

HM greets Syria, Slovakia

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Dr Bashar Al Assad of the Syrian Arab Republic, on his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of good health and happiness to President Al Assad. His Majesty the Sultan has sent a cable of congratulations to President Peter Pellegrini on him being elected as a President for the Republic of Slovakia. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sentiments to President Pellegrini.

SUNRISE - 05:44 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR - 04:26 AM

DHUHR - 12:11 PM

ASR - 03:39 PM

MAGHRIB - 06:34 PM

ISHA - 07:47 PM



HM condolences conveyed to families

14 SHELTERS OPENED AS HEAVY RAINS REPORTED IN GOVERNORATES



Heavy rains accompanied with strong downdraft winds and hail were reported in many wilayats on Tuesday. – ONA

CAA advises to take precautions during rains

For safety, online classes to continue in schools

Overflowing wadis rip into roads in wilayats

Businesses told to ensure safety of workers

Precautionary evacuations in Musandam

AL MUDHAIBI: Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, conveyed condolences and sympathy of His Majesty to families of the pupils who died in Samad Al Shan in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate as a result of heavy rains and gushing floods during the current adverse weather condition.

His Majesty prayed to the Almighty Allah to have mercy on the deceased and grant their families solace and patience to bear the loss.

Meanwhile, heavy thunderstorms (30-100 mm) accompanied with strong downdraft winds and hail expected tonight and on Wednesday morning over governorates of Musandam, Al Buraimi,

Al Dhahirah, Al Batinah North, Al Dakhiliyah, Muscat, Al Batinah South, Al Sharqiyah South and Al Sharqiyah North and the northern parts of Al Wusta Governorate. Chances of isolated rains occasionally thundershowers predicted over Dhofar Governorate as well.

The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) advises all to take precautions during thunderstorms, avoid crossing wadis and low-lying areas and avoid venturing into sea during the alert period.

ONLINE CLASSES

To ensure the safety of school students, the Ministry of Education said that it has been decided to continue suspension of classes in schools and applying distance

OHRC following up on pupils' deaths

The Omani Human Rights Commission (OHRC) has expressed deep sorrow over the death of children in flash floods during the exceptional weather conditions that prevailed in the country. The commission said it is following up and studying the causes of the incident that claimed so many lives. It also called on the authorities concerned to take all necessary measures and ensure that such painful incidents are not repeated within the framework of what is required by the current laws. The OHRC has requested everyone to take the utmost caution during exceptional weather conditions taking into account children's best interests.



The Royal Navy of Oman, in cooperation with the Coast Guard of the Royal Oman Police, carried out a precautionary evacuation of a number of citizens and residents in Musandam Governorate.

learning in all public, private and foreign schools in all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman on Wednesday, with the exception of the governorates of Dhofar and Al Wusta.

The decision is in view of weather alerts issued by the National Multi-Hazard Early Warning Centre and with reference to the National Committee for Emergency Management's follow-up with the authorities concerned. It was reported that heavy rains are likely to persist due to the current trough that continues to impact different governorates of the Sultanate of Oman. The ministry said that normal work and classes will resume in schools with effect from Thursday. — ONA

Majlis Ash'shura to host Minister of Information

MUSCAT: The Majlis Ash'shura will host Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information, on Monday (April 22), during which he will deliver the Information Ministry's statement during a public session.

The session is part of the 8th regular sitting of the Majlis's first annual convening during the 10th Term (2023-2027).

A day earlier, the Majlis will hold its 7th regular session during which it will discuss the "Draft Media Law" referred by the government. This was revealed by



Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information

Shaikh Ahmed bin Mohammed al Nadabi, Secretary-General of the Majlis Ash'shura.

Al Nadabi said that the statement of the Minister of Information will deal with 12 main topics specified earlier by the Majlis. The minister will elaborate on the Sultanate of Oman's media strategy and policy, laws regulating the media sector in Oman, the ministry's efforts to develop media training, role of Oman News Agency and its daily follow-up and coverage of local, regional and international events.

The statement will focus on investment in 'media making' and the challenges posed to the industry. It will review efforts to develop Omani drama, Governorates' Media and Foreign Media. The deliberations will also cover the extent to which the Government Communication Centre and to activate liaison with government institutions.

The statement will explain how the media handles different social issues and addresses the challenges facing the media sector. — ONA

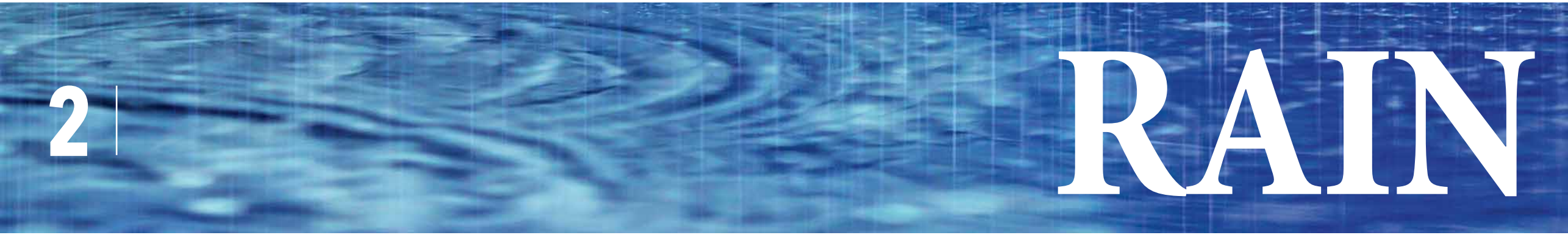
Syrian minister offers condolences to Oman on rain-related deaths



Dr Faisal al Miqdad

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, received a phone call from Dr Faisal al Miqdad, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic, on Tuesday.

During the phone call, Al Miqdad expressed his condolences to the Sultanate of Oman and its people on the victims of the torrential rains witnessed by the Sultanate of Oman. He offered condolences on the death of a number of citizens due to adverse weather conditions that hit the Wilayat of Al Mudhaibi, stressing the solidarity of the Syrian Arab Republic with the government and people of the Sultanate of Oman in this tragedy, wishing the injured a speedy recovery. For his part, the Sayyid Badr expressed his deep appreciation for the feelings expressed by the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates wishing the leadership and people of the Syrian Arab Republic greater stability and progress. – ONA



WADI WATERS IN FULL FORCE RIP INTO ROADS

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

The roads to and from the Wilayat of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate were closed due to fog and rain on Tuesday. Many roads were damaged due to heavy rains after depression set in since Saturday. From 11.00 am to 12.00 on Tuesday, Shinas in Al Batinah North, received 51.6 mm. According to the officials at the weather station of the Civil Aviation Authority, this is a record amount of rain in the Wilayat of Shinas, in just one hour.

The flooded areas required authorities to conduct emergency operations. Operations continued for rescue, evacuation and transport of medical supplies in Al Batinah South Governorate. Heavy rains lashed Al Buraimi, Musandam, Shinas and Suhar. Even petrol stations, parking lots as in the case of Shinas Vocational College, were flooded. Wadi Al Zahimi, Liwa, Wadi Humaira in Shinas are all flowing



Once again the wadis have outlined their clear path to reach their respective basins to drain

in full strength. A wadi cut through Sinaw - Mahut road, and the Beach Road in Suhar has also had the same impact of being ripped apart as the wadi water continued to drain out into the sea. Earlier, people in the village of Qada, located in the Wilayat of Khasab were evacuated and its residents directed to designated shelter places to ensure their safety. People were rescued by ROP helicopters from a flooded Wadi in

Bidiyah. Once again the wadis have outlined their clear path to reach their respective basins to drain. Oman's road network has been known as one of the best road infrastructures overcoming the challenges of mountainous and uneven terrain. The much admired road design might now have to incorporate bridges to aid wadis for an uninterrupted flow to its destination.



Meanwhile, the aerial image showed the continued formation of cumulus clouds over the Arabian Gulf and over the deserts of the Empty Quarter and their movement was towards the governorates of Musandam, Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah and Al Batinah North, with chances of rain of varying intensity, accompanied by active descending winds and occasional hail during Tuesday night and early morning on Wednesday.

The weather forecaster at Oman Met Office explained there were three waves embedded in the same system and on Tuesday it was the third wave to be concluded on early Wednesday morning. "The rest of the day on Wednesday, there would be just some advection and cloud formation over Al Hajar Mountains in addition to some isolated rain," the weather forecaster told the Observer.

According to him, the places that are expected to receive highest amount of rainfall are Musandam, Al Batinah North, Al Dhahirah, Al Batinah South and Al Hajar Mountains. Heavy thunderstorms was accompanied by active downward winds, and hailstones were expected during the late night and on Wednesday morning, with rain amounts ranging between 30-100 mm in the governorates of Musandam, Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah, Al Batinah North, Al Dakhiliyah, Al Batinah South, Muscat, Al Sharqiyah North, Al Sharqiyah South and northern Al Wusta Governorate. Scattered rain that may be thundery at times is also expected to be experienced in Dhofar Governorate. Expectations indicate that the weather condition will begin to gradually weaken and recede starting tomorrow evening, on Wednesday and Thursday morning, with continued chances of scattered rain on the coasts of the Al Wusta and Dhofar Governorates.

Work to restore normalcy in full swing

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
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Authorities removed rocks from the roads, drained water from flooded residential areas, and evacuated people from low-lying places as heavy rains lashed several governorates on Tuesday. The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology along with municipalities have taken the necessary measures to facilitate traffic and ensure safety of motorists. Abdulaziz bin Fahd al Nusairi, Director of the Roads Department in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate, said the ministry is taking all efforts to remove mud and rocks from affected roads. He said that the ministry made a rapid response to clear the Sinaw-Mahout road. The ministry also cleared rocks on the Qurayat-Sur dual carriageway. Similar works are underway on the Al Sharqiya Expressway, Al



Municipalities in rain-hit governorates removed rocks and fallen trees from many streets.

Fulaij-Wadi Bani Jaber road, Al Kamil W'al Wafi-Sur road, Wadi Al Sin and Wadi Bani Kharous roads. Municipalities in rain-hit governorates removed rocks and fallen trees from many streets. It drained water from flooded areas. Authorities evacuated 280 citizens and residents to shelters, six of which are in the Musandam Governorate, one each in Al Buraimi and Al Sharqiyah North.

A number of citizens and residents were transferred as a precaution to shelter centres in the Kamzar and Lima areas and transferred to the Wilayat of Khasab. Royal Oman Police helicopters conducted several rescue operations in coordination with the Royal Air Force of Oman. "There were 90 rescue operations," said Major Rukn Ali bin Abdullah al Kasbi, Department



of Security Relations and Media at the Royal Oman Police. Hospitals are also ready to face health emergency situations. The Royal Oman Police and the Royal Air Force of Oman airlifted seven patients. Dr Mohammad bin Saif al Bousafi, Director of the Emergency Management Centre at the Ministry of Health, said 13 injuries were reported due to traffic accidents and four were rescued from drowning.

Businesses told to protect workers, equipment in light of heavy rains

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, APRIL 16

Most of the governorates witnessed heavy rains accompanied by strong winds, leading to floods in some areas and power outages in other areas. According to local sources, the rains continued in Shinas for long hours, causing floods in low-lying areas and the closure of some roads. Emergency teams are currently working to repair the damage and restore essential services to affected areas. The Ministry of Labor warned business owners to take the necessary precautions to protect workers and property in light of the prevailing weather conditions. The warning included several tips and guidelines for business owners, including regularly following up on weather warnings and updates issued by the official authorities and informing workers of them, and securing all light tools and equipment like cranes in open spaces.

During rains, workers must stay in buildings, avoid low-lying areas, postpone driving vehicles and business trips unless necessary. It also asked to pause excavation during rains. As for hazardous materials, the ministry said that all chemicals and hazardous materials must be secured in a designated place to prevent leakage or damage. Workers should stay away from high areas, work platforms, and scaffolding during weather conditions. Workers should also be warned not to take risks and cross valleys. The employer or his representative must share the emergency numbers of the competent authorities with the workers. Business owners must suspend work in case of danger, while workers are responsible for their safety. Cooperation between employers and workers is essential to ensure the safety of everyone in the work environment.

Condolences and prayers pour in for flood victims

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The Sultanate of Oman bade adieu to the children who lost their lives to flood floods on Sunday as prayers and condolences poured in from different corners of the society. Dr Ahmed al Budhaini, academician and educational counsellor, called the demise of 15 children 'unfortunate'. Rayees Ahmed, President Indian School Ghubra and member of the Board of Directors of Indian Schools Oman, expressed his condolences. "As a parent, my thoughts immediately rush forward to express my heartfelt sympathy to the parents, relatives and friends of

the young ones. The loss of a child is tragic and I can feel their deep sense of loss and helplessness. Having been associated with schools for over three decades, the loss of students in a tragedy upsets me completely," Ahmed said. "Every life is precious, every child sent from the Almighty. The loss of children in a tragedy here in Oman has shaken all of us. We are all mourning the loss of these precious lives. May the Almighty give all the strength and fortitude to deal with this unexpected loss of these very young children. Alex, another academician, associated with a foreign school was deeply saddened by the sudden and tragic death of nine children at Samad on Sunday. "No parent should ever have



to experience the pain of losing a child. May God grant fortitude to the bereaved families to bear the loss and may the blessed souls of these children find eternal rest in God's presence," he said. Lalshmi, a parent, said, "It's

extremely unfortunate to lose so many lives in a single mishap. My heartfelt condolences to the grieving families. In such situations it's very important to understand that every stakeholder should make decisions at their level.

Firstly, it's the family that should pay heed to nature's warning signs and take them seriously. "We as individuals have a bigger responsibility and take our call based on our immediate climatic and geographic conditions. Safety

of children should be the primary concern and the recent pandemic has given us enough tools to tide over the situation. "One such tool is online schooling. Every school must have the infrastructure ready to switch to online mode as and when required keeping children safe as priority." "Secondly, in view of sudden dramatic changes in climate and very unique natural features like flash floods in Oman, places like schools should be built in highlands and away from streams and other water bodies," she said. Bhakti Shetty, a student of a community school, prayed for the children and offered their souls peace. "May God give strength to their families," she said.

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STAY SAFE DURING FLASH FLOODS

KABEER YOUSUF
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Taking preventive measures against flash floods can alleviate the depth of damages, as they are swifter, unpredictable, dangerous and happen within a short time, according to experts.

While developing an evacuation plan and keeping an emergency 'go bag' prepared and handy is a must, one should look

out for information from official channels to follow.

“Follow evacuation orders of the officials and follow guidelines from official channels if there’s an evacuation instructions before or during flash flood from local officials,” reminds the Civil Defence and Ambances Authority (CDAA).

CDAA stated that it is highly advisable to move to a higher ground from low-lying area

immediately if there is a flash flood warning. “Also, one should avoid seeking shelter in a closed attic as it may pose you getting trapped by rising floodwater,” CDAA official said.

“As much as possible, try to avoid direct contact with floodwater that enters the home or premises as submerged rooms, or basement where floodwater has touched can pose electrical shock. If you’re trapped in a car

and a flash flood is imminent or occurring, most importantly, stay calm and never drive around barricades, and instead, try to find an alternate route or abandon the car and save ones life,” he added.

“While there’s a flash flood happening, avoid driving on the bridge over fast-moving water as chances are powerful currents can wash out a bridge. Most importantly, avoid driving

through floodwater or through large puddles as it is dangerous,” he added.

According to reports, it only takes 12 inches of water to for a small sedan or SUV to float, and one should also avoid driving through flash floods as they may look more shallow than they are. Most importantly, try to stay calm in the vehicle that you’re driving if you’re surrounded by fast-moving floods and don’t try

to exit the vehicle unless water is rising inside the vehicle. If water is entering inside the vehicle, leave the car and get onto the roof.

“Remember, prevention is always better than facing the danger and avoid venturing out in vehicles and try to stay indoors as much as possible. Follow official information and alert the authorities if need be,” he said.

Beware of electrical shocks

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
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With the instabilities in weather conditions that the Sultanate of Oman is witnessing, including rainfall, thunder, lightning, and various weather phenomena, anxiety and fear increases among everyone, especially parents, from the risk of electrocution.

Electrocution is one of the most dangerous problems that may occur during rain, as a result of one of the electricity wires coming out of the lighting poles just because water is a good conductor of electricity.

It is possible for water to reach exposed electricity poles, or those that are subject to breakage due to wind activity, so in such climates it is necessary to know tips to avoid the risk of electrocution.

It is always advisable to avoid standing under trees of any height or near electricity poles as they are good conductors of electricity, which puts you at risk.

Stay away from all metals, such as lighting poles. Lightning is a charge of electricity, and metals are an element that attracts this electricity, and combining the two poses a danger to your life.

