

P12

SPURS ACE SON BACK ON ROAD TO WORLD CUP



P13

CONSTRUCTION OF BARKA V DESALINATION PROJECT NEARING COMPLETION



P19

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■ MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO TUNISIA PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Kais Saied of the Republic of Tunisia on his country's Independence Anniversary. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes to President Kais Saied. His Majesty also wished the people of Tunisia further development and prosperity.

■ GENEVA

2024 TO BE HOTTER THAN LAST YEAR: UN



Global temperatures “smashed” heat records last year, as heat-waves stalked oceans and glaciers suffered record ice loss, the United Nations said on Tuesday -- warning 2024 was likely to be even hotter. The annual State of the Climate report by the UN's World Meteorological Organisation confirmed preliminary data showing 2023 was by far the hottest year ever recorded. And last year was part of “the warmest 10-year period on record”, the WMO weather and climate agency said, with even hotter temperatures expected going forward. “There is a high probability that 2024 will again break the record of 2023”, WMO climate monitoring chief Omar Baddour told reporters. Reacting to the report, UN chief Antonio Guterres said it showed “a planet on the brink”.

■ HM GREETINGS CONVEYED



Badr bin Mohammed al Mantheri, the Sultanate of Oman's Ambassador to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, on Tuesday presented his credentials to President Alar Karis of the Republic of Estonia, as Oman's Non-Resident Ambassador to Estonia. The ambassador conveyed to President Alar Karis the greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, along with His Majesty's wishes of good health and happiness to the President. He also conveyed His Majesty the Sultan's wishes of progress and prosperity to the government and people of Estonia. **DETAILS ON P2**

Citizen donates money to release 51 prisoners under Fak Kurba

IBRI: An Omani citizen from Al Dhahirah Governorate donated money for the eighth year straight for the release of 51 prisoners who met the conditions of the Fak Kurba humanitarian initiative in its eleventh edition in Al Dhahirah Governorate.

The 11th edition of the Fak Kurba initiative launched on the third day of the holy month of Ramadhan is a continuation to efforts made by the Omani Lawyers Association for the release of prisoners or against whom detention orders have been issued in civil, commercial, labour and Sharia cases.

In its past 10 editions, the initiative was able to release 5,890 prisoners from various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman. This year, the initiative targets to release 1,500 prisoners.

The amount of the claim should not exceed RO 2,000, and the total number of claims shall not exceed RO 2,000 for one insolvent person if there is more than one claim against him. Donations are directed to deserving cases in coordination with government institutions and civil society. The priority in payment will be given to the lesser claim to the oldest than the youngest. It is worth noting that the initiative has contributed to the release of more than 5,890 cases since 2012. — **ONA**

■ YOUNG ENTREPRENEURS OF NIZWA



Nizwa Souq is a cultural hub in Oman, known for its traditional goods and vibrant marketplace atmosphere. It is not just a place of commerce but also a focal point for social interactions and community bonding. Many businesses in Nizwa Souq have been passed down through generations, forming a rich legacy of entrepreneurship and craftsmanship. No matter the day of the week you visit, Nizwa Souq is a bustling marketplace, where even children are becoming an integral part of preserving legacies and culture. **DETAILS ON P18**

Regulating labour market key for better businesses

MUSCAT: The Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) held its first Ramadhan Night under the title ‘Dialogue Between the Three Production Parties to Regulate the Labour Market’, on Monday.

The event was held under the auspices of Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat.

Economic experts and specialists discussed the challenges and difficulties facing the private sector with regard to the labour market in the Sultanate of Oman and ways to stabilise it.

Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman, OCCI Board of Directors, said that regulating the labour market is a key to improving the business environment and empowering the private sector. He added that the event brought together representatives from the three production parties - the government represented by the Ministry of Labour, workers represented by the General Federation of the Sultanate of Oman Workers as well as the OCCI.

He added that the Ramadhan Night discussed the changes in the Omani Labour Law and the obligations and rights of both employers and workers. He added that the event is dedicated to debating challenges


The first Ramadhan Night discussed the challenges and difficulties faced by private sector institutions with regard to the labour market and the role of social dialogue in achieving stability in labour market

FAISAL BIN ABDULLAH AL RAWAS
OCCI Chairman

and difficulties facing private sector institutions with regard to the labour market and the role of social dialogue in achieving stability in the labour market.

The event was also attended by Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, Shaikh Nasr bin Amer al Hosani, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Labour for Labour, and Nabhan bin Ahmed al Battashi, Chairman of the General Federation of the Sultanate of Oman Workers.

