, political, and security dimensions. This collaboration involves clearly defined frameworks, action plans, and shared benefits from joint projects.

It's crucial to emphasise that a strategic partnership doesn't entail complete alignment of political, security, and economic positions but rather signifies an expansion of shared interests. Establishing such a partnership lays the institutional groundwork to enhance cooperation and navigate geopolitical and geo-economic shifts.

Oman's inclination towards a strategic partnership with China is multi-faceted. China, as the world's second-largest economy, boasts a GDP of approximately \$7.94 trillion, excelling in both exports and imports. In 2021, China's e-commerce market reached \$1 trillion, with substantial foreign currency reserves totalling \$3 trillion. Its

massive population of 1.4 billion further underscores its economic prowess. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Oman, actively engage in trade with China, with a trade volume exceeding \$200 billion. China's role in importing oil from the Gulf nations, with Oman being a significant contributor, exemplifies the symbiotic relationship. Despite historical ties, Oman's relations with China, though established in 1978, need to evolve to match the ambition and depth seen in China's relations with other Gulf Arab states.

To capitalise on historical connections and Oman's strategic location, the question arises: How can Oman elevate its relationship with China to a genuine strategic partnership, leveraging China's expertise to diversify its economy and stimulate local manufacturing?

In 2022, the trade volume between China and Oman reached \$40.45 billion, making Oman China's fourth-largest trading partner in the Arab world. Despite Oman's significant contribution to China's oil needs, Chinese investments in Oman remain below the desired level.

Reasons supporting a deeper engagement include Oman's Vision 2040 goals, China's economic efficiency, geopolitical shifts, Oman's strategic location for trade, and its role as an energy source for China.

The future of the Oman-China partnership holds promise, given China's soft approach to regional security in the Middle East and its increasing energy needs.

However, maximising the benefits necessitates a deeper understanding of the Chinese market, language barriers addressed through educational initiatives, and accelerated negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement between China and the GCC countries.

To capitalise on historical connections and Oman's strategic location, the question arises: How can Oman elevate its relationship with China to a genuine



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strategic partnership, leveraging China's expertise to diversify its economy and stimulate local manufacturing?

China's assistance in Oman's economic diversification, production expansion, and technological advancements is crucial. The establishment of a Free Trade Agreement and collaboration on massive economic projects further strengthens this partnership. Addressing the challenge of knowledge and technology transfer is vital for Oman to fully benefit from Chinese investments.

Today, we can affirm that the geopolitical circumstances support this partnership, believing that the world map is shifting both politically and economically through the establishment of massive economic projects between the two parties, bearing political, security, and economic dimensions.

In addition to the aforementioned points, it is essential to capitalise on Chinese investments in the Sultanate of Oman, particularly concerning

the transfer of technology, expertise, and knowledge to Omani companies.

Realities indicate a significant challenge in knowledge and technology transfer, and the potential for the Omani economy to benefit from Chinese investments in this regard.

A strategic partnership between China and Oman unlocks exciting prospects for Omani businesses, expanding access to resources, knowledge, and markets. Here are some key areas where Omani players can thrive:

CAPITALISING ON CHINA'S EXPERTISE

Infrastructure development: Oman can tap into China's vast experience in building ports, roads, and logistics hubs to upgrade its own infrastructure, enhancing its regional connectivity and attracting further investment.

Technology transfer: Partnering with Chinese companies can provide Omani businesses with access to cutting-

edge technologies in areas like renewable energy, 5G, and AI, boosting their competitiveness and innovation.

Manufacturing and industrial upgrades: Chinese expertise in efficient production methods and supply chain management can help Omani manufacturers improve quality, reduce costs, and access larger markets.

DIVERSIFYING EXPORTS AND REACHING NEW MARKETS

Free trade agreement: A Free Trade Agreement with China and the GCC opens doors for Omani exporters to reach a massive consumer market with reduced tariffs. Products like food, minerals, and tourism services can find new demand.

E-commerce platforms: Partnering with established Chinese e-commerce platforms like Alibaba can provide Omani businesses with direct access to millions of Chinese consumers, promoting their unique products and services. Tourism and hospitality: Omani companies

can cater to the growing Chinese tourist market by developing eco-tourism packages, luxury resorts, and cultural experiences, promoting Omani culture and generating significant revenue.

STRENGTHENING DOMESTIC CAPABILITIES

Human resource development: Collaboration with Chinese institutions can provide Omani professionals with training in Mandarin, business practices, and technical skills, enhancing their employability and preparing them for international partnerships.