Avoid using a landline phone during thunderstorms, as it is the primary cause of lightning injuries, as lightning enters the house from anything that conducts electricity, such as telephone wires, sewerage, and electricity as well.

Make sure to stay away from any downed power line, because power lines are connected to water, and do not touch power sockets during a storm and the occurrence of various weather phenomena.

Avoid going out during lightning incidents, and do not go out before at least 30 minutes have passed after the last lightning strike, even if you find that the rain has begun to decrease.

Most of us do not know how to deal with the rain, especially when we hear about incidents of individuals being electrocuted during the rain. Rain and storms can cause dangers that may harm many.

Lightning, power lines, and falling poles may lead to physical damage or loss of life and property. Electrocution is considered one of the most serious problems that may occur when it rains.

Every person must be familiar with the methods of rescuing or treating an electrocuted person,

بالنيابة عن مجلس إدارة شركة سيح الرول للغاز، أتقدم بخالص التهنية إلى الدكتور أفلح بن سعيد الحضرمي لتعيينه كأول مدير عام عماني لشركة تنمية نفط عمان. يمثل هذا الإنجاز علامة بارزة في مسيرته المهنية ويعكس تفانيه وكفاءته وصفاته القيادية. ونحن على ثقة من أن بخبرته الواسعة ستواصل الشركة بالازدهار والمساهمة في تطوير قطاع الطاقة في السلطنة. ونتمنى له دوام التوفيق في منصبه الجديد.

On behalf of the Board of Directors of Saih Al Rawl Gas Company, I extend our heartfelt congratulations to Dr. Aflah Bin Saeed Al Hadhrami for his appointment as the first Omani General Manager of PDO. This achievement marks a significant milestone in his career and reflects his dedication, competence, and leadership qualities. We are confident that with his extensive experience, the company will continue to thrive and contribute to the development of Oman's energy sector. We wish him continued success in his new role

خالد بن غدير بن صالح الجنيني
رئيس مجلس الادارة لشركة سيح الرول للغاز
Khalid Bin Ghadeer bin Saleh Al Junaibi
Chairman of Saih Al Rawl Gas LLC Company

شركة سيح الرول للغاز ش.م.م
SAIH AL-RAWL GAS CO. LLC
Oil Field Services خدمات حقول النفط

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RAIN ALERT

WEDNESDAY | APRIL 17 | 2024

MORE RAINS
EXPECTED
TODAY; AVOID
WATER BODIES

MUSCAT: Heavy thunderstorms (30-100 mm) accompanied with strong downdraft winds and hail are expected on Wednesday over governorates of Musandam, Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah, Al Batinah North, Al Dakhiliyah, Muscat, Al Batinah South, Al Sharqiyah South and Al Sharqiyah North and the northern parts of Al Wusta Governorate.

Chances of isolated rains occasionally thundershowers predicted over Dhofar Governorate as well. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) adviseds all to take precaution during thunderstorms, avoid crossing flooded Wadis and low laying areas and avoid venturing into the sea during alert period. — ONA





The event offers Oman an opportunity to further expand its drive for global influence. – ONA

Oman’s pavilion at Venice International Art Biennale 2024 to open on Friday

MUSCAT: On Friday April 19, the Sultanate of Oman will participate with a pavilion in Venice International Art Biennale 2024 (the 60th edition of the art event), titled ‘Foreigners Everywhere.’ The exhibition’s activities will continue until November 24.

The opening of ceremony Oman’s pavilion will be held under the auspices of HH Sayyid Dr Kamil bin Fahd al Said, Secretary-General of the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers.

ART EVENTS

Since its inception in 1895, Venice Biennale has been one of the world’s most important international art events. The expo is organised every two years and each country showcases its national works of art in its pavilions.

Oman has its own independent pavilion in a unique location. The event offers Oman an opportunity to further expand its drive for global influence. The pavilion, which occupies a total area of 300 square metres, is located near the historic Piazza

Oman has its own independent pavilion in a unique location. The event offers Oman an opportunity to further expand its drive for global influence

San Marco, the beating heart of Venice. This will allow artists to display artworks independently and contribute to highlighting Omani art globally, enhancing the visibility of the Omani artistic and cultural identity and expanding the country’s cultural communication networks and scopes for future cooperation with other countries.

The pavilion is expected to attract about 2,000 visitors daily.

Omani artists who will attend the Biennale include Alia al Farsi, Dr Ali al Jabri, Issa al Mufarji, Adham al Farsi and Sarah al Awlaki. During the Biennale, the Sultanate of Oman will hold special programmes and workshops in the field of modern art. — ONA

Huda bint Salim becomes first Omani woman truck driver

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Huda bint Salim al Mahrouqiyah has become the first Omani woman heavy duty truck driver under the ‘Women On Wheels’ programme of ReadyMix Muscat, a member of Holcim group.

Her induction and experience stands as a clear indication of the positive influence of the programme on the lives of Omani women seeking unconventional career paths, which is an idea brought out by another young woman Shameem bint Mansoor al Mahriziyah, Quality Control Engineer in the same company.

This initiative seeks to create new opportunities and integrate Omani women into various sectors traditionally dominated by women. One of the key aspects of this programme is to provide Omani women with unconventional work experiences, opening doors to professions that were previously considered beyond their capabilities.

Speaking to the Observer, Huda said that her journey reflects the broader vision of the company to empower ambitious women

“I’m really grateful to the training programme and subsequent work opportunity and I hope more women would



Huda said that her journey reflects the broader vision of the company to empower ambitious women

choose their career path away from the conventional careers,” she said.

“Our ‘Women on Wheels’ is a groundbreaking initiative in Oman to include women in the march of Renewed Renaissance

as there is a recent increase in female representation within the organisation,” said Daniel Mendible, general manager of the company.

Regarding the programme and the person who conceived the innovative idea, he said that

This initiative seeks to create new opportunities and integrate Omani women into various sectors traditionally dominated by women. One of the key aspects of this programme is to provide Omani women with unconventional work experiences, opening doors to professions that were previously considered beyond their capabilities

Shameem, upon her joining the company in August 2023 as an intern, had conceived the idea of Women on Wheels. When she proposed the idea to the company, she learned that the organisation had already introduced this initiative in other countries like Kenya, Nigeria, and Jordan.

“I’m immensely glad that I could be the force behind such an initiative and I’d like to thank the team for providing such an opportunity to execute and successfully roll out this programme,” Shameem said.

JORDANIAN DELEGATION VISITS MARITIME SECURITY CENTRE



MUSCAT: A delegation of the Royal Jordanian National Defense College (RJNDC) on Tuesday visited the Maritime Security Centre (MSC). Members of the delegation were greeted upon their arrival at the MSC by the Acting Head of the MSC. They were briefed on the tactical roles and tasks carried out by the centre in the safety of the Omani maritime environment. They also toured the centre’s facilities and viewed its latest equipment and technologies used in carrying out its national duties. – ONA

Muscat improves position in Smart City rankings

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 16

Due to constant efforts of the government as Oman Vision 2040, the capital, Muscat, along with its other GCC counterparts, has been performing well in the rankings for smart cities.

Muscat improved its performance in the recent World’s Smart City Index by moving up eight points to 88 from 96 in the previous year, which was prepared by the International Institute for Management Development (IMD).

The Index takes into account the economic and technological aspects of smart cities on the one hand and the “humane dimensions” of smart cities (quality of life, environment, and inclusiveness) on the other.

A Smart City system is about the integration of all the utilities, infrastructure, and citizen services on a single platform and a unified dashboard for the efficient, reliable, and resilient operation of the city.

According to Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), “There is no limit on how this concept of smart cities



Muscat improved its performance in the recent World’s Smart City Index by moving up eight points to 88 from 96 in the previous year

will evolve. It is based on guidelines, including that from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the ISO standard. There is a national effort regarding the smart city and this is a good example of a collaborative regulation”

It has been prepared in

cooperation with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MoHUP) and the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT).

The regulatory framework for smart cities is likely to be ready by

the end of this year, according to a top official of the TRA.

The Oman Vision 2040 strategy has made it clear that Smart Cities are a national ambition, a source for growth, and jobs, and a tool to diversify its economy away from oil exports. As such, the

government developed the Oman National Spatial Strategy to guide progress in line with Oman Vision 2040 and has been deploying several pilots and tools to support the development of the Smart City sector throughout the country, while increasing opportunities

for collaboration with the private sector and academia. The launch of the national Smart City Platform underscored the importance of this sector for the country.

The IMD, which surveyed and data collected in 142 cities, seeks to help policymakers and media illustrate various stages of development and diverse experiences in each, to show the relevance of the index to the real world.

Among others, Riyadh moved up to 25 from 31, Doha to 48 from 54, Dubai to 12 from 14, and Abu Dhabi to 10 from 13. The top ten smart cities are Zurich, Oslo, Canberra, Geneva, Singapore, Copenhagen, Lausanne, London, and Helsinki, apart from Abu Dhabi.

Development of smart cities infrastructure and services is reliant on a strong Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure and governance framework where the roles and responsibilities of all entities that contribute to ICT governance are set out clearly and transparently,” according to TRA.



Smoke billows as a woman and child look on amid the rubble of buildings destroyed during Israeli bombardment in Khan Yunis. – AFP

UN FINDS 1,000-POUND BOMBS IN GAZA SCHOOLS

GAZA: The UN agency for Palestinian refugees said on Tuesday it had found unexploded 1,000-pound bombs inside schools after Israel pulled troops out of southern Gaza’s main city Khan Yunis.

The Israeli army has carried out relentless air strikes and bombardments in Gaza since Palestinian groups attacked Israel on October 7.

UN agencies led an “assessment mission” in Khan Younis after Israeli forces withdrew from the embattled city last week, UNRWA said.

It found “significant challenges in operating safely due to the presence of unexploded ordnance (UXOs), including 1,000-pound bombs inside schools and on roads”.

“Thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) require a range of lifesaving assistance,

including health, water and sanitation, and food,” it said.

Earlier this month, the United Nations said it would take “millions of dollars and many years to decontaminate the (Gaza) Strip from unexploded munitions”.

“We work off the rule of thumb that 10 per cent of ordnance doesn’t function as designed,” UN Mine Action Service chief Charles Birch said in a statement earlier this month.

“We estimate that, to begin the clearance of Gaza, we need around \$45 million.”

The October 7 attack that triggered the war resulted in the deaths of 1,170 people in Israel, according to a tally of Israeli official figures.

Israel’s retaliatory offensive has killed at least 33,843 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in the territory.

UN agencies led an “assessment mission” in Khan Younis after Israeli forces withdrew from the embattled city last week

Meanwhile, UNRWA said on Tuesday there had been “no significant change” in the amount of humanitarian aid entering the Gaza Strip.

UNRWA added in a statement that “181 aid trucks have crossed into Gaza per day” through land crossings from Israel and Egypt so far in April.

It said this “remains well below the operational capacity of both border crossings and the target of 500 trucks per day.”

Last week Israel’s defence minister Yoav Gallant told reporters that Israel planned to

“flood Gaza with aid” and increase deliveries to 500 truckloads per day.

The Israeli defence ministry body responsible for coordinating Palestinian affairs, COGAT, said 126 trucks entered the northern Gaza Strip overnight, and that 237 trucks entered Gaza on Monday.

For months, aid groups and foreign governments including top ally the United States have urged Israel to reopen border crossings into northern Gaza.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told new army recruits on Tuesday that Israel is fighting “without mercy”, according to a statement from his office.

Israel has kept up its bombing campaign in Gaza and the coastal territory has been largely devastated by the war and the siege on its 2.4 million people.

— AFP

Israel obstructing access to attack victims: UN probe

GENEVA: Israel is preventing UN investigators from speaking to witnesses and victims of the October 7 attack, former UN rights chief Navi Pillay, who is chairing a three-person probe, said on Tuesday.

The unprecedented Commission of Inquiry was established by the UN Human Rights Council in May 2021 to investigate alleged violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

“I deplore the fact that people inside Israel who wish to speak to us are being denied that opportunity, because we cannot get access into Israel,” Pillay said.

The investigation briefed diplomats at the UN in Geneva on its work and said that since October 7, it had focused on the Gaza war between Israel and Palestinians.

“So far as the government of Israel is concerned, we have faced not merely a lack of cooperation but active obstruction of our efforts to receive evidence from Israeli witnesses and victims to the events that occurred in southern Israel,” said Chris Sidoti, one of the three members of the inquiry.

Pillay, 82, a South African former High Court judge, said the commission was investigating alleged crimes during the attack as well as some allegedly committed by Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank. Sidoti, speaking via video-link, said the investigation had found it difficult to collect evidence from large numbers of witnesses.

“I use this opportunity to appeal again both to the government of Israel to cooperate, and to victims and witnesses to the events in southern Israel to contact the commission of inquiry so that we can hear what they have experienced,” he said.

Sidoti also said the investigators began collecting digital evidence early on October 7, some of which has since “disappeared from the Internet”.

“If it had not been collected on that day, it would not have been able to be collected,” the former human rights commissioner of Australia said.

Pillay — who served as a judge on the International Criminal Court and presided over the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda — said the commission had shared more than 5,000 documents with the ICC in The Hague, collected between October and December 2023. The commission is to present its first findings to the Human Rights Council in June. — AFP



A man walks his dog next to a banner during a protest in front of the US Embassy branch office in Tel Aviv. – AFP

■ CHILDREN IN FACE OF WAR



Children carry water as they walk past buildings destroyed during Israeli bombardment in Khan Yunis. – AFP

Mideast on edge as Israel vows ‘response’ to Iran strikes

TEL AVIV: Israel and Iran traded threats after Tehran’s first ever direct attack on its arch foe sharply heightened Middle East tensions and as the Gaza war ground on with no truce in sight.

Israel’s military chief Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi vowed “a response” after Iran and its allies launched a barrage of over 300 missiles, drones and rockets at Israel.

Iran said its large-scale attack was an act of self-defence following a deadly Israeli air strike on its consulate in Syria, and that it would consider the matter “concluded” unless Israel retaliated.

US President Joe Biden stressed that “the United States is committed to Israel’s security” but also that he wants to prevent the conflict from spreading.

Washington, Israel’s top ally



Pro-Palestinian demonstrators march through downtown streets and shopping malls during a “Strike for Gaza” protest in Los Angeles, California. – Reuters

and arms supplier, has made clear it will not join Israel in any attack on their common adversary Iran, a senior US official said.

World leaders have urged restraint since Iran’s attack, which has sparked a flurry of crisis diplomacy and sent up oil prices while depressing stock markets.

Israel kept its bombing of targets in Gaza. Israel’s military has vowed the Iran tensions will not distract it from the ongoing war in Gaza where it aims to destroy Palestinian groups and bring home the captives. — AFP



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In brief

■ MOSCOW



RUSSIA ORDERS FRESH EVACUATIONS IN SIBERIA AMID FLOOD

Russian authorities on Tuesday began fresh evacuations from towns and villages in western Siberia threatened by devastating floods that have swept the region and neighbouring Kazakhstan. The floods have forced thousands to flee and are expected to peak this week on the Tobol and Ishim rivers.

The governor of the Tyumen region, Alexander Moor, said emergency services had begun “urgent evacuations” from towns expected to be inundated.

“Pack your valuables. Leave now for a safe place, to relatives or to a temporary accommodation centre,” Moor said. — AFP

■ WASHINGTON



US, CHINA DEFENCE CHIEFS HOLD FIRST TALKS IN 18 MONTHS

US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke with his Chinese counterpart Dong Jun via video teleconference Tuesday, the Pentagon said, in the first substantive talks between the superpowers’ defence chiefs in nearly 18 months.

“The two officials discussed US-PRC defence relations and regional and global security issues,” the Pentagon said in a statement, referring to the People’s Republic of China.

“Secretary Austin emphasised the importance of continuing to open lines of military-to-military communication between the United States and the PRC” following talks between the two sides. — AFP

■ KYIV



UKRAINE IDENTIFIES 37,000 MISSING, WARNS FIGURE HIGHER

Ukraine said Tuesday it had identified almost 37,000 people, including military personnel, who are unaccounted for since Russia’s attack began in February 2022, warning the actual figure may be “much higher”.

Calculating the exact number of missing is difficult, as Russian forces still occupy around a fifth of the country and neither side regularly releases data on military casualties.

“Almost 37,000 people are considered missing — children, civilians and military. These figures may be much higher,” Ukraine’s human rights ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets said. — AFP

Scholz seeks Chinese role in peace for Ukraine

BEIJING: German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said on Tuesday he had urged Xi Jinping to press ally Russia to end its “senseless” war in Ukraine and that the Chinese President had agreed to back a peace conference in Switzerland.

Following a meeting with Xi at Beijing’s Diaoyutai State Guesthouse on Tuesday, Scholz said on X, formerly Twitter, that “China’s word carries weight in Russia.”