The participants reviewed the changes to the Omani Labour Law and the laws and regulations of the Social Protection Fund compared to former regulations and laws. Business owners were introduced to the obligations and rights set forth by the law.

LABOUR RIGHTS
A number of challenges and developments facing labour rights in the modern age, including temporary work, the impact of technology on traditional jobs, the lack of balance between professional and personal life, were discussed. The participants concluded that addressing these challenges require strengthening national labour legislation, improving vocational training to enhance worker skills, and encouraging companies to adopt sustainable working methods.

It is noteworthy that the Ramadhan Nights, organised by the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, aim to enhance the knowledge pertaining to business and economy and raise awareness of and laws and legislations governing business and labour market through discussions with economic experts and decision-makers to explore new opportunities for investment and growth. — **ONA**

Oman, Spain call for end to Israeli repression

MADRID: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, met with José Manuel Albares, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Spain.

They reviewed bilateral relations between the two friendly countries and discussed various aspects of mutual cooperation and ways to enhance them.

The two sides also discussed a number of regional and global issues most notably the repercussions of the continued Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip and the importance of exerting pressures to end the war on the Gaza Strip and lift the siege to ensure smooth flow of relief and humanitarian materials to the population.

For his part, Sayyid Badr expressed his appreciation for the firm position adopted by the Spanish government and the friendly Spanish people towards the just Palestinian cause.

Meanwhile, the Arab Group condemned the Israeli intransigence during the holy month of Ramadhan by tightening restrictions on the entry of Palestinians to Al Aqsa Mosque, in an attempt to change the status quo at Al Aqsa.

Speaking before the Executive Council of Unesco at its 219th session, Dr Hamad bin Saif al Hamami, Permanent Representative of the Sultanate of Oman to Unesco, said in



Two women react while mourning the relatives who were killed during Israeli bombardment at Al Najjar Hospital in Rafah on Tuesday. — **AFP**

the statement of the Arab Group, that the barbaric and bloody Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip and all Palestinian territories continues during the holy month of Ramadhan, as the Palestinians are exposed to the most heinous and widespread crimes. “War and genocide are in full view of the international community, which is powerless to stop the fire.”

The statement stressed the need for Unesco to carry out its tasks and work to implement decisions related to occupied Palestine, including monitoring serious Israeli violations

and taking a clear and firm position on them, stressing the need to expedite the appointment of a permanent representative of the Director-General of Unesco in the Old City of Jerusalem, and implement an interactive monitoring mission to document all violations committed committed by Israel.

The statement touched on the situation in the occupied Golan and a reminder of Israel's use of white phosphorus in both Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. It also referred to the difficult conditions witnessed in Yemen and Sudan.

The statement appreciated the contributions of Türkiye, Ireland, Brazil and Japan to the special fund for the Gaza Strip, and South Africa for its courageous humanitarian stance before the International Court of Justice, in addition to all countries that support and stand with the Palestinian cause.

The statement expressed the Arab Group's support for the decision of the Council of Arab Foreign Ministers regarding Arab countries' support for the nomination of Professor Dr Khaled al Anani, former Minister of Tourism and Antiquities of the Arab Republic of Egypt, for the position of Director General of Unesco.

It is worth noting that the Sultanate of Oman is Vice-President of the Executive Council of Unesco for the Arab Group for the period 2023-2025. — **ONA**



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ROYAL OFFICE MINISTER RECEIVES AMBASSADOR OF USA

MUSCAT: Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office on Tuesday received Ana Escrogima, Ambassador of the United States of America to the Sultanate of Oman. During the meeting, the two sides reviewed bilateral relations and areas of joint cooperation. They also discussed regional issues of common concern. The ambassador of the USA lauded the strength of relations between Oman and the USA. – **ONA**

HM greetings conveyed to Estonia

TALLINN: Badr bin Mohammed al Mantheri, the Sultanate of Oman's Ambassador to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, on Tuesday presented his credentials to President Alar Karis, President of the Republic of Estonia, as Oman's Non-Resident Ambassador to Estonia.

The Ambassador conveyed to President Alar Karis the greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, along with His Majesty's wishes of good health and happiness to the President. He also conveyed His Majesty the Sultan's wishes of progress and prosperity to the government and people of Estonia.

The Ambassador expressed the keenness of His Majesty the Sultan's government to enhance relations between Oman and Estonia and to expand the scope of bilateral cooperation in all fields, notably



Badr al Mantheri, Oman's Ambassador to the United Kingdom on Tuesday presented his credentials to President Alar Karis, President of the Republic of Estonia, as Oman's Non-Resident Ambassador to Estonia. – **ONA**

in commercial, investment, green energy, technology and tourism sectors in a manner that serves the common interests of the two countries.