Joint ventures and knowledge sharing: Joint ventures with Chinese companies can allow Omani businesses to acquire new production techniques, marketing strategies, and management skills, contributing to sustainable growth and local expertise development.

Financial cooperation: Chinese investment banks and financial institutions can provide access to funding and financing options for Omani businesses, supporting their expansion and entrepreneurial ventures.

EMBRACING THE FUTURE: A SHARED VISION

In conclusion, the evolving geopolitical landscape supports a deeper partnership between Oman and China. Oman, in its pursuit of strategic alliances, must leverage its strengths, international relationships, and Vision 2040 objectives. The collaboration with China can enhance living standards, generate job opportunities, increase income, and achieve financial sustainability, aligning with the shared vision for the future.

This collaborative journey represents not only a business transaction but also a gateway to a future marked by innovation, sustainability, and shared prosperity. As these two nations embark on this transformative alliance, the world watches with anticipation, expecting nothing short of a partnership that will shape the economic landscape for years to come.

Navigating Oman's SME revolution



NAJAH AL RIYAMI

The author is a media and communication Master's graduate skilled in diverse writing formats, specialising in storytelling, branding, and in-depth journalism.

Oman's commitment to economic diversification and fostering innovation has led it to become a hotspot for entrepreneurs seeking to launch Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), with numerous companies and resources available to help you craft your business every step of the way.

While starting a SMEs is a journey filled with promises, it is

not without obstacles.

Shatha al Maskiry, Country MD of Protiviti Oman, shares her advice on navigating the pathway across Oman's entrepreneurial landscape, explaining "in a market with low spending power, SMEs must consider various factors to navigate challenges and scale effectively.

Firstly, prioritise being customer-centric — understand market dynamics, economic conditions, and consumer behaviours."

This is evident in the statistics of today's hypercompetitive market, with up to 89% of consumers switching to a competitor after a poor customer experience (Harris Interactive), while good brand customer experience generates 5.7x more revenue than competitors who fall short (RCE).

She stresses a critical factor to consider, advising the entrepreneur to "align their business model with the needs and financial capabilities of target customers," explaining "this is an area requiring constant attention as it is subject to change

influenced by external factors beyond our control".

By tailoring their business models and product offerings to suit the financial capabilities and preferences of their target customers, SMEs can enhance their chances of success."

Succeeding the challenges of today's low-spending market landscapes depends on understanding and adapting to economic conditions that directly influence consumer behaviour. Economic conditions play a pivotal role in shaping consumer behavior within these markets.

As Shatha advises, "Today's customers seek new experiences and value for money, so focus on essentials and maintain lean operations by remaining resilient, agile, and adaptable.

Continuously optimise your processes to enhance efficiency, and negotiate wisely with suppliers to reduce costs."

In markets with limited spending power, prioritising customer-centricity goes beyond understanding, and

actively engages with consumers by soliciting feedback, and continuously seeking to improve products or services to stay up to date with evolving needs.

Another aspect to consider is utilising your resources efficiently, specifically, she advises SMEs to "utilise digital marketing strategically to minimise your marketing budget; social media is a powerful tool for reaching and engaging customers.

Pay attention to customer feedback, as customer loyalty is crucial for business sustainability. Loyal customers serve as valuable brand advocates, significantly contributing to our business growth and sustainability."

Flexibility and adaptability is another key to the success of your SME, as Shatha explains that implementing a flexible pricing model attracts a broader customer base, and advises the entrepreneur to "actively solicit customer feedback and iterate your products or services to meet evolving needs and preferences."

She stresses the importance

of collaboration, advising us to "embrace partnerships and collaborations to share resources, reduce costs, diversify products/services, raise funds for expansion, or access new markets," explaining, "the power of collaboration can be instrumental in overcoming challenges and fostering growth".

To conclude, we leave you with the thought that standing out in a crowded market goes beyond just the product or service. It involves leveraging location advantage and crafting a compelling, unique value proposition.

Shatha stresses that "in a market cluttered with copycats, our emphasis on strategic location and a distinctive value proposition sets us apart". Recognise that simply offering the same product or service isn't enough. Consistency in delivering superior quality, both in offerings and service, forms the cornerstone of an SME's identity.

While others may focus solely on aesthetics, a successful SME will prioritise a seamless blend of exceptional product/service

quality and customer experience, to ensure that each interaction with us isn't just about ambiance but an unwavering dedication to excellence, setting us apart from the sea of competitors.