“I have therefore asked President Xi to influence Russia so that Putin finally calls off his senseless campaign, withdraws his troops and ends this terrible war,” he said.

He added that Xi had agreed to back a peace conference on the war in Switzerland. China says it is a neutral party in the Ukraine conflict.

China and Russia have in recent years ramped up economic cooperation and diplomatic contacts, their strategic partnership only growing closer since the attack of Ukraine.

In talks with Xi on Tuesday, Scholz said “the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine and Russia’s armament have a very significant negative impact on security in Europe”, according to a recording provided by the chancellor’s office.

“They directly affect our core interests,” he told Xi, adding they “damage the entire international order because they violate a principle of the United Nations Charter”.

Chinese state media said Xi had highlighted the importance of ties in the face of “increasing risks and challenges”.

“China and Germany are the second and third largest



German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Chinese Premier Li Qiang attend a meeting with Chinese-German Economic Advisory Committee in Beijing. — Reuters

I have therefore asked President Xi to influence Russia so that Putin finally calls off his senseless campaign, withdraws his troops and ends this terrible war

OLAF SCHOLZ

German Chancellor

economies in the world,” state broadcaster CCTV quoted Xi as having said.

He also laid out what state media described as “four principles to prevent the Ukraine

crisis from spiralling out of control and to restore peace”.

Nations must focus on “the upholding of peace and stability and refrain from seeking selfish gains”, Xi said, as well as “cool down the situation and not add fuel to the fire”.

“We need to create conditions for the restoration of peace and refrain from further exacerbating tensions,” Xi added, while aiming to “reduce the negative impact on the world economy”.

The “four principles” echoed a Beijing paper last year that called

for a “political settlement” to the conflict, which Western countries said could enable Russia to hold much of the territory it has seized in Ukraine.

CCTV also released footage of the two going for a walk in the picturesque garden of the statehouse for “in-depth exchanges” set to an uplifting classical tune.

Scholz later met Premier Li Qiang, Xinhua reported, without giving more details. He is also expected to hold a press conference. — AFP

Inferno devastates historic Copenhagen landmark

COPENHAGEN: A huge fire on Tuesday tore through Copenhagen’s 17th-century former stock exchange, toppling the historic building’s landmark spire in front of horrified and emotional witnesses. Amid flames and black smoke, the 54-metre spire crashed into the street below the Borsen building, which had been undergoing renovation.

“This is our Notre-Dame! This is a national treasure,” local resident, 45-year-old Elisabeth Moltke, said that as she watched the blaze. Other witnesses watched in tears as more than 100 firefighters battled to save the building.

“A lot of old Danish paintings, originals are in there. I’ve been in there several times and it’s a magnificent building so it makes me feel very emotional,” added Moltke.

The fire started at around 7:30 am under the red-brick building’s copper roof, emergency services told reporters.

As flames and huge plumes of black smoke billowed from the rooftop, fire trucks surrounded the building, covered in scaffolding and canvas, which today houses the Danish Chamber of Commerce.

Danish rescue services said that they could not give “any guarantees” that the facade of the building could be saved.

The Borsen building, close to



Plumes of smoke billow from the historic Boersen stock exchange building which is on fire in central Copenhagen, Denmark. — AFP

the Christiansborg parliament and seat of government, was commissioned by King Christian IV and built between 1619 and 1640. It is one of Copenhagen’s oldest and best known landmarks. Housing a vast art collection, it was being renovated to celebrate its 400th anniversary.

Forces from the Danish military were also called to the scene, in particular to try to evacuate artworks.

“We are currently working hard to save our historical art from Borsen,” the Chamber of Commerce said in a post to X.

The most valuable paintings in the building were quickly moved

to the nearby National Museum of Denmark.

Speaking outside the burning building, Copenhagen mayor Sophie Haestorp Andersen said the city and the Danish Chamber of Commerce had already decided to try and restore the building, however the details, including funding, would have to be decided. “This is part of the story of the building of our city, a story that we can’t just leave in a sea of flames, and therefore we will do everything we can to rebuild this,” she told reporters.

Police said they had blocked off parts of the city centre as part of the fire-fighting efforts. — AFP

South Korea marks 10th anniversary of ferry disaster

SEOUL: South Korea on Tuesday marked the 10th anniversary of the country’s worst maritime disaster, when hundreds of schoolchildren died after the overloaded Sewol ferry capsized and sank. The disaster and botched rescue efforts dealt a crushing blow to then-president Park Geun-hye, who was eventually impeached in 2017, and the tragedy remains divisive and politically sensitive in South Korea even now.

A Coast Guard vessel took some of the victims’ families to the site of the sinking early on Tuesday for a special ceremony.

At the site off South Korea’s south coast — marked by a yellow buoy — the families called out the names of the deceased and threw flowers into the water, followed by a moment of silence.

President Yoon Suk Yeol, whose party was dealt a crushing defeat in parliamentary elections last week, offered his condolences to the families of victims at a Tuesday cabinet meeting.

“Even though 10 years have passed, the events of April 16, 2014, remain vivid in my memory,” he said. “I pray for the repose of the unfortunate victims and once again

extend my deepest condolences to the bereaved families.”

In the afternoon, a memorial service was held in southern port city of Mokpo, where the wreckage of the Sewol, which was salvaged in a complex operation, is now on display. Jo Young-gyu, general secretary of the minor Justice Party’s South Jeolla branch, said his “heart still aches when I think about” the tragedy a decade ago.

“Every year, every anniversary, I think there should be more emphasis on social responsibility for safety and life.”

Experts say that the current government’s handling of the Itaewon disaster and the marine’s death proved an electoral liability.

The daily schedule for Tuesday released by President Yoon’s office did not list attending any of the Sewol memorial services being held throughout the day.

The decision sparked criticism from the public and political figures, with the minor Justice Party claiming that Yoon attending the memorial service would show the kind of “act of governmental renewal” which the public wished to see after the general elections. — AFP



Guests bow their heads during a moment of silence during a remembrance ceremony in front of the salvaged Sewol ferry at a port in Mokpo, South Jeolla Province. — AFP

A tale of talent wasted as a counterfeiter



Rasha al Raisi

The Last Vermeer (2019) is one of the rare movies that I had to watch twice to judge it fairly, before its removal from Netflix last week. When watching it for the first time, I was nodding off and had to watch the movie in parts to finish it. The second time, I decided to watch it all at one go (and managed to stay wide awake!).

The movie tells the story of Han Van Meegeren (played by Guy Pearce) the most famous forger in the 20th century who made millions of dollars by selling fake Vermeer paintings to many, including Nazis. He's caught by the Dutch Resistance to investigate whether he'd conspired with the Nazis knowingly. The investigating officer is a former Dutch Resistance fighter Joseph Piller (Danish actor Claes Bang) who believes in Van Meegeren's innocence and works hard to prove it.

But is Van Meegeren as guiltless as he claims or is Piller falling for his charms like us viewers? The movie is a directorial debut of American director Dan Friedkin and is based on The Man Who Made Vermeers (2008) written by American art historian Jonathan Lopez . The director uses windows and light in almost all scenes. For example, a window that separates militants

like Piller from civilian life outside his car and another one from which Van Meegeren watches the military parade from above, which gave the movie a distinctive artistic touch.

My favourite was a jail cell scene, where Van Meegeren and his lawyers are arguing with a wall behind them (indicating a dead end) and bright light shining from an invisible roof window above (assuring hope). The cast which included an Australian (Guy Pearce) and a medley of British and European actors perfected their roles.

Everything in the movie makes it an outstanding historical drama from set design to music, yet it's very slow paced with flashbacks from Van Meegeren's past life which I found confusing at times. However, what's more interesting than the movie itself is its main character Han Van Meegeren (1899-1947). He was a Dutch artist who showed real artistic talent at a young age, despite his father's disapproval. While in high school, he trained with an art teacher who taught him the techniques of his compatriot classic painter Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675).

Van Meegeren continued taking drawing and painting lessons while studying architecture in

THE LAST
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Delft university but he never graduated. Instead, he moved to the Hague, got a diploma in art, and painted for extra income before travelling around Europe. His work was criticised by art experts for not being original but a copy of the Old Masters.

In 1932, he started developing his forgery skills by creating colours using raw materials such as Lapis Lazuli and making paint brushes from badger-hair like what Vermeer painted with.

Moreover, he bought 17th century canvas to paint on and devised methods to create centuries-old cracks on his completed fake Vermeer paintings. These paintings were authenticated by art experts around the world and sold to international museums and private collectors for millions, which helped Van Meegeren live lavishly and own more than 50 houses in the Netherlands.

However, in 1947 he had to confess his forgeries while on trial for selling a painting to Nazi leader Göring. He was given a one-year sentence and became a national hero. Sadly, he died from a heart attack right after the trial, aged 58.

Van Meegeren was a prolific artist which made the number of his forgeries still unknown. His best quote was “My triumph as a counterfeiter was my defeat as a creative artist.”

Overtourism sparks backlash in Spain

VALENTIN BONTEMPS

Anti-tourism movements are multiplying in Spain, the world's second most visited country, prompting authorities to try and reconcile the interests of locals and the lucrative sector.

Rallying under the slogan “The Canaries have a limit”, a collective of groups on the archipelago off northwest Africa are planning a slew of protests on Saturday. The Canaries are known for volcanic landscapes and year-round sunshine and attracts millions of visitors from all over the world.

Groups there want authorities to halt work on two new hotels on Tenerife, the largest and most developed of the archipelago's seven islands.

They are also demanding that locals be given a greater say in the face of what they consider uncontrolled development which is harming the environment. Several members of the collective “Canaries Sold Out” also began an “indefinite” hunger strike last week to put pressure of the authorities. “Our islands are a treasure that must be defended,” the collective said.

The Canaries received 16 million visitors last year, more than seven times its population of around 2.2 million people.

This is an unsustainable level given the archipelago's limited resources, Victor Martin, a spokesman for the collective told a recent press briefing, calling it a “suicidal growth model”.

Similar anti-tourism movements have sprung up elsewhere in Spain and are active on social media.

In the southern port of Malaga on the Costa del Sol, a centre of Spain's decades-old “soy y playa” or “sun and beach” tourism model, stickers with unfriendly slogans such as “This used to be my home” and “Go home” have appeared on the walls fn doors of tourist accommodations.

In Barcelona and the Balearic Islands, activists have put up fake signs at the entrances to some popular beaches warning in English of the risk of “falling rocks” or “dangerous jellyfish”.

Locals complain a rise in listings of accommodation on short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb have worsened a housing shortage and caused rents to soar, especially in town centres. The influx of tourists also adds to noise and environmental pollution and taxes resources such as water, they add. In the northeastern region of Catalonia, which declared a drought emergency in February, anger is growing over the pressure exerted on depleted water reserves by hotels on the Costa Brava. — **AFP**

Warnings about Artificial intelligence



Dr Muamar bin Ali Al Tobi

The writer is an academic and researcher

In 2014, physicist Stephen Hawking made alarming statements about the dangers of artificial intelligence, predicting the extinction of the human species.

However, these statements were largely dismissed as exaggerations at the time, as AI had not yet achieved the prominence it holds today.

It wasn't until 2022, with the emergence of the generative AI model ChatGPT, that warnings about AI's risks began to increase.

Following Hawking, warnings came from AI pioneer Geoffrey Hinton and former OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, maker of ChatGPT, alongside calls from scientists for a moratorium on AI development, and warnings from global decision-makers, including a recent one from UN Secretary-General António Guterres in June 2023, comparing AI's existential threat to that of nuclear weapons.

I strive to follow global news on AI across various media, seeking to understand the current landscape and future projections.

My long acquaintance with AI, through computational systems and mathematical principles, did not prepare me for the media dynamism and engagement I've seen, especially since late 2022.

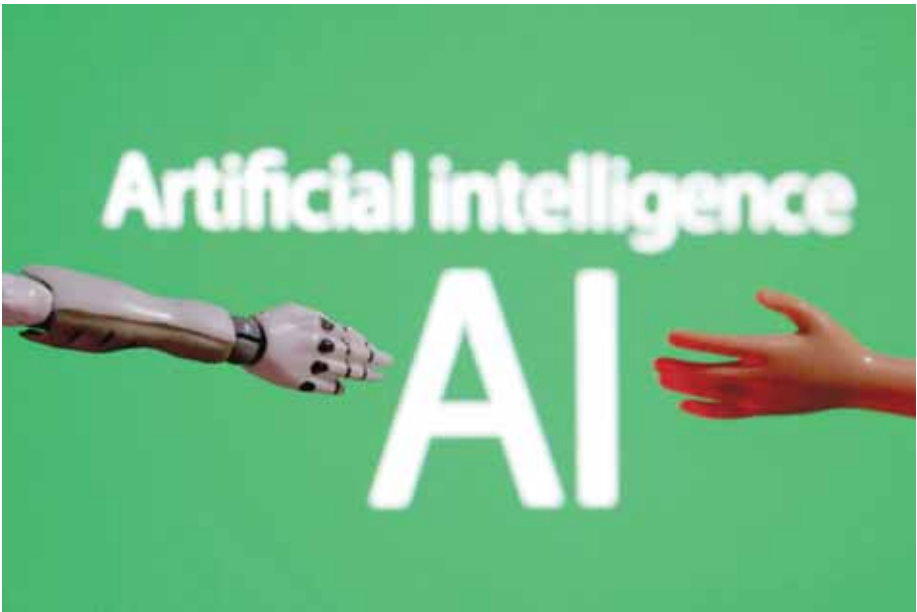
The media's focus on scientists' and politicians' concerns is not unfounded; it reflects the existential dangers some, like the UN Secretary-General, equate with nuclear threats.

I don't wish to reiterate these widely discussed fears, but rather, I aim to present the core of this digital dilemma that has divided opinions: one side anxious and concerned, the other indifferent, viewing the issue as a media storm filled with hyperbole.

My perspective, based on technical “scientific” rationales and political insights, is that AI's current and future developments bear worrying signs, moving towards a general AI that rivals human cognitive abilities.

This raises a profound question, previously posed by Geoffrey Hinton: How can a being, like humans, control a digital entity, AI, that surpasses its intelligence?

This unprecedented scenario in



The UN Secretary-General has shown a “serious” interest in establishing an international AI agency, akin to the International Atomic Energy Agency, reflecting real concerns and attempts by these nations to curb the negative ramifications and harmful uses of AI.

HISTORY SEEMS TO REPEAT ITSELF WITH AI, AMIDST UNHEEDED WARNINGS AND ALERTS. THIS TIME, THE THREAT IS A DIGITAL WEAPON ENDANGERING HUMANITY IN VARIOUS WAYS BEYOND MERE PHYSICAL DESTRUCTION, INCLUDING ECONOMIC, FINANCIAL, INDUSTRIAL, AND PERSONAL STABILITY THREATS

science poses a significant risk if AI surpasses its human creators in all aspects of intelligence. Readers are invited to contemplate such a scenario and its outcomes, with a “scientific” affirmation of its feasibility as AI begins to outperform humans in various fields.

The main problem leading AI to its perilous turn lies in politics, as the scientific side naturally progresses in AI developments, inevitably advancing scientific growth and maximising the benefits of these advanced technologies.

However, mitigating their negatives requires firm political decisions. This situation is reminiscent of the early days of nuclear energy and its military-political developments under secret military research, lacking sufficient

political will to prevent potential dangers until the catastrophic nuclear event in Hiroshima.

The world then awakened to a human existential threat, leading to regulations and ethics governing nuclear energy use and limiting harmful nuclear proliferation.

History seems to repeat itself with AI, amidst unheeded warnings and alerts. This time, the threat is a digital weapon endangering humanity in various ways beyond mere physical destruction, including economic, financial, industrial, and personal stability threats.

Global initiatives are emerging to establish a serious dialogue on regulating AI uses and developments, with the European Parliament proposing laws to address rising concerns about AI and limit harmful uses, including data types used in training AI models to ensure the highest ethical standards.

The UK has expressed its intention to organise the first global summit on AI safety, aiming for a leading role in AI governance.

Similarly, the UN Secretary-General has shown a “serious” interest in establishing an international AI agency, akin to the International Atomic Energy Agency, reflecting real concerns and attempts by these nations to curb the negative ramifications and harmful uses of AI.

In the midst of disruptive rains...

Unseasonal rains wreaking havoc is a subject of immense concern, as this increasing weather anomaly can impact the loss of human lives, the devastation of crops and livestock and community disruption.

Rainfalls of various intensities are continuously occurring in several parts of the world and scientists link them to climate change. They believe human-caused global warming is to blame because “climate change is supercharging the water cycle’s evaporation process and messing with rainfall patterns.”

According to a World Organisation report, between 80 and 90 per cent of all documented disasters are from natural hazards over the past 10 years that have resulted from floods, droughts, tropical cyclones, heat waves, and severe storms.