For his part, the Estonian President asked the Ambassador to convey his sincere greetings to His Majesty the Sultan, wishing him good health and happiness.

President Alar Karis stressed the need to upgrade the level of bilateral cooperation in commercial, investment, technology and tourism sectors. – **ONA**

TODAY IS THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING



According to reports, the year 2023 was the hottest on record, with global average temperatures at 1.46C

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The Sultanate of Oman will mark the first day of spring astronomically today (March 20), according to an official statement.

The phenomenon of the summer solstice is expected to be around on June 20.

It may be noted that temperatures have been rising in the country with maximum temperatures predicted around

30 to mid-30 degrees Celsius in various cities for Tuesday, including 33°C in Al Seeb, 36°C in Al Amerat, 35°C in Nizwa, 35°C in Sur, 27°C in Salalah and 36°C in Fahud.

The Sultanate of Oman had the warmest winter in December 2023, according to Oman Meteorology, though temperatures dropped marginally for some weeks of February and March this year due to a series of air troughs affecting the atmosphere.

Al Buraimi station recorded a temperature increase of +1.9 degrees Celsius, while Masirah station recorded an increase of 1.2 degrees Celsius compared to the average temperature for December.

The highest temperatures recorded in December were in Wadi Al Maawil (34.8), Barka (34), Mirbat (33.8), and Salalah (33.2) among others.

The highest recorded temperature was in December

2016, when it reached 32.5 degrees Celsius. As for December 2023, 30 degrees Celsius was recorded as the highest temperature, and the lowest recorded temperature was 20 degrees Celsius.

According to reports, the year 2023 was the hottest on record, with global average temperatures at 1.46C above pre-industrial levels and 0.13C higher than the eleven-month average for 2016, currently the warmest calendar year on record.

‘Check the validity of documents before travel’

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 19

With only a few weeks left for the Eid al Fitr holidays, the Royal Oman Police (ROP) has urged citizens and residents to make sure that their identification documents are valid and renew them before official holidays or travel.

According to travel operators, including airport managers of airlines, most people do not bother to check the validity of their passports or residency cards, especially if they are travelling to countries that offer visas on arrival.

“We have several instances of travellers, including families, having to return home disappointed because their documents did not meet the validity requirements. Tourists must have six months’ passport validity if they are travelling to countries that offer visas on arrival or even visa-free entry,” said an airport manager of



a leading airline.

According to the International Air Transport Association, passengers travelling with incorrect documentation is more of a minor issue as over 50,000 passengers are turned back at their destination or transfer points by immigration authorities each year causing stressful and frustrating situations for travellers.

For most countries, visitors must have a valid passport for six months after they plan to arrive at their destination, however, this period can vary.



FLEXIBLE WORK HOURS EASE RAMADHAN TRAFFIC

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

Commuters are relieved this Ramadhan with less traffic congestion due to the flexible working hours introduced since last year.

The situation is not perfect, but a major reprieve for women employees who get more time to spend with families, including preparing Iftar meals.

As the holy month entered its second week, there is traffic slowdown in places such as Al Khoud, Rusayl, and a few entry points of Muscat Expressway because most office goers have preferred the 9 am to 2 pm working hours instead of other options provided by the authorities.

On Monday, ROP reported traffic congestion on Sultan Qaboos Street due to an accident before the airport bridge heading to Al Sahwa Tower, forcing motorists to take alternative routes.

According to Nasser, a government employee, “Compared to previous years, traffic problems after office hours have been minimised. Some areas are congestion-prone but will be resolved as the authorities complete the infra projects, including expansion of lanes, in the coming years.” For Maryam, a bank cashier, “It used to take almost two hours to reach Al Khoud area, but this time it is a major relief though I admit not all days are the same. Thursdays are generally tough as people try to rush to homes outside Muscat, not to mention accidents. But overall, things have changed for the better. The remote working option is a big positive initiative.” The Wadi Adei-Al Amerat road is still witnessing traffic during peak hours as most Omani citizens have shifted to the suburbs. “Flexible hours have improved the situation this year, because people have options to adjust their working hours and most department managers have been open to adjusting timings for their employees,” said Ahmed al



The official working hours for employees during Ramadhan 2024 for government employees are flexible

“Flexible hours have improved the situation this year, because people have options to adjust their working hours and most department managers have been open to adjusting timings for their employees

AHMED AL MAHROUQI
A commuter

Mahrouqi, a commuter.