In essence, the landscape for SMEs in Oman, amid challenges of low-spending markets, demands a comprehensive approach. Shatha al Maskiry's insightful guidance underlines the necessity of customer-centricity, adaptability, and resource optimisation.

Thriving in such markets requires not only understanding economic conditions shaping consumer behaviour but also actively engaging with customers to deliver exceptional value.

Moreover, the emphasis on uniqueness, quality, and customer experience differentiates successful SMEs. By weaving together innovation, adaptability, and customer focus, SMEs in Oman can navigate challenges, carve a niche, and thrive in the vibrant landscape, setting themselves apart in a market crowded with competition.

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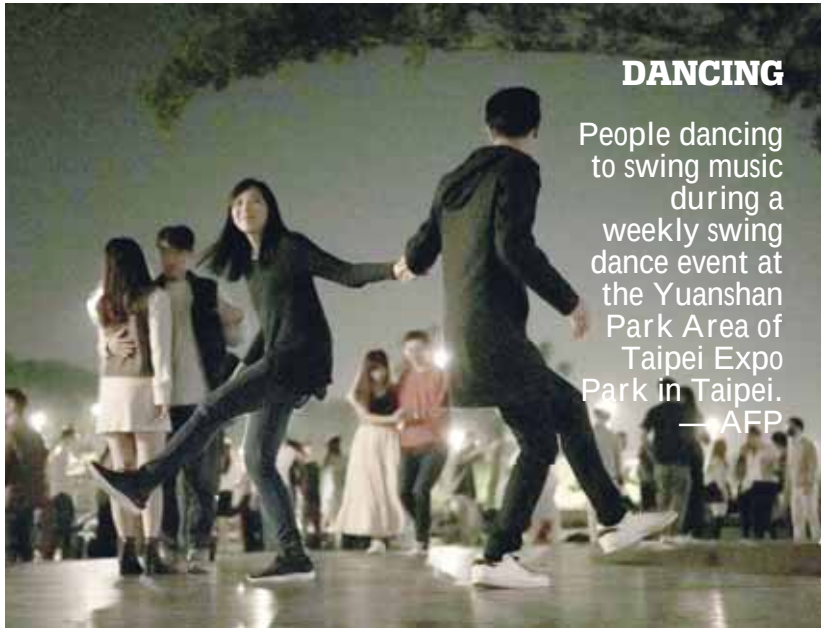
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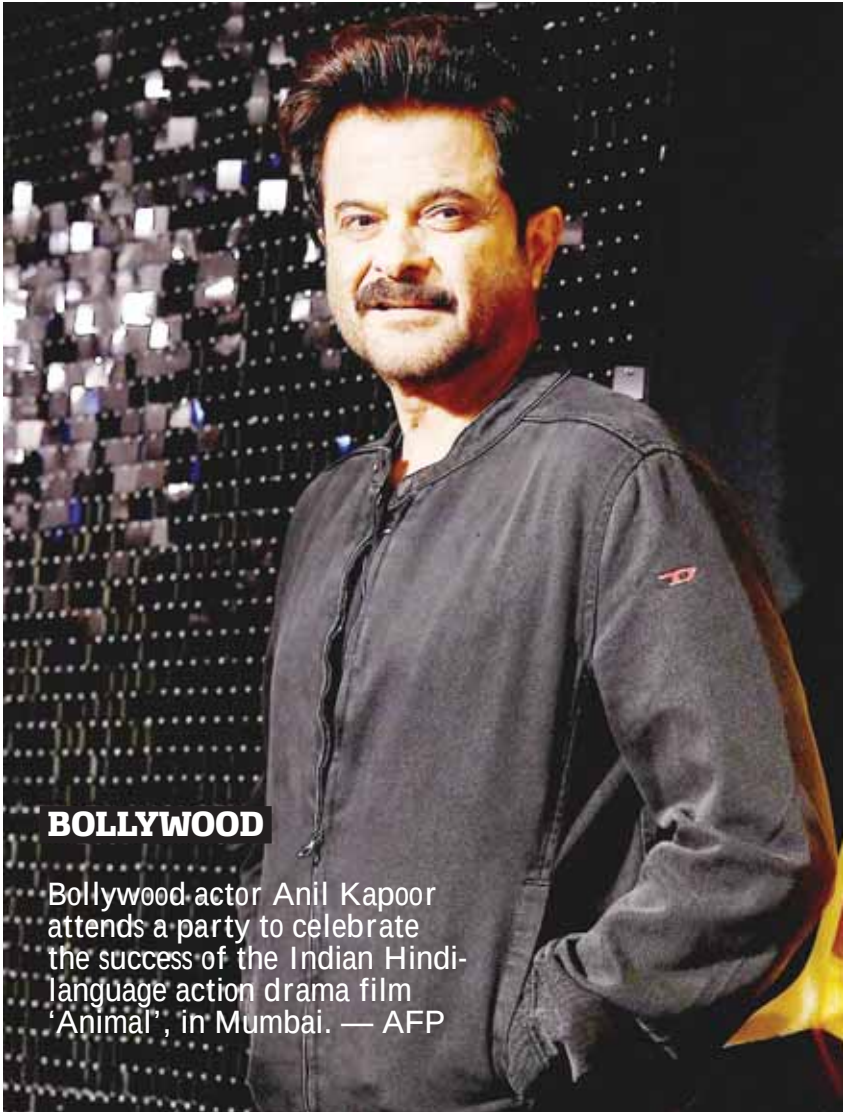
MUSIC