“Floods are also increasing in frequency and intensity, and the frequency and intensity of extreme precipitation are expected to continue to increase due to climate change,” the report points out. Globally, nearly 1.5 billion people or 20 per cent of the world population, have at least a moderate risk of flood exposure.

A report in the Journal of Arid Environments says that flash floods are a recognised natural hazard in ephemeral wadi systems.

“Unfortunately, such floods are posing growing threats, especially for cities and expanding urban areas, where it could be argued that the speed of development has outpaced the analysis of flood risk,” the report adds.

Countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council are no exception to torrential rains and floods becoming frequent headlines in the news. Since the very beginning of this year, there have been a lot of spots in the Gulf region that have received heavy rains.

The Sultanate of Oman is currently experiencing unusually heavy rainfall accompanied by wind and hail for the last few days. This has triggered strong wadi flows in many parts of the country



Samuel Kutty
@samkuttyvp

The writer is a senior journalist, author and columnist

COUNTRIES IN THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL ARE NO EXCEPTION TO TORRENTIAL RAINS AND FLOODS BECOMING FREQUENT HEADLINES IN THE NEWS

and resulted in destructive flooding, resulting in the loss of lives and damage to property.

Flooding is the most frequent type of natural disaster, especially in connection with adverse weather conditions in the arid countries of the Arabian region, and occurs when an overflow of water submerges land that is usually dry.

Oman experienced 22 extreme weather events between 2007 and 2021, six of them cyclones. The country has witnessed how the rain waters transform the wadis into a raging sea of water in minutes, leading to dangerous flash floods. Severe wadi flash floods have occurred repeatedly within the last many years, causing a huge impact on human lives and properties.

As research has found, a large quantity of sediment usually comes with flash floods from upstream and reaches the Wadi basins during flash floods, leading to environmental problems.

“In dry environments such as Wadi basins, the aforementioned problems are expected to be more serious and destructive than for perennial rivers, particularly with respect to climate change,” the research on “Wadi flash floods” with reference to Oman points out.

As rains become more frequent and intense, many scientists in the world link it to climate change. They believe human-caused global warming is to blame because climate change is supercharging the water cycle’s evaporation process and messing with rainfall patterns.

This means there is no escape from unseasonal or abnormal rainfall events. We need to learn lessons from them to be better prepared to minimise the damage.

Although disaster risk reduction and water harvesting have been priorities of the Government of Oman, all parties concerned, including government and non-government organisations, should continue taking serious actions to mitigate and harvest flash floods, which should include structural and non-structural measures.

TEETERING ON THE BRINK!



This underwater photo shows a green turtle swimming at Lizard Island on the Great Barrier Reef, located 270 km north of the city of Cairns. Australia’s famed Great Barrier Reef is teetering on the brink, suffering one of the most severe coral bleaching events on record – the fifth in eight years – and leaving scientists unsure about its survival. – AFP

Swiss climate policy in spotlight after court ruling

Switzerland, known for pristine countryside and snow-capped peaks, is facing scrutiny of its environmental policies after becoming the first country faulted by an international court for failing to do enough against climate change.

The European Court of Human Rights ruling last week highlighted a number of failings in Swiss policies, but experts stressed that the wealthy Alpine country was not necessarily doing much worse than its peers.

“The judgement made it really clear that there are critical gaps in the Swiss domestic regulatory framework,” said Tiffanie Chan, a policy analyst at the London School of Economics and Political Science specialising in climate change laws. “But it’s definitely not a Switzerland-only case,” she said.

Corina Heri, a postdoctoral researcher with the Climate Rights and Remedies Project at Zurich University, agreed. “This doesn’t mean in any way that ... only Switzerland has a problem,” she said. The court last Tuesday ruled in favour of the Swiss association Elders for Climate Protection — 2,500 women above the age of 64 — who had complained Swiss authorities “failings” on climate protection could “seriously harm” their health.

Elderly women are particularly vulnerable to the effects of heatwaves, which due to climate change are becoming more frequent and intensifying, they argued.



Nina LARSON

The writer is a journalist at AFP

THE COURT AGREED, RULING THAT THE SWISS STATE’S CLIMATE POLICY FAILURES VIOLATED ARTICLE 8 OF THE EUROPEAN RIGHTS CONVENTION, WHICH GUARANTEES THE ‘RIGHT TO RESPECT FOR PRIVATE AND FAMILY LIFE’

The court agreed, ruling that the Swiss state’s climate policy failures violated Article 8 of the European rights convention, which guarantees the “right to respect for private and family life”.

The 2015 Paris Agreement set ambitious targets for governments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, with the aim of preferably limiting warming to below global temperature rises to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

To help meet that goal, Switzerland has said it will cut emissions by 50 per cent by 2030, compared to 1990-levels, and reach net zero by 2050.

That target is “average” on a global scale, according to independent monitor Climate Action Tracker (CAT) — which nonetheless deems Switzerland’s climate targets, policies and finance as “insufficient” to help reach the Paris goals.

“Switzerland’s climate policies and action until 2030 need substantial improvements to be consistent with limiting warming to 1.5C,” it says.

To reach its 2030 target, Switzerland would need to slash emissions by at least 35 per cent by next year, according to Geraldine Pflieger, head of Geneva University’s science and environment institute.

But for now, Switzerland

has cut emissions by less than 20 per cent, which was the target it had set, and missed, for 2020. “Switzerland is not on a favourable trajectory,” Pflieger said.

By comparison, the European Union as a whole has cut emissions by 31 per cent, while experts believe it is on track to reach over 60 per cent by 2030, Pflieger pointed out.

But Chan stressed that many individual countries within the EU have also missed their 2020 targets.

“There are many challenges across Europe, which are similar to this case.”



Switzerland’s direct democracy system allows popular votes on a vast array of issues. – AFP

The comparison however looks worse for Switzerland when considering its heavy reliance on carbon offset projects abroad towards its promised cuts, experts say.

It does not quantify how much it plans to rely on such offsets to reach its targets, something CAT described as “highly problematic”.

“The extent to which Switzerland relies on those is just huge,” Charlotte Blattner, a senior lecturer and climate law expert at the University of Bern, said.

Such projects, she lamented, typically “lack traceability, they are not really verifiable”.

In addition, relying on them

means “Switzerland misses a chance to basically transform its own infrastructure in a way that would align with climate policies”.

A major issue separating Switzerland from its peers is its direct democracy system, which allows popular votes on a vast array of issues, sometimes slowing down or derailing policies approved by government and parliament.

In 2021, voters rejected a new CO2 law, delaying implementation.

Finally last year, voters backed a new climate bill aimed at steering the country towards carbon neutrality by 2050.

“Direct democracy has not been a good friend for putting in place Swiss climate policies,” Pflieger said.

Blattner however stressed that Switzerland’s government can act fast in some cases.

She pointed to how it took emergency measures last year over the course of a weekend to rescue the country’s second largest bank Credit Suisse from going belly-up.

“Here, no democratic vote of the people was necessary,” she said.

“I think government should think more... of instituting effective climate change (action) rather than hiding behind excuses.”

sport

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OMAN WIN 4 GOLD, SILVER ON FIRST DAY

GCC GAMES OPENED IN UAE AS OMAN STRIKE RICH IN TAEKWONDO

WALEED AL JAHWARI
DUBAI, APRIL 16

Oman national taekwondo team began their action with great achievement as they grabbed five medals on the opening day of the first GCC Youth Games, hosted by the UAE from April 16 to May 2. All GCC countries are competing in 24 sports in the Games.

Oman Olympic committee is participating with around 200 athletes competing in 15 sports, including sailing, football, golf, taekwondo, water sports, athletics, handball, volleyball, basketball, chess, fencing, table tennis, billiards, snooker and equestrian in addition to the para athletics team.

The Oman taekwondo team achieved five medals, including four gold and one silver. Dawood al Yousifi succeeded in snatching the first gold medal in the 33-37 kg weight competition after defeating UAE's Hamid Mohammed to become the first player to win a medal in this tournament's record.

Ziyad al Balushi won the second gold in 37-41 kg,



after defeating Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Abdulrahman. Muhannad al Hajri claimed the third gold medal in the 49-53 kg category after his victory over UAE's Youssef al Antali. Omani girl Dania al Abdali won the fourth gold in the 37-41 km weight, after defeating UAE's Magda Rashid.

Youssef al Zadjali won the silver in the weight of 45-49 kg, after he lost to UAE's Nasser al Muhairi in the final.

The training sessions for all teams, including athletics and

sailing, were postponed due to the general climatic conditions in the GCC region, in addition to the opening football match between Oman and UAE, which was scheduled for Monday.

SAILING BEGINS TODAY

Oman sailing team will begin the competitions on Wednesday in Abu Dhabi Marine and Sailing Sports Club, where the first day witnesses the launch of the Optimus class, with the participation of five of the team's sailors in the team category.



Oman are participating with nine sailors in three categories. In Optimus, represented by the Arab Championship, Tamim al Balushi, Hod al Nawfali, Omani girl Tarteel al Hasani, Mohammed al Qasimi and Khamis al Mashaykhi will participate.

Alka 4 competitions is represented by sailors Abdullatif al Qasimi and Firas al Hashimi. The Alka 6 is represented by sailors Hatem al Araiimi and Elias al Fudaili.

Athletics competitions begin on Wednesday at the Dubai

Police Officers Club and will continue until April 19.

The Omani athletics delegation was represented by Hamoud bin Abdullah al Dalhami, team coach, along with the team's manager, Fawzi bin Mubarak al Kiyoumi.

Oman athletics delegation, consisting of 12 athletes (8 male and 4 female), participates in various athletics competitions, namely: 100 metres, 200 metres, 400 metres, 800 metres, 1,500 metres, 3000 metres, long jump and high jump, shot put, discus and hammer throw.

On the first day of athletics, Oman will compete in the hammer throw competitions for men, high jump for men, 100 metres race for men, 400 metres race for women, 800 metres race for men and 1,500 metres race for women.

The national volleyball team has finished their internal camp in Suhar ahead of travelling to Dubai on Wednesday. The team will open their campaign by meeting the UAE on Saturday, and then play against Kuwait on Sunday, then with Qatari team, and then with the Saudi team, and will conclude matches against the Bahraini team on the April 25.

The Oman chess team delegation arrived in Sharjah on Tuesday, after completing the training camp at Al Amal Club. The team includes 12 players: Ahmed al Rahbi, Firas al Lawati, Mohammed al Riyami, Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Mohammed al Riyami, Mohammed al Balushi, Doaa al Muqbali, Hoor al Shukaili, Maryam al Balushi, Nour al Ghafri, Reem al Balushi and Reem al Shukaili.

Oman to take part in AlUla camel race in Saudi Arabia

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Oman will take part in the Al Ula Camel Cup, the world's most prestigious and the pinnacle of camel racing to be held from April 24 to 27, according to sources from the racing circles.

Organised by Royal Commission for AlUla in collaboration with Saudi Camel Racing Federation, the second edition is a four-day marquee event that promises exhilarating fusion of sport, culture and entertainment alongside 'Year of the Camel' celebrations.

The camel-racing cup which is

back with a series of adrenaline-fuelled races is backed up on the success of last year's inaugural edition which had attracted 2,550 visitors.

This time around, attendees are assured of an event even more special and momentous. With 2024 inaugurated as the 'Year of the Camel' to celebrate their cultural significance, enduring community connection and esteemed status in Saudi society, this year's tournament will honour this legacy – serving as a unique sporting celebration accessible to all.

Speaking to *Oman Daily Observer*, Ziad al Suhaibini, Chief



Sports Officer, RCU, said that the AlUla Camel Cup stands proudly as the pinnacle of camel racing and has assumed a starring role

in elevating AlUla's regional and global standing as a premier heritage sports destination.

"As we start the countdown

to this year's highly anticipated second edition, we are excited to present another exceptional event where sporting excellence, cultural heritage, and audience engagement converge. Aligning perfectly with our sports sector strategy at RCU, this same formula will ensure another incredible sporting spectacle which not only shows our country's rich and storied heritage to the world, but also lays new foundations for growth and development in the years ahead," he said.

In line with AlUla's sporting ambition and its deep pride and respect for heritage sports, the AlUla Camel Cup will illustrate the

seamless intertwining of heritage and future growth – blending AlUla's deep-rooted traditions with modernity to promote camel racing, enrich the nation, and shape a promising future.

Live from AlUla's Mughayra Heritage Sports Village, the AlUla Camel Cup presents a four-day event for visitors to experience and enjoy.

The region's fastest camels and most talented riders are set to feature in several rounds of elite competition with enduring legacy, substantial prize pots, and exquisitely designed AlUla Camel Cup champion trophies up for grabs.



Impact subs add lower order firepower as IPL smashes records

NEW DELHI: Better use of the Indian Premier League's impact substitute rule has been the big factor behind this season's run spree in the high-octane Twenty20 competition which has seen multiple scoring records smashed, say experts.

Sunrisers Hyderabad broke their own IPL all-time record score by bludgeoning 287-3 on Monday against Royal Challengers Bengaluru, only three weeks after they set the previous benchmark with 277-3 against Mumbai Indians.

Travis Head led Hyderabad's charge with a 39-ball century, the fourth-fastest in the tournament's 17-season history, before Heinrich Klaasen slogged seven sixes his 67 off 31 balls.

"Impact player makes a big difference," Klaasen said after his team's 25-run victory in Bengaluru.

"It's nice to see our boys striking it nicely and our bowlers can at least defend 270, which is always a positive sign."

The impact player rule was introduced last year and allows the replacement of a player named in the starting team at any point after the toss.

The rule is allowing teams batting first to play an extra big-hitting batsman down the order, who can then be replaced by a bowler when they field. Alternatively a bowler can be replaced if they bat second.

GOOD IMPACT

"The impact player rule has definitely worked," former India women's captain Mithali Raj said in a Star Sports press meet on Monday.

Five substitutes can be named and the one used must be Indian, unless there are fewer than four overseas players in the starting XI.

Teams have been using the rule to maximise the chance of quick runs in the final few overs.

"We have seen how it has helped teams to post big totals and... especially it has helped teams in chasing," said Raj. — AFP

Records galore as Hyderabad beat Bengaluru after IPL best 287

BENGALURU: Sunrisers Hyderabad amassed 287-3 for the highest-ever Indian Premier League total and beat Royal Challengers Bengaluru by 25 runs on a Monday full of records and featuring a century by Travis Head.

Hyderabad, who were invited to bat first by hosts Bengaluru, went past the previous mark of 277 they made last month after a 41-ball 102 by Head and Heinrich Klaasen's explosive 67.

The new high was the second best in a T20 match after Nepal bludgeoned 314-3 against Mongolia in last year's Asian Games in Hangzhou.

The match produced the highest aggregate for a T20 game with a tally of 549 runs.

Virat Kohli (42) and skipper Faf du Plessis (62) gave RCB a blazing start before Dinesh Karthik smashed 83 off 35 balls as Bengaluru ended on 262-7.

Skipper Pat Cummins and spinner Mayank Markande broke the back of the Bengaluru chase with five wickets between them.

"Against Mumbai (Indians) a few weeks ago I thought it won't happen again, but it has happened again," Cummins said after his team's third straight victory and fourth of the season.

Batters ruled at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium as Hyderabad smashed the most sixes in an IPL innings, with 22 hits flying over the fence. Head reached his ton in 39 balls for the fourth-fastest hundred in the competition as he set the tone for the assault and named man of the match.

He put on a 108-run opening stand with Abhishek Sharma, who hit 34.

Head, who was Australia's match winner in the final of the ODI World Cup in India last year, struck nine fours and eight sixes.

KLAASEN BLITZ

After his departure Klaasen took charge with his 31-ball blitz. The South African was nearly as punishing as Head as he smashed the ball to all parts of the ground before being dismissed by Lockie Ferguson.

Fellow South African Aiden Markram (32) and Indian hitter Abdul Samad (37) put together 59 off 19 balls for the final storm.

Samad smashed England left-arm fast bowler Reece Topley for three fours and two sixes in a 25-run 19th over before he and Markram finished off with 21 runs from the final over.

Hyderabad posted 277-3 against Mumbai Indians at their home ground on March 27 to go past the 263-5 by Bengaluru in 2013.



Sunrisers Hyderabad's Travis Head celebrates after scoring a century against RCB in Bengaluru. — IPL

Earlier this month, Kolkata Knight Riders posted 272-7 in a crushing 106-run victory over Delhi Capitals.

In-form Kohli attempted to set up the chase with a powerful start as he struck six fours and two sixes in his 20-ball knock and Du Plessis kept up

the charge till his departure.

The steep run chase made wickets tumble but Karthik once again came up with a late assault to reduce the losing margin for bottom-placed Bengaluru, who slumped to their fifth straight loss.

"One thing really important is to freshen your mind, it's such a mental game," said Du Plessis.

"Sometimes it feels like your mind is going to explode. A little bit of (an) uphill task for us at the moment," the RCB captain added. — AFP

Scheffler's calm exterior masks hatred of losing

AUGUSTA, United States: Masters champion Scottie Scheffler's showcased once again his outstanding ability to keep his focus and calm as he marched to his second win at Augusta National on Sunday and then revealed his ruthless side.

Scheffler's low-key personality and his lack of emotion on the course have led many to presume that he spends his life in what athletes like to call "the zone".

For some observers, the world number one's Christian religious beliefs combined with an uncomplicated approach to golf go a long way to explaining the unflustered way he went about the back-nine on Masters on Sunday.

But after slipping on the green jacket again, Scheffler admitted he

is driven by a fierce competitive streak.

"I love winning. I hate losing. I really do," he said. "And when you're here in the biggest moments, when I'm sitting there with the lead on Sunday, I really, really want to win badly."

Scheffler is always comfortable discussing his Christian faith but his words suggested that while he doesn't want his identity to be defined by results, he can't escape that fierce determination to win.

"I believe that today's plans were already laid out many years ago, and I could do nothing to mess up those plans. I have been given a gift of this talent, and I use it for God's glory. That's pretty much it," he said.

"So when I'm out there, I try to compete to the best of my



Scottie Scheffler of the US celebrates with his green jacket and the trophy after winning The Masters. — Reuters

abilities. Like I said, I really want to win. I feel like that's how I was designed. I've been that way since I was a young kid. That's always been a part of me, and I don't think that should be going away anytime soon.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with that either," he said.

Scheffler's hunger for more suggests his current domination of the sport — he has won three tournaments already this year — might not be a fleeting spell at the top. "I feel like I'm playing really good golf right now," he said. "I feel like I'm as in control of my emotions as I've ever been, which is a good place to be. I feel like I'm maturing as a person on the golf course, which is a good place to be."

"I think it's hard to argue with

the results of the last few weeks. I've been playing some nice golf. But I really try to not focus too much on the past. I'm going to go home this week and reflect on this week and soak it in as best I can. It's not a very satisfying sport because I'm supposed to tee it up again on Thursday. Back to the grind pretty quick," he said.

Scheffler's wife, Meredith, is due to give birth to their first child later this month.

He's looking forward to the prospect, but says he doesn't expect sleepless nights to impact his form at the next major, the PGA Championship at Valhalla.

"I will go home, soak in this victory tonight. Will definitely enjoy the birth of my first child. But with that being said, I still love competing." — AFP

THE ENGLISH PLAYER HAS BEEN A SHINING LIGHT IN AN OTHERWISE DISAPPOINTING CAMPAIGN FOR THE BLUES AND MOVED LEVEL WITH CITY’S ERLING HAALAND’S 20 EPL GOALS IN THE RACE FOR THE GOLDEN BOOT

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE TABLE AFTER MONDAY’S MATCH (PLAYED, WON, DRAWN, LOST, GOALS FOR, GOALS AGAINST, POINTS):

Man City	32	22	7	3	76	32	73
Arsenal	32	22	5	5	75	26	71
Liverpool	32	21	8	3	72	31	71
Aston Villa	33	19	6	8	68	49	63
Tottenham	32	18	6	8	65	49	60
Newcastle	32	15	5	12	69	52	50
Man Utd	32	15	5	12	47	48	50
West Ham	33	13	9	11	52	58	48
Chelsea	31	13	8	10	61	52	47
Brighton	32	11	11	10	52	50	44
Wolves	32	12	7	13	46	51	43
Fulham	33	12	6	15	49	51	42
Bournemouth	32	11	9	12	47	57	42
Crystal Palace	32	8	9	15	37	54	33
Brentford	33	8	8	17	47	58	32
Everton	32	9	8	15	32	48	27 *
Nottm Forest	33	7	9	17	42	58	26 **
Luton	33	6	7	20	46	70	25
Burnley	33	4	8	21	33	68	20
Sheff Utd	32	3	7	22	30	84	16

NOTES: Top four teams qualify for the Champions League; fifth-placed team enters Europa League. Bottom three relegated

- Everton deducted eight points for breaching profit and sustainability rules (PSR)
- Nottingham Forest deducted four points for breaching PSR

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE RESULTS

On Monday
Chelsea 6 (Palmer 13, 18, 29, 64-pen, Jackson 44, Gilchrist 90) Everton 0

Played on Sunday
Arsenal 0 Aston Villa 2 (Bailey 84, Watkins 87)
Liverpool 0 Crystal Palace 1 (Eze 14)
West Ham 0 Fulham 2 (Pereira 9, 72)

On Saturday
Bournemouth 2 (Solanke 16, Kluivert 36) Manchester United 2 (Fernandes 31, 65-pen)
Brentford 2 (Arblaster 63-og, Onyeka 90+3) Sheffield United 0
Burnley 1 (Brownhill 74) Brighton 1 (Muric 79-og)
Manchester City 5 (Hashioka 2-og, Kovacic 64, Haaland 76-pen, Doku 87, Gvardiol 90+3) Luton 1 (Barkley 81)
Newcastle 4 (Isak 30, 51, Gordon 32, Schar 87) Tottenham 0
Nottingham Forest 2 (Gibbs-White 45+1, Danilo 57)
Wolves 2 (Cunha 40, 62)



Chelsea’s Cole Palmer scores their first goal. – Reuters

LONDON: Cole Palmer scored four goals to put Chelsea within touching distance of the Premier League’s top six after a 6-0 win over Everton on Monday.

The England international has been a shining light in an otherwise disappointing campaign for the Blues and moved level with Manchester City striker Erling Haaland’s 20 Premier League goals in the race for the Golden Boot.

Palmer killed the game as a contest as he completed his hat-trick inside 30 minutes before Nicolas Jackson also struck before half-time.

However, the night was not without drama for Chelsea as Palmer had to fend off teammates Jackson and Noni Madueke to score his fourth from the penalty spot. “We cannot behave in this way. I told them this is the last time I accept this type of behaviour,” said Pochettino after his biggest win as Chelsea boss to date.

PALMER NETS 4 AS CHELSEA HIT EVERTON FOR 6

Despite an eight-game unbeaten Premier League run, Chelsea remain in ninth but are now just three points adrift of sixth-placed Newcastle with a game in hand to come.

And they will head into Saturday’s FA Cup semifinal against City confident they can end the holders’ quest for a second consecutive treble.

“The most important thing now is to build a team which is consistent,” added Pochettino.

“We were not consistent enough. We need to learn and learn quick.”

A demoralising defeat leaves Everton still perilously placed just two points above the relegation zone. Nottingham Forest visit Goodison Park in a huge relegation six-pointer on Sunday and Sean Dyche’s men will need to improve at both ends of the field to prolong their 70-year stay in the top flight.

“It’s the most embarrassed I’ve felt as an individual and part of a team in my time in football,” said Everton defender James Tarkowski.

The visitors were dealt a blow before kick-off as Dominic Calvert-Lewin missed out due to a hamstring injury.

His deputy Beto spurned a glorious chance to open the scoring when he somehow turned over Seamus Coleman’s cross from point-blank range.

PLAYER OF YEAR?

Palmer was not so forgiving at the other end as he made another case to be crowned as the Premier League’s player of the year.

City must regret letting the 21-year-old leave for what now looks like a bargain £40 million (\$50 million) in September.

Palmer nutmegged Jarrad Branthwaite before exchanging a neat one-two with Jackson and curling home from the edge of the box to open the scoring. With Enzo Fernandez absent due to injury, Pochettino flanked Palmer and Jackson with Madueke and Mykhailo Mudryk for the first time in his starting line-up.

Palmer was left with an easy task to head in his second after Jordan Pickford denied Jackson from a Mudryk cross. Pickford then had a moment to forget as he gifted possession to Palmer, who nonchalantly chipped his international teammate on his weaker right foot. — AFP

Al Harthy, Rossi and Martin Imola-bound for FIA WEC

SECOND ROUND OF 2024 FIA WORLD ENDURANCE CHAMPIONSHIP THIS WEEKEND

OMAN’S AHMAD AL HARTHY DETERMINED TO PUSH FOR MAIDEN LMGT3 SILVERWARE

EXCITING RACE IN PROSPECT AT FABLED IMOLA WITH TEAM-MATES ROSSI AND MARTIN

TEAM WRT’S BMW M4 GT3 DRIVERS AIMING TO BUILD ON P4 FINISH FROM QATAR

IMOLA: Italy becomes the latest stop on Ahmad al Harthy’s global sporting tour of 2024 this week, with the second round of the ultra-competitive FIA World Endurance Championship taking place on Sunday, 21st April – the 6 Hours of Imola.

Following hot on the heels of the opening event of his dovetailed programme in the Fanatec GT World Challenge Europe powered by AWS Endurance Cup just over a week ago at Paul Ricard in the south of France, Al Harthy now turns attention back to FIA WEC with the No 46 Team WRT squad.

Reuniting with star team-mates Valentino Rossi and Maxime Martin for the second event of the World Endurance season, the trio are determined to mount a challenge for their maiden podium in the LMGT3 class after finishing fourth during the championship-opener in Qatar last month.

Being the home event for sports icon Rossi, the buzz around the Team WRT garage is set to be even more electrifying



Ahmad al Harthy during the 2024 FIA World Endurance Championship in Doha from February 28 to March 2.

than usual with the Italian race fans. Al Harthy, supported by partners OQ, Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Omantel and BMW Oman, is incredibly excited to be part of that experience for the first time, and looking forward to being back on track in the WEC.

Unquestionably the biggest season of racing in his glittering GT and sportscar career, Al Harthy has seamlessly transitioned to be part of Team

WRT and has adapted incredibly quickly to the BMW M4 he shares with Rossi and Martin.

At the first round in Qatar, the Omani brilliantly overcame an issue with the car in qualifying to move into his maiden Hyperpole shoot-out session with just a single flying lap. After then taking ninth on the grid in LMGT3 during Hyperpole, he embarked on his longest ever race stint – three full hours.

Carving his way into the



podium placings, driving an excellent race, Al Harthy set things up perfectly for a potentially strong result with Rossi and Martin sharing the remainder of the contest. Ultimately ending the encounter in fourth position, the result was a good way to begin their championship bid.

AHMAD AL HARTHY: “I’m very excited to be racing at Imola this weekend, and

especially as team-mate to Vale with all of the Italian fans there – it’s going to be a very special experience. We made a good, solid start to the season in the 10-hour in Qatar. Our package wasn’t the fastest, so the team produced a strategy which was pretty aggressive which did enable us to get very close to finishing on the podium.

“Hopefully we will be even more competitive in Imola. My aim is, obviously, to qualify

as strong as we possibly can but we know we need a car that is quick, consistent and very reliable for the race so there will be a lot of focus on achieving that during practice. As always, I’m hoping to deliver the best result I can for the team and also for my amazing partners and supporters in Oman.”

Opening practice at Imola for the second event of the FIA World Endurance Championship season will begin at 12.00 local time on April 19, with session two following at 17.15. On April 20, a third practice run will start at 11.10 local time with qualifying beginning at 14.45.

Raceday is April 21, with the 6 Hours of Imola getting underway at 13.00 local time. All of the action can be followed at www.fiaawec.com

FIA World Endurance Championship LMGT3 Driver Standings (after Rd1)
4th Ahmad al Harthy / Maxime Martin / Valentino Rossi, 18pts



Oman LNG signs sales and purchase pact with a Japanese firm

MUSCAT: Oman LNG, made a significant announcement yesterday regarding the signing of a crucial Sales and Purchase Agreement (SPA) with JERA Co., one of the prominent players in the energy industry in Japan.

This milestone agreement solidifies a partnership that is set to enhance the energy landscape for both companies in the coming years.

Under the terms of this groundbreaking agreement, Oman LNG has committed to supplying 0.8 million metric tonnes per annum of LNG to JERA Co for a duration of 10 years, with deliveries scheduled to commence in 2025.

This strategic move not only cements the existing relationship between Oman LNG and JERA but also signifies a significant step towards expanding market access for Oman LNG in Japan, a key market that has been instrumental in driving growth for the Omani LNG sector over the past two decades.



Oman LNG commits to deliver 0.8 million metric tonnes per annum of LNG to JERA for 10 years starting from 2025.

Hamed al Numani, Chief Executive Officer of Oman LNG, expressed his enthusiasm regarding the newly formed partnership, stating, “This Sales and Purchase Agreement exemplifies the deepening

collaboration between Oman LNG and JERA Co, a major LNG importer in Japan. It underscores the trust and confidence that JERA Co. has placed in the quality and reliability of LNG sourced from

Oman. Through this agreement, both parties are poised to experience sustainable growth while ensuring a stable and consistent supply of energy to meet the demands of this crucial market.”

Oman banks see strong start in 2024

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, APRIL 16

The Omani banking sector is off to a positive start in 2024, according to a report by Vision Capital detailing a rise in key financial metrics across the sector for the first quarter.

The total income for Omani banks grew by 4.8% to reach RO 338 million in Q1 2024, up from RO 325 million a year earlier. This positive trend comes alongside a slight increase in operating expenses of 2.0%, reaching RO 146 million in Q1 2024, up from RO 143 million a year earlier.

Despite the expense increase, operating profit for Omani banks rose by a significant 5.8% to reach RO 192 million, up from RO 182 million in Q1 2023.

Year-on-year, net provisions remained flat at 0.9%, reaching RO 44 million in Q1 of this year.

The strong performance translates to a net profit



Commercial banks posted net profits aggregating RO 125 million in Q1 2024.

increase of 6.1% to RO 125 million in Q1 2024, up from RO 117 million a year earlier.

This growth is further supported by an expansion in lending activity, with net loans growing 3.0% year-on-year, reaching RO 28.6 billion.

Customer deposits also saw a significant rise, growing by an impressive 11.9% year-on-year, reaching RO 29.7 billion.

The Vision Capital report paints a picture of a healthy Omani banking sector in the first quarter of 2024.

Growth across income, profitability, lending, and deposits suggests a positive outlook for the industry.

PDO names first Omani managing director

MUSCAT: The Board of Directors of Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), the largest oil and gas producer in the Sultanate of Oman, has named Dr Aflah al Hadhrami as the new Managing Director, making him PDO’s first Omani national MD of the company.

Dr Al Hadhrami, who is currently CEO of Integrated Gas Company (IGC), will take over from incumbent MD Steve Phimister on June 1, 2024, said Eng Salim al Aufer, Minister of Energy and Minerals and Chairman of PDO’s Board.

In a statement, Al Aufer said the leadership change marks the culmination of a multi-year transformation journey at majority state-owned PDO.

“PDO’s transformation journey is approaching the three-year mark and continues to generate positive business results. PDO has redefined its Purpose, refreshed its Strategy, renewed its Operating Model and implemented a cultural transformation.

PDO is now changing its organisational leadership structure to further enhance competitiveness and business performance.

The PDO Board has finalised structural changes and senior appointments; creating a smaller, strategic decision-making leadership team, made up of five Executive Directors (EDs) and the Managing Director (MD) responsible for delivery across assets, technical and corporate functions.



Dr Aflah al Hadhrami
Managing Director
Petroleum Development Oman

PDO’S TRANSFORMATION JOURNEY IS APPROACHING THE THREE-YEAR MARK AND CONTINUES TO GENERATE POSITIVE BUSINESS RESULTS. PDO HAS REDEFINED ITS PURPOSE, REFRESHED ITS STRATEGY, RENEWED ITS OPERATING MODEL, AND IMPLEMENTED A CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION.

These changes will take effect from June 1, 2024,” Al Aufer stated, adding that the succession of the MD has been aligned with the organisational change.

Dr Aflah brings with him broad energy experience from a global career spanning nearly three decades in executive, operational and commercial roles, in multinationals and

government. Before joining PDO, he led the Integrated Gas Company SAOC (IGC). Before that, he served as CEO of Alshawamikh Oil Services SAOC, where he drove exponential business growth. Dr Aflah also held positions as Regional Director at BP, Vice President at Occidental Oman, and other senior management roles in Oman Refinery and Schlumberger Overseas. He has a passion for strategic leadership, transformative change, and the cultivation of high-performing teams.

“As we welcome Dr Aflah, we also take this opportunity to recognise the significant contribution made to PDO, and the Energy industry of Oman, by Steve Phimister. Steve has worked in partnership with the Board, Oil and Gas leaders and PDO’s management to redefine the business strategy and purpose, streamlined PDO’s ways of working, and driven its cultural transformation,” Al Aufer said.

“Steve will depart PDO following a handover period with Dr Aflah ensuring PDO continues to work at pace to maximise value safely for Oman.