Dutch violinist Andre Rieu performs during a New Year's concert in the Ziggo Dome, in Amsterdam. — AFP



DANCING

People dancing to swing music during a weekly swing dance event at the Yuanshan Park Area of Taipei Expo Park in Taipei. — AFP



BOLLYWOOD

Bollywood actor Anil Kapoor attends a party to celebrate the success of the Indian Hindi-language action drama film 'Animal', in Mumbai. — AFP



ACTOR

Actor Christian Oliver with his family arrives for the premiere of 'Home' at the Regency Village theatre in Westwood, California— AFP



TRAVEL

Snow and rain falls as people visit Times Square in New York. — AFP

art & life

MONDAY | JANUARY 8, 2024 | JUMADA AL THANIA 25, 1445 AH | OMAN OBSERVER | www.omanobserver.om | features@omanobserver.om



In Colombia, rare bird flaunts male and female feathers

ON THE RIGHT SIDE of its body, the bird flaunted the typical blue plumage and black head of the male Green Honeycreeper. On the left, it was a beautiful grass green. According to experts, the specimen spotted in Colombia was a rare example of "bilateral gynandromorphy" -- a condition in which one side of an animal exhibits male characteristics and the other female.

Amateur photographer John Murillo said he first spotted the unique bird through his camera lens when it landed on a feeder to enjoy a meal of bananas and grapes at a nature reserve in Villamaria in Colombia's west in late 2019. It was then observed by Murillo and experts for more than a year, but never captured. In an article published last

month in the Journal of Field Ornithology, Murillo and a group of bird scientists report the first recorded observation of gynandromorphy in a living Green Honeycreeper (Chlorophanes spiza.) Green Honeycreepers are small birds found in the tropics from southern Mexico to Brazil. Murillo, 56, said he felt very fortunate to have observed some

thing "very different from anything we have seen." He also recounted the bird's "strange" behaviour: "it was always alone" at the feeder. — AFP

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AROUND THE WORLD



Navajo object to deposit human remains on Moon

THE UNITED STATES will soon launch its first spacecraft to attempt a soft lunar landing since the Apollo era, in a historic collaboration with the private sector — but not everyone is celebrating. The Navajo Nation, America's largest Indigenous tribe, has raised concerns over the presence of human cremated remains on the lander vehicle, calling the mission a “desecration” of the Moon which holds a sacred place in their culture.

On January 8, Pittsburgh-based Astrobotic's Peregrine lander is set to hitch a ride on a giant United Launch Alliance Vulcan Centaur rocket making its maiden voyage under a NASA commercial partnership aimed at saving the US space agency money.

Peregrine's scientific instruments will probe for lunar surface radiation, helping NASA better prepare for crewed missions going

there later this decade under the Artemis programme.

But the boxy robot's manifest also includes payloads from two companies — Elysium Space and Celestis — that will contain cremated remains and DNA to stay on the Moon, inside the lander, forever.

While Elysium hasn't offered details, Celestis has 69 individual “participants” including late Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry, sci-fi author Arthur C Clarke, and a dog named Indica-Noodle Fabiano.

Customers paid prices starting at \$12,995, according to the company's website.

In a December 21 letter addressed to officials at NASA and the Department of Transportation, Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren expressed what he called “our deep concern and profound disappointment regarding a matter of utmost importance,” and

called for NASA to delay the launch.