We would like to thank Steve for his immense energy and passion in transforming PDO, whilst leading the organisation to achieve competitive business delivery and far stronger HSE performance these past three years,” he added.

Oman-IX Officially Launched by AWASR, AMS-IX, and Alliance Networks



AWASR, the leading provider of fixed telecommunication services and recipient of the Fastest Internet in Oman award for seven consecutive years from 2017 to 2023, along with Alliance Networks, a regional provider of digital infrastructure services, and AMS-IX, a leading global provider of internet exchanges, have officially launched the “Oman-IX” internet exchange point after year of strategic planning and intensive preparation.

The launch of Oman-IX aims to revolutionize digital infrastructure services in the region by establishing a neutral internet exchange and connecting leading telecom industry networks providers, hyperscale’s, data centres, and cloud services across the Middle East and beyond. The Oman-IX, powered by AMS-IX, has been deployed at Equinix’s neutral carrier data centre, in MCI in Muscat.

The launch of Oman-IX marks a significant milestone in Oman’s digital transformation, with Oman-IX serving as a hub for aggregating internet traffic from local and global networks. This partnership reaffirms the commitment of the companies to revolutionize communication and digital infrastructure in the Middle East region and beyond. Through this mutually beneficial partnership, AWASR, Alliance Networks, and AMS-IX will collaborate to build digital

echo system and infrastructure services, leveraging Alliance’s and AWASR’s expertise in the region.

Eugen Comendant, Chief Commercial Officer of Awasr, expressed his excitement about the official launch, stating, “We are delighted to officially launch Oman-IX in collaboration with Alliance Networks and AMS-IX. We are confident that we will open new horizons for Oman in the field of digital data, enabling efficient internet traffic exchange and enhancing digital innovation across sectors towards enriching the customer experience”.

Peter van Burel, CEO of AMS-IX, commented, “We are proud to launch Oman-IX officially today, as the collaboration between AWASR, Alliance Networks, and AMS-IX strengthens Oman’s digital landscape and accelerates the Sultanate’s interconnectivity to global networks through public peering. Oman-IX will serve as a vital hub for digital services, internet and data exchange, providing an enhanced user experience and promoting digital innovation”.

On the other hand, Adel Al Daylami, CEO of Alliance Networks, expressed their commitment to providing a reliable and robust digital echo system in Oman, confirming that the partnership with Awasr will contribute to enrich connectivity and facilitate seamless data exchange across borders.

About AWASR Oman and Partners SAOC: AWASR Oman and Partners SAOC is a licensed Service Provider that plays a pivotal role in Oman’s telecommunications sector. Awasr is considered the fastest fixed Internet provider in Oman, winning the Ookla Speed test Award for seven years in a row. The company aims to provide cutting-edge connectivity solutions and enhance digital services across the Sultanate.

About Alliance Networks Alliance Networks is a regional digital infrastructure service provider that interconnects industry-leading organizations, networks, data centres, and cloud services across the Middle East and beyond. The company offers advanced digital solutions, driving innovation and digital transformation in the region.

About AMS-IX AMS-IX (Amsterdam Internet Exchange) is a neutral member-based association that operates multiple interconnection platforms around the world. Our leading platform in Amsterdam has been playing a crucial role at the core of the internet for 30 years and is one of the largest hubs for internet traffic in the world with over 12 Terabits per second (Tbps) of peak traffic. Connecting to AMS-IX ensures customers such as internet service providers, telecom companies and cloud providers that their global IP traffic is routed in an efficient, fast, secure, stable and cost-effective way. This allows them to offer low latency and engaging online experiences for end-users. AMS-IX interconnects more than 1000 IP-networks in the world. AMS-IX also manages the world’s first mobile peering points: the Global Roaming Exchange (GRX), the Mobile Data Exchange (MDX) and the Internetwork Packet Exchange (I-IPX) interconnection points.

BankDhofar: Banking services reach customers doorsteps

MUSCAT: BankDhofar, a pioneering financial institution in Oman, continues to a qualitative shift in the banking experience with its Direct Sales Unit, offering doorstep banking services across governorates including Muscat, Al Sharqiyah, Al Dakhiliyah, Al Batinah, and Dhofar.

This innovative initiative aims to provide individuals and SME customers with a seamless banking experience designed to make banking more rewarding.

The Doorstep Banking Unit is comprised of a dedicated direct sales team equipped to handle a wide range of banking services, from account openings to cards, and Insurance queries.

Operating with utmost flexibility, the team ensures that customers can avail these services at their residence, office, or any location of their choice, eliminating the need for a visit to the branch.

One of the key highlights of the Direct Sales Unit is its active participation in open days, such as employee workplace events and updates, engaging directly with customers and addressing their banking needs on-site.

This approach not only enhances customer accessibility but also builds a closer relationship between the bank and its clientele.

The Direct Sales Unit offers comprehensive solutions, including managing POS machines, salary accounts, shop insurance, health insurance for



workers, as well as cards.

Operating throughout the day, the team ensures that SME clients receive prompt and efficient service to meet their business requirements.

“At BankDhofar, we understand the importance of convenience and accessibility in banking services, which is why our Direct Sales Unit is dedicated to bringing banking services directly to our customers’ doorsteps.” Noted Amjad Iqbal al Lawati, Chief Retail Banking Officer at BankDhofar, “Through this initiative, we aim to redefine the banking experience by providing personalised solutions that cater to the diverse needs of individuals and SMEs alike.”

Meethaq wins leading Islamic banking brand in Oman award

MUSCAT: Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat, has been honoured with the Leading Islamic Banking Brand in Oman Award by the *Global Brands Magazine Awards 2024*, recognising its commitment to excellence in providing Islamic banking services.

This award underscores Meethaq’s dedication to enhancing the quality of products and services available to its customers.

On the occasion, Ali bin Ahmed al Lawati, Assistant General Manager — Meethaq Corporate Banking, said: “We are proud to receive the Leading Islamic Banking Brand in Oman Award, which serves as a definitive proof of Meethaq’s dedication to delivering world class products and services to both our retail and corporate customers.”

Al Lawati added, “Meethaq has a track record of success and accomplishments in the Islamic banking sector. We continuously strive to adapt to the evolving market dynamics and innovate our approach to ensure the highest standards of quality and



adherence to Shari’a regulations. Meethaq remains committed to delivering top-notch services to our expanding customer base.”

Meethaq Islamic Banking is devoted to offering the finest services and facilities to cater to its customers. Each product provided by Meethaq undergoes rigorous Shari’a compliance endorsement by the Shari’a Supervisory Board, ensuring adherence to the regulatory guidelines outlined by

the Central Bank of Oman.

In its pursuit of delivering outstanding Islamic banking experience nationwide, Meethaq has solidified its presence as the largest Islamic banking network in Oman, boasting 28 strategically located branches across Oman.

Additionally, Meethaq also has a dedicated network comprising over 50 ATMs and CDMs, providing customers a seamless free access to more than 820

ATMs and CDMs within the Bank Muscat network, thereby facilitating hassle-free banking transactions nationwide.

Customers can also utilise the Internet and Mobile App for various banking needs. To further enhance customer service, Meethaq’s contact centre offers around-the-clock assistance, reachable at 24656666, ensuring an exceptional banking experience for all customers.

New BMW Motorrad Club in Oman set to promote vibrant motorcycling culture

MUSCAT: Al Jenaibi International Automobiles — the official importer of BMW Group vehicles in Oman — recently launched the BMW Motorrad Club in the Sultanate of Oman.

The launch event in the form of a Suhoor that took place in March, at The Chedi Muscat, marked the beginning of an exciting journey that brought together motorcycling enthusiasts from across the country.

The club is set to establish a dynamic BMW Motorrad community of bikers in Oman, marking a pivotal juncture in the Sultanate of Oman’s motorcycling scene.

Offering motorcycling enthusiasts specific benefits including exclusive offers on parts, lifestyle products, special labour rates, and many more, the club will host events and activities throughout the year.

The BMW Motorrad club will provide members with the opportunity to connect with fellow riders and explore the beauty of Oman together.

At the helm of the BMW



Motorrad Club is one of Oman’s leading motorbike enthusiasts, Asim al Balushi, who has been elected as the president. Al Balushi also serves as the Deputy General Director of the Motorcycle Learning Centre in Oman.

With a lifelong passion for motorcycles, Al Balushi took to riding touring bikes five years ago, and in 2022, he acquired the BMW K 1600 B and since became a fan of the strength, stability, and advanced technology that

characterise BMW Motorrad bikes.

Rachid Zamani, Managing Director of Al Jenaibi International Automobiles, shared his excitement about the launch, saying: “Tonight is not just about the motorcycles; it’s about creating a family while marrying the thrill of riding with the spirit of community.

We’re here to offer an experience that goes beyond the ride — it’s about experiencing the thrill of

the ride through the unmatched quality of BMW Motorrad bikes, along with the sense of belonging and camaraderie.”

Thomas Paselou, Head of BMW Motorrad Middle East, commented: “By launching the BMW Motorrad Club in Oman for our customers and enthusiasts in the region, we aim to enhance the motorcycling experience through not only advanced technology and design but also adventure and exploration.

We are thrilled to see the club come to life after extensive planning and look forward to the incredible journeys that lie ahead for its members.”

The event also showcased some of BMW Motorrad’s iconic models, including the soul-stirring BMW Motorrad R18, the superlative BMW Motorrad S1000RR, and the adventurous BMW Motorrad R1300GS.

Each model, with its unique features and capabilities, encompass the diversity and richness of the motorcycle-riding experience offered by BMW Motorrad.

Tesla’s global job cuts include leading markets US, China and Germany

SHANGHAI/BERLIN: Tesla’s global job cuts include reducing staff in the US and China, the automakers’ two biggest markets, across sales, tech, and engineering, five sources briefed on the matter said.

CEO Elon Musk told staff in an internal memo that the company is laying off more than 10% of its global workforce, as it grapples with falling sales and an intensifying price war for electric vehicles.

Several US-based service centres saw heavy layoffs effective immediately, primarily of sales staff and technicians, one source said. Another location laid off all front-of-house staff, the source said.

A Tesla programme manager in California posted a spreadsheet on LinkedIn of over 140 staff, mostly engineers, who had been laid off and were seeking new jobs.

Two sources said members of Tesla’s China sales team were being notified they were being



Tesla China-made Model 3 vehicles are seen during a delivery event at its factory in Shanghai. — Reuters

made redundant, with one saying more than 10% were losing their jobs.

A third source said that in Shanghai, where Tesla’s largest plant is located, the company will only lay off a small proportion of staff, amounting to “several dozen” people.

Tesla shares fell 2.5% in premarket trading on Tuesday. They closed down 5.6% on Monday.

Tesla Germany refuted reports in German media that 3,000 of the carmaker’s roughly 12,000 staff had been fired, and said it was evaluating how to implement Musk’s orders at the plant. — Reuters

IMF sees resilient global economy, edges up forecast to 3.2%

WASHINGTON: Global growth is forecast to edge up to 3.2% in 2024, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Tuesday, slightly upwardly revising its January prediction of 3.1%. The IMF is forecasting growth of 3.2% in 2025.

The world economy has been buffeted by challenges in recent years, from pandemic-related supply chain disruptions and soaring food and energy prices, to tight monetary policy aimed at curbing inflation.

The IMF noted that, in general, the fear of both prices and wages being pushed up at an uncontrolled pace - referred to by economists as a wage-price spiral — has not materialised.

The US economy is projected to grow at a better-than-expected 2.7% this year while China’s is expected to come in at 4.6%.

Against that, the IMF sees more problems for the German economy, forecasting growth of just 0.2% for the current year due to persistently weak consumer



Containers and cargo vessels are seen at the Qingdao port, China. — Reuters

sentiment.

That would be the weakest growth of all leading G7 industrialized nations for the current year. In January, the IMF had still expected growth of 0.5% in Germany.

There are some signs of improvement, though, and the fund expects the German economy to grow by 1.3% in 2025. Italy would then bring up the rear of the G7 countries with just 0.7%. In the long term, the fund is primarily concerned about

structural problems in Germany, such as the decline in the size of the working population and obstacles to investment.

Despite what it frames as gloomy predictions, the fund says the world has been spared a recession. Still, while the world has managed to avoid gloomy predictions of recession, growth is weak from a historical perspective. The IMF cites factors such as higher borrowing costs and the impact of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. — dpa



Oman oil price reaches \$90.42 per barrel



MUSCAT: Oman oil price (June delivery 2024) yesterday reached \$90.42 per barrel, comprising a rise by 83 cents compared to the price on Monday, which stood at \$89.59.

The average price of Oman oil (April delivery 2024) has stabilised at \$80.85 per barrel, thus \$2.10 per barrel higher than March delivery 2024.

Meanwhile, Brent oil edged lower on Tuesday as easing concern about supply risks and a rapidly escalating conflict after Iran's weekend attack on Israel offset data showing China's economy grew faster than expected in the first quarter.

Also weighing was stronger-than-expected US retail sales for March that further reinforced expectations the US Federal Reserve is unlikely to rush to cut interest rates, a scenario that dampens the prospects for oil demand.

Brent futures for June delivery fell 33 cents, or 0.4%, to \$89.76 a barrel by 1140 GMT. US crude for May slipped 38 cents, or 0.4%, to \$85.03.

"The balancing act between sticky inflation, a hesitant Fed and the gradual move towards a full-blown regional conflict keeps oil...in its range," said Tamas Varga of oil broker PVM.

"Material disruption to oil production, supply or shipping must take place to approach the \$100 a barrel milestone. Currently such a development appears implausible."

Concern that Iran would respond to the strike on its embassy compound in Damascus helped send Brent on Friday to \$92.18, the highest since October.

Prices, though, fell on Monday after Iran's attack on Israel proved to be less damaging than anticipated, easing concerns of a quickly intensifying conflict that could disrupt supply.

"As the risk to supply is waning and a military response from Israel looks less likely as more time passes, prices are holding steady," said Rystad Energy's Jorge León. "Tensions are high, and either party's next moves are hard to predict."

— ONA/Reuters

OQ Chemicals achieves key milestone in construction of Propel project in US

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT, APRIL 16

OQ Chemicals, the wholly-owned subsidiary of OQ – the integrated energy group of the Sultanate of Oman – has announced the completion of a key milestone in the construction of a site in the US state of Texas that will house its 'Propel' project – a joint initiative with German-based global chemicals giant Röhm.

The Propel facility, built at OQ Chemicals' Bay Site complex in Texas, will support the operation of Röhm's world-scale Methyl Methacrylate (MMA) plant.

Integrated with OQ Chemicals' existing complex, the Propel site will source part of its feedstock requirements from OQ Chemicals to produce 250,000 tonnes per annum of MMA – a crucial precursor for applications like coatings, adhesives, medical products, road markings, and Plexiglas (acrylic sheets).

OQ Chemicals (formerly known as OXEA) is a global manufacturer of Oxo



OQ Chemicals is a global leader in the production of oxo intermediates and performance chemicals

Intermediates and Oxo Performance Chemicals such as alcohols, polyols, carboxylic acids, speciality esters, and amines.

These are used to produce high-quality coatings, lubricants,

cosmetic and pharmaceutical products, flavours and fragrances, printing inks, and plastics. It was acquired by wholly Omani state-owned OQ Group in 2013 and subsequently rebranded as OQ

Chemicals.

Significantly, as part of its role in the Propel project, OQ Chemicals has ramped up production of high-purity propionaldehyde, a key raw material for the MMA facility.

Construction work on the Propel project (short for "Propyls Elevated") began in October 2022.

Upon its final commissioning and start-up, the plant will be the first to employ Röhm's proprietary LiMA technology ('Leading in Methacrylates'), for the production of MMA. Besides constructing the infrastructure, OQ Chemicals is also providing services vital for Röhm's plant operation.

Commenting on the milestone, Kyle Hendrix, OQ Chemicals President USA, said: "Achieving mechanical completion underscores OQ Chemicals' commitment to delivering projects on time and to the highest quality standards."

As we move forward, our focus remains on the final phases of the project, including commissioning,

testing, and handover. We are committed to ensuring a seamless transition to operational readiness, so that our partner can realise the full potential of their investment."

The announcement represents a shot in the arm for OQ Chemicals as it seeks to expand and diversify its portfolio. It comes on the heels of a ratings downgrade announced by S&P Global Ratings just over a week ago. The ratings agency lowered its rating on OQ Chemicals to 'CCC-' from 'B', with a negative outlook.

In lowering its rating, S&P Global cited parent company OQ's decision to cancel its equity contribution, which was an important consideration for the expected refinancing of OQ Chemicals' debt.

"We also understand that OQ is looking to dispose of its stake in the company. Therefore, we no longer assess OQ Chemicals as a moderately strategic subsidiary and strategic investment of OQ," the ratings agency noted.