“The Moon holds a sacred position in many Indigenous cultures, including ours,” Nygren wrote.

“The act of depositing human remains and other materials, which could be perceived as discards in any other location, on the Moon is tantamount to desecration of this sacred space.”

NASA PROMISES MEETING

Nygren added the situation was reminiscent of the Lunar Prospector mission launched in 1998 by NASA which intentionally crashed a probe into the Moon's surface. On board were the remains of renowned geologist Eugene Shoemaker.

Then, too, the Navajo voiced objections. NASA apologised and committed to consult with Native Americans in future, according to a contemporary report in The Spokesman-Review of Spokane,

Washington.

NASA's deputy associate administrator for exploration Joel Kearns said on Thursday an intergovernmental team had arranged a meeting with the Navajo Nation, but added the agency had no control over its private partner's payloads.

“We take concerns expressed from the Navajo Nation very, very, seriously, and we think we're going to be continuing on this conversation,” Kearns told reporters.

Celestis was less conciliatory.

“We respect all cultures' right to engage in religious practices, but no single culture or religion should exercise a veto on space missions based on religious tenets,” the company said.

Denying that the mission “desecrates the Moon,” it stressed the material would remain aboard the lander rather than being deposited on the surface. — **AFP**

ANIMALS



Spain police investigate suspected poisoning of 47 cats

SPANISH POLICE said on Thursday they had opened an investigation into the suspected poisoning of nearly 50 street cats that could see the perpetrators serving several years' jail time under a new animal welfare law.

The incident occurred in La Carlota village just outside the southern city of Cordoba, with local residents discovering the bodies of at least 10 cats on December 31 at the local dump where the colony was based.

They alerted the animal rights party PACMA which on Tuesday filed a complaint with the Guardia Civil police over “the mass poisoning of a 47-strong feline colony”.

“Some of the animals were found inside nearby containers while others were lying in the street with only one survivor, a young male cat which is in very poor state,” said the complaint, a copy of which was seen by AFP.

The rest of the cats had disappeared, with a PACMA spokeswoman saying they were believed to have died in the nearby woods after the poison took hold.

In response, officers from the Guardia Civil's nature protection service Seprona were dispatched to the scene on Wednesday to investigate, a spokesman for the force said.

“They are looking into whether the deaths were due to poisoning or from other causes. And if there was a crime, to identify the culprits,” he added.

Under terms of a new law that came into force in September, anyone found guilty of cruelty leading to an animal's death could face up to three years behind bars, up from a previous penalty of 18 months.

In a separate operation, police said on Thursday they had smashed a ring which allegedly imported puppies from Hungary and Slovakia and then sold them in Spain with forged documents.

Officers arrested eight people and rescued over 100 animals during four searches they carried out as part of the operation, a police statement said. — **AFP**

Bahla's historical defensible wall

LEGENDS

BY Buthaina Al Riyami

Bahla, a historical town in the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, is one of the well-known governorates in the Sultanate of Oman. Bahla shines as a historical town that embraces as much of a social and cultural document that reflects its people's beliefs and qualities as the great wall that embraces the town.

While the Bahla wall surrounds the town, there are innumerable thoughts and beliefs gathered to find out how a narration interprets the existence of the wall.

The real narration, which holds concrete evidence establishes beyond doubt who the real founder is which faded into oblivion. However, townspeople have passed down from generation to generation as different narrations.

Under the spot of moonlight, when children resort to their mothers and grandmothers' laps, their mothers and grandmothers start to pass down narrations that they received from the older generations.

Legends and narratives that are related to Bahla's wall always have their fair share of oral narration that blares in Bahla's night narrations.



While there are many legends and narrations. But one that takes the lion's share outweighs the beliefs that show that the wall was built by two witches. The narration goes as: "In Bahla, there were two witches who were sisters, and they were called Matha and Gatha. Matha and Gatha's generous spirit aura fills the town. They got to know magic and devoted their abilities to magic and supernatural power in aiding people, in Bahla, which guaranteed them townspeople's devotion and acceptance.

In their day, there was a sprawling city close to them, famous for its great extension called Nizwa. The governor of the city was planning to colonise Bahla. Colonisation and war brought misery to the people of Bahla and they were forced to pay tribute. The burden and suffering of the people in Bahla were increasing day after day.

As usual, the two sisters Initiated to aid people in the town. Thus, they decided to act one night without anyone knowing and the next morning the people of the city were surprised by a great wall surrounding the town.