Over 4,800 fishing related violations recorded in 2023

HIBBA AL KINDI

MUSCAT, APRIL 16

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MoAFWR) reported a total of 4,881 fishing violations in 2023, representing a decrease of approximately 4.96% from the previous year's tally of 5,136 violations.

According to a Ministry report, the majority of violations (2,672) pertained to licensing, including the failure to obtain or carry valid operating licences, boat and ship licences, transport licences, and marketing licences.

This was followed by 741 violations for not placing identification signs on boats and ships, and 608 violations for using

or possessing prohibited fishing methods and implements.

Furthermore, 209 violations related to the use of unauthorised tracking devices, while 195 violations pertained to the use of illegal expat labour in fishing activities.

The rest of the violations pertained to fishing in prohibited areas (120), and unauthorised fishing of rock lobsters (79), abalone (26) and shrimp (21). A further 210 violations of a miscellaneous nature were recorded as well.

Furthermore, the Ministry reported the seizure of 24,398.3 kg of various fish species in 2024.

The majority were assorted fish (11,402 kg), followed by 6,214.4 kg of rock lobster, 1,003.9 kg of



Around 25 tonnes of illegally caught fish were seized by authorities in 2023.

abalone, 961 kg of shrimp, and 4,817 kg of other unspecified catches.

Moreover, the Ministry reported the arrest of 420 foreign

workers, which represented a 19.39% decrease from the previous year's total of 521. Fishing boats and equipment confiscated by the Ministry also

increased by 51.51% in 2023.

In all, a total of 4,177 seizures were made, including 340 nets, 150 finishing equipment items, 98 boats and vessels, 91 engines, and 78 cages. This represents a huge difference from the previous year's total 2,757 seizures.

In Oman, fishing is regulated by the Marine Fishing Law and Protection of Living Aquatic Resources. The regulations mandate the importance of obtaining licences and permits depending on the type of fishing activity. Furthermore, fishing of several species is restricted based on seasons. These restrictions relate to rock lobster, shrimp and abalone. Violations can result in fines, seizure of equipment or the loss of licences.

Oman special economic and free zones: Modern oases catering to individuals and investors' aspirations

NASRULAH AL AJMI

MUSCAT, APRIL 16

Special economic and free zones in Oman have achieved significant and substantial milestones in the growth of the GDP, creating numerous incentives for the national economy. These zones accelerate the pace of foreign direct investments, boost foreign trade with an increase in exports, and stimulate industrial activity.

Globally, there has been a notable acceleration in the growth of special economic zones, with more than 5,000 zones spread across nearly 150 countries.

These large numbers reflect the importance of economic zones in expediting development, diversifying the economy, and creating a modern environment associated with these zones.

Between 2022 and 2023, the added investment in special



Between 2022 and 2023, the added investment in special economic and free zones in Oman doubled to around RO 3.5 billion.

economic and free zones in Oman doubled to around RO 3.5 billion. Special economic zones, free zones, and industrial zones recorded investments of approximately RO 19 billion last year, demonstrating high economic investments in these zones and accelerating interest in infrastructure development.

These areas offer a wide range of services, making them highly attractive for housing and living, whether for investors, families, or individuals.

These zones have managed to attract a growing number of people who prefer living in or near them due to their fast-paced economic growth, extensive

infrastructure development, natural parks and recreational areas, comprehensive hotel facilities, advanced residential locations, modern shopping complexes, and the development of heritage and tourist sites while focusing on nearby beaches and stimulating commercial activities, fostering the growth of medium and small enterprises.

As projects expand in special economic and free zones, these areas have attracted various foreign nationalities who prefer living near their workplaces, significantly boosting commercial activities in these zones and encouraging the establishment of service projects and the growth of SMEs.

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones oversees integrated infrastructure projects in these areas, such as internal roads, sewage networks,

and parks, which enhance residents' living standards.

New projects are also underway to improve infrastructure and support substantial investments in these areas, promoting modern living patterns and investment opportunities.

Duqm, a key Special Economic Zone, exemplifies Oman's growth in modern living and attracts various nationalities annually. Investments have reached RO 6 billion by 2023.

Duqm blends global economic projects with modern lifestyles, including tourism and residential facilities. Its favourable weather, stunning beaches and world-class hotels make it a destination for both residents and visitors.

In recent years, Al Duqm has seen increased investments with the Duqm Refinery and Petrochemical Industries project reaching commercial operation by

the end of 2023. The area supports renewable energy projects and green industries, such as green iron and hydrogen production.

These investments create a modern, appealing environment, encouraging residents and investors to settle in Al Duqm. Other free zones in Oman, such as Suhar, Al Mazayouna and Salalah, saw significant investments last year, totalling around RO 800 million.

These zones offer safe living environments with proximity to daily necessities and workplaces.

Notable projects include recycling and circular economy initiatives, as well as food, mining and medical supply ventures.

These diverse investments drive modern living and economic growth, portraying these areas as modern oases comparable to global economic zones in developed countries.

End of UK recession now almost a certainty



ANDY JALIL
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The UK economy is gradually coming out of recession with GDP rising by just 0.1pc in February, official figures showed this week. The meagre growth, not helped by torrential rain that hit the construction sector, marks a slowdown from a 0.3 per cent advance in January, which was revised up last week from 0.2 per cent by the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

However, it still makes it almost certain that GDP went up over the first quarter of the year as a whole, although that will not be officially confirmed until the March figure is out in May.

It would mean the two-quarter “technical” recession seen in the second half of last year probably ended in December, making it one of the shortest such

downturns in British economic history. A recession is defined as two consecutive quarters of contraction, and the UK achieved this in the third and fourth quarters of last year when GDP fell by 0.1 per cent and 0.3 per cent respectively.

Although the likely end of the recession cheered the markets — with the FTSE 100 heading towards the 8,000 mark – commentators in the financial district of London (known as the ‘City’) said the UK remained stuck with slow growth.

Associate Director of Fidelity International, Ed Monk, said: “Last year’s recession appears to have been both shallow and short-lived, but the fact remains that UK growth remains weak. We may be shaking off the technical recession but that won’t change the feeling that there is

very little momentum in the economy.” Last week’s figures were in line with City forecasts.

They show the dominant services sector, which accounts for around 80 per cent of output, grew by 0.1 per cent, while the production sector, which includes manufacturing, advanced 1.1 per cent.

However, the construction sector took a 1.9 per cent fall, the biggest drop in a month since January last year.

The ONS said anecdotal evidence suggested “negative effects of heavy rainfall delaying planned work.” It was the fourth wettest February in England, with the southern half of the country seeing more than twice average rainfall.

But ONS chief executive Grant Fitzner said he was “moderately optimistic” about the outlook for

the next few months, with the labour market stable, consumer confidence rising, and businesses more hopeful about prospects for turnover.

However, much will depend on the timing of interest rate cuts from the Bank of England.

City markets were predicting only a 9 per cent chance of a cut at the May meeting of the Monetary Policy Committee. Chief economist at Santander CIB, Victoria Clarke, said: “The February GDP looks like a perfect ‘not too hot, not too cold’ number for the Bank of England.”

Business output has risen sharply to the highest level in nearly two years marking a ‘turning point’ for the UK economy. Research showed that business activity rose for the second successive month in March. Accountancy firm BDO

said its output index climbed to 103.39 – the highest since the month of May 2022. Above 95 indicates growth.

The rise was driven by falling inflation — recorded at 3.4 per cent in February — but experts said ‘we are not out of the woods yet’ as measures of business optimism and employment rates both fell. BDO’s business optimism index declined by 0.16 points to 99.33 – the first drop since November.

The employment index fell for the ninth consecutive month to 98.32 last month – its weakest point in nearly eleven years.

BDO partner Kaley Crossthwaite said: “Output reaching its highest point in nearly two years illustrates UK robustness. For businesses, the main mood right now is cautious optimism.”

Hedge funds propel multiple commodities positions

OLE S HANSEN

Iran’s well-flagged attack on Israel over the weekend triggered a muted reaction overnight in Asia, with Brent touching \$91 before turning lower.

Crude prices already include a risk premium, and unless the market faces a real disruption to supply, the risk of an upside spike towards \$100 remains limited.

All eyes are now on Israel and its response, especially after President Biden urged restraint and after Iran said they do not intend to continue strikes.

Gold trades a tad firmer after suffering a near \$100 correction on Friday, but with a major risk premium already priced in and with the dollar being the short-term safe haven focus, the combination of yield strength following last week’s surge, the metal may struggle to regain last week’s strong momentum, instead entering a period of consolidation.

Watch support at \$2320, followed by \$2290.

Limited impact

On Friday, the US and the UK took further action to limit Russian profit from trading in its copper, aluminium, and nickel.

The latest order restricts Russian metals mined after April 13 from entering the metal exchanges in London and New York.

Traders responded to the news by sending aluminium and nickel higher on the Asian opening by around 9% before pairing back most of those gains in the realisation this action may not fundamentally change the overall supply-demand balance.

China holds an outsized influence on the mined metal market, a role that will only be strengthened by this action, leaving them in a position to force even deeper discounts from Russian suppliers.

COT on forex

In the forex market, flows ended up being somewhat mixed, but for a fourth week in a row, still skewed towards dollar buying, resulting in the gross dollar long vs eight IMM forex futures rising by 10% to \$17.8 billion, a fresh 19-month high.

Selling of CHF, GBP, JPY and CAD was partly offset by short covering in EUR, nearly doubling the net-long, AUD, and continued demand for high-interest paying MXN, driving the net-long to a fresh four-year high.

The JPY net short jumped to 162k contracts (\$13.5 billion), the highest since 2007, while the CHF short, at 32k contracts (\$4.4 billion), was the highest in almost five years.

COT on Commodities

In the week to April 9, the Bloomberg Commodity Total Return index rose 2.2% to trade near a six-month high, led by strong gains across precious and industrial metals.

Excluding natural gas, the energy sector rose 2.2% and was among these three sectors managed money accounts from hedge funds to CTA’s focused their buying interest while the agricultural sector saw a very mixed reaction.

Overall, the big three markets of crude oil, copper and gold saw net buying which lifted the total net long to a July 2021 high at 772k contracts, representing a nominal value of \$96 billion.

Weeks of buying in response to an improved technical and fundamental outlook for key commodities saw several positions extend beyond their one-year highs, most notably Brent, RBOB gasoline, gold, silver, HG copper, Arabica coffee, lean hogs.

Energy: All crude and fuel contracts saw net buying, with the combined net long reaching a fresh two-year high at 728k contracts, with the bulk being held in the two crude oil contracts of WTI (238k) and not least Brent (304k)

Metals: Gold’s 3.5% continued rally triggered no response from funds, highlighting an emerging reluctance to add more exposure at this stage. Silver’s 8% rally only managed to lift the net long by 13% to a two-year high.

Under-invested traders rushed into copper as the price broke higher, lifting the net long by 230% to a 2-½-year high.

(The author is the Head of Commodities Strategy at Saxo Bank.)



SAQIB IQBAL AHMED

The author is a stocks, options, and FX reporter at Reuters.

A rally in the US dollar is accelerating, as stubborn inflation sows doubts over how aggressively the Federal Reserve will be able to cut rates this year compared to other central banks.

The US dollar index, which measures the greenback against a basket of six major currencies, is up 4.6% this year and stands near its highest levels since early November. The index rose 1.7% last week, its biggest weekly gain since September 2022.

The greenback is advancing as market participants grow convinced the Fed will need to leave interest rates at current levels for longer to avoid a potential resurgence of inflation.

Last week’s stronger-than-expected consumer price data bolstered that view: investors late Friday were pricing in just 50 basis points of interest rate cuts in 2024, futures markets showed, compared to 150 basis points priced in at the start of the year.

By contrast, investors believe some global central banks — including the European Central Bank, the Bank of Canada and Sweden’s Riksbank — could have a freer hand to ease monetary policy. That is a shift from a few months ago, when many believed the Fed would be among the first to cut rates.

“We had a fairly clear path that the Fed would likely be the first actor. The data that we have received really does undermine that,” said Eric Leve, chief investment officer at wealth and investment management firm Bailard.

“I can see obvious reasons



US dollar banknotes are seen in front of displayed stock graph. – Reuters

why the dollar could strengthen further.”

Yield differentials between the US and other economies have widened in recent weeks, contributing to the greenback’s rally as higher yields boost the allure of dollar-denominated assets.

The two-year US-German bond spread stood at its widest since 2022 late Friday, LSEG data showed, a day after the European Central Bank signalled it could cut rates as soon as June.

Bullish investors have increased their bets on the dollar, while bears have wavered.

Net bets on the dollar in futures markets stood at \$17.74 billion in the latest week, data from the Commodity Futures Trading Commission showed, the highest level since August 2022.

Central bank policy has diverged in recent months, reflecting economies’ varying struggles to contain inflation.

The Swiss National Bank reduced rates by 25 bps in March, its first cut in nine years.

Sweden’s central bank has signalled it could cut rates in May if inflation keeps falling, while the Bank of Canada recently suggested it was ready to ease. Central banks in Australia, Britain and Norway, on the other hand, appear less eager to loosen

monetary policy.

Japan’s yen, meanwhile, has weakened to a near 34-year low against the dollar — though the country has recently ended eight years of negative interest rates. The Bank of Japan has ruled out using rate hikes to support the currency.

Eric Merlis, managing director and co-head of global markets at Citizens, believes the dollar could continue appreciating broadly on the back of a more hawkish Fed relative to the ECB. The euro has fallen 3.6% against the greenback this year.

“The dollar has room to strengthen. We have the strongest economy right now, in general, the trajectory of yields has been going up,” he said. “Whereas Europe is struggling in terms of growth.”

A stronger dollar could complicate the inflation fight for other economies as it pushes down their currencies, while helping the US tamp down consumer prices by tightening financial conditions.

Dollar strength can also be a headwind for US multinationals as it makes it more expensive to convert their foreign profits into dollars, and make exporters’ products less competitive abroad.

Other factors may also be driving the dollar. The US

currency is a popular destination for investors during times of geopolitical uncertainty, which has sharpened in recent days on fears over a widening conflict in the Middle East.

Brian Liebovich, chief dealer for global foreign exchange at Northern Trust, believes the dollar may receive a boost from the Fed allowing assets to run off its balance sheet, a process known as quantitative tightening.

The Fed is currently allowing up to \$60 billion per month in Treasury bonds and up to \$35 billion per month in mortgage bonds to mature and not be replaced.

While Northern Trust expected the dollar to strengthen by up to 5% going into the US presidential election, “market activity since the initial dollar rally this week suggests that move could happen sooner than expected,” Liebovich said.

Others are less certain the dollar has more room to run. Shaun Osborne, of Scotiabank, wrote that the dollar’s recent strength means investors have priced in a good deal of bullish news.

Rates and spreads are in the dollar’s favour, however, meaning “the trend at the moment suggests the USD will stay better supported,” he said. — Reuters

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Attn of: the Managing Director - Commercial

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REMEMBRANCE

A guest holds a white flower before laying it along with others on a table during a remembrance ceremony in front of the salvaged Sewol ferry at a port in Mokpo, South Jeolla Province, South Korea. — AFP



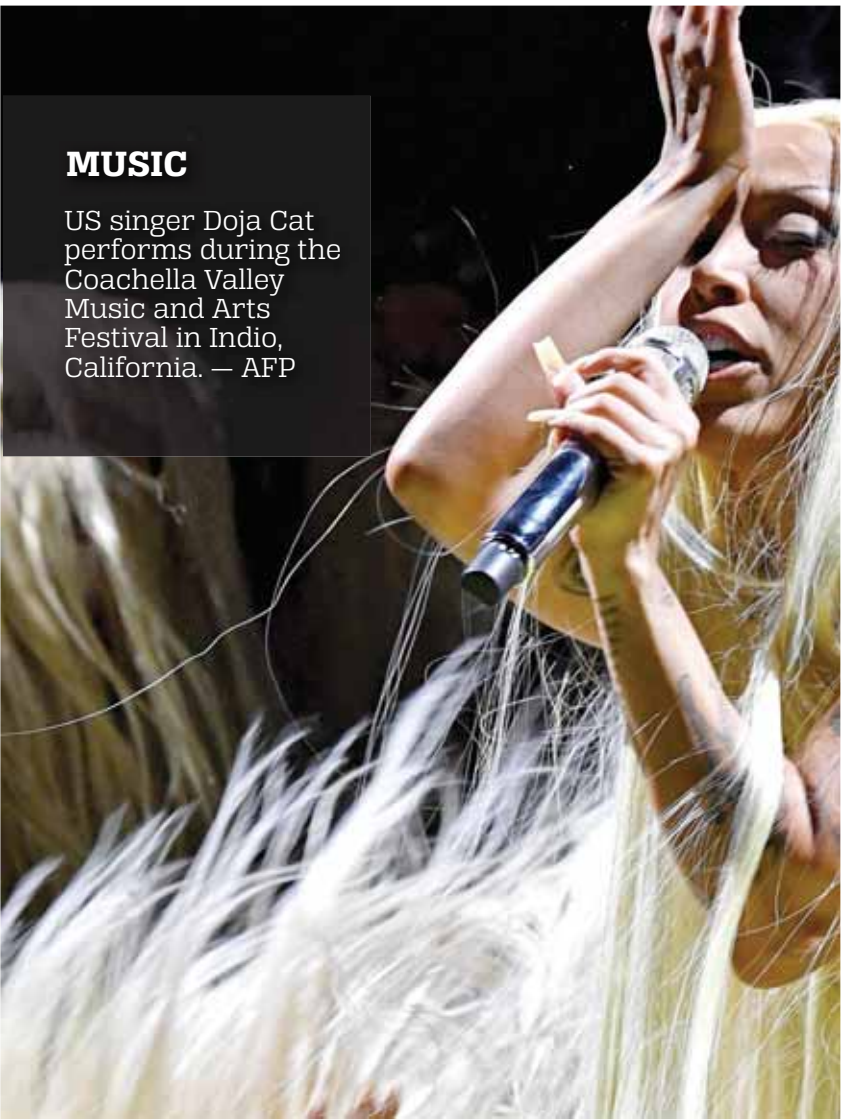
ENTERTAINMENT

French comedian and newly appointed theatre director Julie Delille poses at "Le theatre du Peuple" in Bussang, eastern France. — AFP



MUSIC

US singer Doja Cat performs during the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California. — AFP



CULTURE

Actors perform during the Olympic torch lighting ceremony for the Paris 2024 Olympics Games at the Ancient Olympia archaeological site, birthplace of the ancient Olympics in southern Greece. — AFP



LIFESTYLE

A farmer harvests wheat crop at a field in Faridabad. — AFP



art & life

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OMAN'S CORAL REHABILITATION LOOKS AT SUSTAINABLE CONCRETE BOCKS

OMAN'S coral reefs are home to a wide variety of marine life and play crucial roles in the ecosystem. Over the last decades, these reefs had been facing a lot of challenges including climate change, pollution, and unsustainable fishing practices. Here's how a major initiative is helping rehabilitate damaged coral environments

TRAVEL TALES

Ballet hails the return of water to Rome's ancient Caracalla baths

THE RETURN OF water to Rome's ancient baths of Caracalla after more than 1,000 years was greeted on Friday by ballet dancers performing on a platform over a newly installed pool.

One of the largest thermal complexes ever built, the baths were begun by Emperor Septimius Severus in 212 AD and completed four years later by his successor Caracalla. The ruins are now a popular tourist destination and host concerts and theatre.

This month local authorities unveiled a project to re-introduce water to the site, installing a large, shallow pool which reflects the towering walls of the ancient buildings.

The pool, dubbed the Specchio, or mirror in Italian, is a rectangular structure 42 metres by 32 metres and 10 cm deep, designed by architects Hannes Peer and Paolo Bornello.

It is meant to evoke the so-called Natatio, the largest of the several pools in ancient Roman baths, usually found at the centre.

"Water, an element that has been absent for more than 1,000 years, returns in a decisive yet respectful

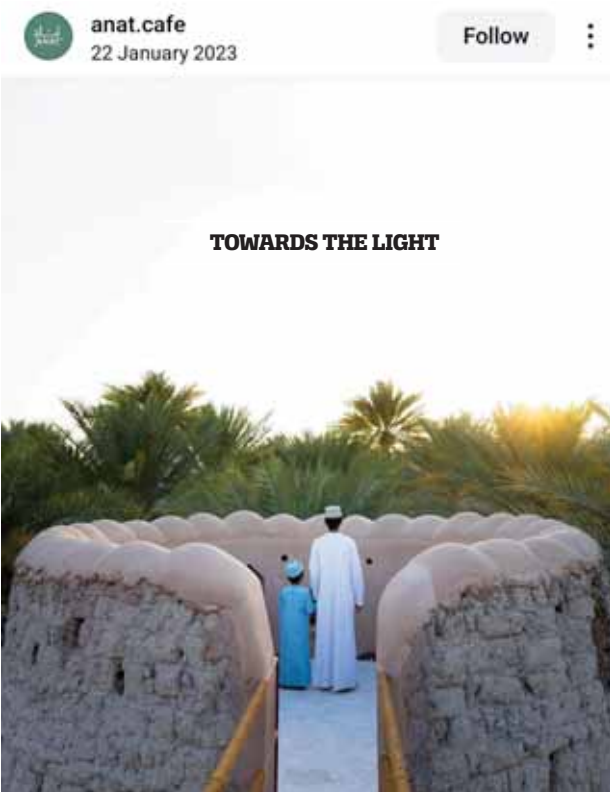


way to the ruins," Mirella Serlorenzi, the site's director, said.

The installation, which is fitted with submerged water jets and lighting effects, is part of a broader project by Rome's cultural authorities to make the city's ancient sites more similar to how they were originally conceived.

Friday's opening show by Aterballetto, choreographed by Iratxe Ansa e Igor Bacovich, will be the first of a string of dance, theatre and classical music performances to be hosted in Caracalla this spring and summer. — Reuters

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



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ALTERNATIVE HABITAT FOR UNDERWATER CREATURES

the urgent need for action, the Coral Reefs Garden project (Tharwa) emerged as a beacon of hope. This initiative aims to rehabilitate damaged coral environments by cultivating coral reefs using innovative methods involving cement blocks.

The project not only seeks to restore marine habitats but also promotes environmental sustainability by reducing pollution and minimising ecological damage. It aligns with the comprehensive plan developed by the Environment Authority to safeguard Oman's marine biodiversity and support natural habitats crucial for marine life.

Under the strategic vision of the Environment Department in

sion of coral farming activities across the Sultanate of Oman.

Looking ahead, the project aims to construct 500 concrete structures by 2025, with a focus on monitoring survival and growth rates over the next five years. With continued vigilance and concerted efforts, it is anticipated that the rehabilitated areas will thrive, fostering a vibrant ecosystem rich in marine life and supporting sustainable development goals for Oman's marine environment.

A GREAT COLLECTION OF CORALS

Oman boasts a rich and diverse marine ecosystem spanning over 2,000 kilometres of coastline, embracing coral reefs, mangroves, and sea-

confront formidable threats. Climate change-induced rising sea temperatures imperil corals, while overfishing and pollution exacerbate their plight.

Recognising the significance of coral reefs, the Omani government has instituted marine protected areas, safeguarding reefs from detrimental activities. Additionally, efforts to mitigate pollution and raise public awareness about reef conservation are underway.

Oman's pristine coastal waters offer a haven for coral reef enthusiasts. Positioned at the convergence of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, its biodiverse marine ecosystems boast vibrant coral communities. With well-preserved reefs and crystal-clear

the coast of Muscat, providing sturdy shelter for numerous marine creatures. Acropora Coral, often referred to as "table corals," forms branching structures crucial to reef ecosystems, offering habitat and sustenance for a diverse array of ocean life.

Mushroom Coral adds its solitary charm to the underwater landscape, nestled on the sandy ocean floor, while Soft Coral sways gently in ocean currents, its feathery appearance creating a mesmerising underwater dance. Porites Coral, known for its massive dome-shaped colonies, thrives as a resilient species in the Arabian Sea, playing a crucial role in reef-building and resisting environmental stressors.

Goniopora Coral, or Flowerpot

BY ARWA AL HASHIMI

Off the picturesque coast of Oman lies a hidden world of vibrant coral ecosystems, each species holding its own unique charm and significance. Among the treasures waiting to be discovered by divers and marine enthusiasts are Brain Coral, Acropora Coral, Mushroom Coral, Soft Coral, Porites Coral, Goniopora Coral, Pocillopora Coral, Fire Coral, Montipora Coral, and Euphyllia Coral.

Amidst the awe-inspiring beauty of Oman's coral reefs lies a crucial call to action for their preservation. Human activities, climate change, and pollution pose significant threats to these fragile ecosystems. Responsible diving practices, sustainable tourism, and efforts to mitigate climate change are imperative to ensure the continued existence of these coral treasures for future generations to marvel at. Let the enchanting diversity of Oman's corals inspire a collective commitment to their protection, safeguarding the wonders that lie beneath the waves for years to come.

Marine life in Oman has long been a focal point due to its significant economic value as one of the country's prime resources. Among these marine treasures, Coral Reefs stand out, serving as vital habitats for a plethora of marine organisms. These reefs provide a safe haven for various species, facilitating reproduction and serving as feeding and shelter grounds for many benthic fish, lobsters, and shrimps.

However, the fragile ecosystem of coral reefs in Musandam has faced threats from various human activities, particularly unsustainable fishing practices and pollution. Recognising



Musandam, the project has made significant strides. Through a collaborative effort with local companies and stakeholders, including Abdullah Darwish Sons Trading and Contracting Company, Al Madiq Trading Company, Sokhour Musandam Company, and Khasab Port Management, the initiative has already begun to yield promising results.

Initial findings indicate a positive response from marine species, with some fish and organisms showing a preference for the cement blocks as shelter. Consequently, the growth rates of coral reefs have increased, laying the groundwork for the expan-

grass beds teeming with a plethora of marine life. With over 500 species of corals, it leads the Arabian Gulf region in coral biodiversity, fostering an array of fish, invertebrates, and marine mammals.

Coral reefs, pivotal ecosystems on Earth, offer manifold benefits. Serving as habitats for marine life, they provide sustenance, shelter, and breeding grounds for a myriad of species. Moreover, acting as natural barriers, they shield coastal communities from storms and erosion. Economically, coral reefs bolster tourism and fisheries.

Nevertheless, Oman's coral reefs

waters, Oman provides optimal conditions for witnessing the beauty of various coral species. From the brain coral's intricate formations to the branching staghorn coral, and the delicate soft corals swaying in the currents, the underwater landscape teems with life. Divers and snorkellers alike can explore numerous dive sites along the coastline, each presenting unique coral formations and marine habitats for an unforgettable experience. Here are some of the most notable corals found in Oman:

Brain Coral, named for its intricate patterns reminiscent of the human brain, stands as a common sight off

Coral, captivates with its intricate flower-like polyps, adding elegance to the underwater scenery, while Pocillopora Coral forms branching colonies that create intricate habitats supporting a diverse range of marine life. Fire Coral, though not a true coral, presents a hazard to unaware divers with its painful sting.

Montipora Coral, often referred to as Velvet Coral, contributes to the overall diversity and structural complexity of the reef with its smooth surface and vibrant colours, while Euphyllia Coral, characterised by its long, flowing polyps, exhibits a graceful beauty favoured in reef aquariums.

MUSIC

Fortunato Ortombina named new La Scala director

THE DIRECTOR OF La Fenice Opera House in Venice, Fortunato Ortombina, will take the helm of Milan's storied La Scala, authorities announced on Tuesday.

The Italian director, 63, succeeds Frenchman Dominique Meyer, 68, who has been in the post since 2020, Milan's Mayor Giuseppe Sala announced after a meeting of La Scala's board of directors, where he serves as chairman.

Last year, the hard-right government of Prime Minister Giorgia



Meloni set an age limit of 70 on opera directors, effectively preventing Meyer from being reappointed.

Ortombina has directed the

Venice opera house, one of Italy's leading cultural centres, since 2017.

At La Scala, he served as an artistic director coordinator from 2003-2007. For nearly a year the two men will work side by side, with Ortombina taking up his post in September, and Meyer remaining in his until August 2025.

"We have done everything for the good of La Scala, with dignity and fairness," the mayor said.

La Scala's music director, Riccardo Chailly, 71, whose current mandate expires in February 2025, has had his duties extended until 2026. Succession plans at the head of La Scala had caused a stir with critics accusing Meloni's government of purging cultural voices at the head of Italian institutions who clashed with the government's views. Ortombina was proposed as a successor to Meyer after a meeting in March between Culture Minister Gennaro Sangiuliano and Sala, even as La Scala's orchestra appealed to the board for Meyer's term to be extended by two years.

— AFP

SCIENCE

Up to 1 Trillion Cicadas Are About to Emerge in the US

IN A RARE OCCURRENCE, 1 trillion cicadas from two different broods are expected to begin appearing in the Midwest and Southeast regions of the United States at the end of April.

It's the first time since 1803 that Brood XIX, or the Great Southern Brood, and Brood XIII, or the Northern Illinois Brood, will appear together in an event known as a dual emergence.

Thomas Jefferson was president the last time that the Northern Illinois Brood's 17-year cycle aligned with the Great Southern Brood's 13-year period. After this spring, it'll be another 221 years before the groups, which are geographically adjacent, appear together again.

A roughly 16-state area will be centre stage for these periodical cicadas, which differ from those that appear annually in smaller numbers.

Forested areas, including urban green spaces, are more likely to see higher numbers of cicadas than agricultural regions.

To put into perspective just how many of these bugs could emerge, 1 trillion cicadas, each just over 1 inch -long, would cover 15,782,828 miles if they were placed end to end, said Floyd Shockley, an entomologist and collections manager at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

The first cicadas are expected to start emerging late this month. Temperature determines when they come out, said Gene Kritsky, a retired professor of biology at Mount St. Joseph University in Cincinnati, and the author of several books on cicadas.

Kritsky said that first the soil needed to reach 64 degrees Fahrenheit, about 6 inches deep, and "then you get a good soaking rain, and that's when they really pop."

They'll use their forelegs to tunnel



out from the earth, their beady red eyes looking for a spot where they can peacefully finish maturing. A few days after they emerge and molt, the males will start buzzing in an effort to find a mate, a slow-building crescendo of noise that as a chorus can be louder than a plane. — AIMEE ORTIZ / NYT

‘Titanic’ task of finding plundered African art in French museums

WITH TENS OF THOUSANDS of African artworks in French museums, curators face a huge task in trying to identify which of these were plundered during colonial rule in the 19th and 20th centuries and should be returned.

During a visit to Burkina Faso in 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron pledged to return “African heritage to Africa” within five years, pushing other former colonial powers, including Belgium and Germany, to launch similar initiatives.

In 2021, France repatriated 26 royal treasures its soldiers took from Benin during colonial rule.

The effort has stalled, and in March the government indefinitely postponed a bill authorising the return of African and other cultural artefacts following right-wing resistance in the Senate.

French museums are nonetheless

cies of our catalogues, our dating, and our designations,” said Katia Kukawka, chief curator of the Aquitaine Museum, calling the job an “ethical imperative”.

FRUSTRATED EFFORTS

To ease the cost burden, the Aquitaine Museum, which has 2,500 African objects, is pooling resources with other organisations, including museums in Gabon and Cameroon.

But without the proposed law, it remains uncertain what criteria will determine when an object must be returned to Africa.

If it was illegally acquired, that might be sufficient, said Salaberry, of the Angoulême Museum, but the lack of clear historical records will continue to frustrate restitution efforts.

“There will be an enormous number of objects for which light can never be shed,” she said.

Loans and long-term retainers



studying the origins of some 90,000 African objects in their archives.

Most — 79,000 — are in the Quai Branly museum in Paris dedicated to indigenous art from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas.

The task is “titanic and exhilarating”, said Emilie Salaberry, head of the Angoulême Museum, which houses around 5,000 African objects.

“It’s turned upside down how we understand our collections,” she said.

REAL INVESTIGATIVE WORK

Identifying an object’s provenance is becoming central to museum work, but tracking down the necessary information is hard and time-consuming.

France’s Army Museum began its inventory in 2012 but has only been able to study around a quarter of its 2,248 African pieces.

And while it says there is a “reasonable hypothesis” that many are spoils of war, it has struggled to establish definitive conclusions.

“The main difficulty... is the relative lack of sources,” a museum spokesperson said.

Emilie Giraud, president of ICOM France, which oversees 600 museums, said: “It’s real investigative work which requires cross-checking clues and finding sources that may be scattered, sometimes abroad, or might not even exist at all.”

It is hoped the task will grow easier as this type of research becomes commonplace.

The University of Paris-Nanterre introduced a course dedicated to provenance in 2022, and the Louvre School at the heart of the famed museum followed suit in 2023.

Germany and France launched a three-year, 2.1-million-euro (\$2.2 million) fund for provenance research in January.

“We need to be transparent about everything, including the inadequa-

could be an alternative to full restitution — as Britain recently did for items from the Ashanti, or Asante, royal court in Ghana.

But not everyone was impressed with that.

As Nana Oforiatta Ayim, a culture adviser to Ghana’s government, told the BBC: “Someone comes into your home and steals something, keeps it in their house, and then X amount of years later comes up and says ‘I’m going to lend you your things back’.

“It doesn’t make any sense.” — AFP