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) has prohibited truck movement on some roads in various governorates on Thursdays and Saturdays to avoid congestion and help citizens return home outside the workplace.

The official working hours for employees during Ramadhan 2024 for government employees are flexible, starting from 7 am to 3 pm, and the head of the

departments will determine the hours of attendance that suit the nature of the work. The shift options are 7 am to 12 noon, 8 am to 1 pm, 9 am to 2 pm, and 10 am to 3 pm.

The head of the department may allow remote work for the employees if it does not affect the workflow.

In all cases, the number of employees required to be present at their workplace may not

RAMADHAN
OFFICIAL WORK
HOURS

From 7 am until 12 pm

From 8 am until 1 pm

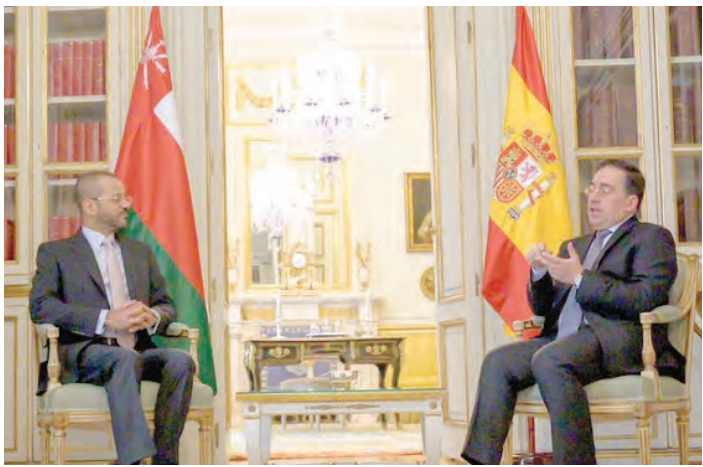
From 9 am until 2 pm

From 10 am until 3 pm

be less than 50 per cent of the total number of employees per department.

The maximum working hours for Muslim workers shall be six hours per day in the private sector or 30 working hours a week.

The official work hours during Ramadhan are from 9 am to 2 pm. The Head of a Unit may determine the hours of attendance and leave that suit the Unit's work as per scheduled work hours.



SAYYID BADR, SPANISH FOREIGN MINISTER REVIEW REGIONAL, GLOBAL ISSUES

MADRID: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, met with José Manuel Albares, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Spain. They reviewed bilateral relations between the two friendly countries and discussed various aspects of mutual cooperation and ways to enhance them. The two sides also discussed a number of regional and global issues most notably the repercussions of the continued Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip and the importance of exerting pressures to end the war on the Gaza Strip and lift the siege to ensure smooth flow of relief and humanitarian materials to the population. For his part, Sayyid Badr expressed his appreciation for the firm position adopted by the Spanish government and the friendly Spanish people towards the just Palestinian cause. – ONA

Ministry warns against using a mixer brand



STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 19

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) has warned against using a particular electric mixer brand.

“It poses a risk to consumer safety due to manufacturing defects and the electric mixer produced by BlendJet 2 does not comply with the Gulf

technical regulations for low-voltage electrical devices,” a statement said.

The ministry, represented by the Directorate-General of Standards and Metrology, has taken measures to verify the dangers of the electric blender produced by the BlendJet 2 brand in cooperation with the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA), including withdrawing the product from the market.

Shura Office reviews responses to parliamentary questions

MUSCAT: The Office of Majlis Ash'shura held its seventh ordinary meeting for the first annual sitting under the chairmanship of Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ash'shura, on Tuesday.

During the meeting, the office reviewed the minutes of its meeting with the Ministerial Coordination Committee, which was held at the headquarters of the Secretariat-General of the Council of Ministers. It also reviewed the ministerial responses to a number of parliamentary questions raised by members of Majlis Ash'shura.

The office reviewed the response delivered by Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, to a parliamentary question regarding planning controls for building on agricultural lands. In his response the minister stated that the regulation of residential plans and their distribution in the various wilayats of the Sultanate



Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali

of Oman is based on systematic planning controls as Ministerial Decision (220/2023) made it possible to change the purpose of agricultural lands while underscoring the importance of providing the necessary services for residential schemes.

He added that the regulations also permitted the establishment of agricultural projects after obtaining an approval from the competent authorities.

Also reviewed at the meeting was a response provided by



The Office of Majlis Ash'shura also reviewed a briefing request submitted to the Chairman of the Oman Investment Authority (OIA) regarding the financial and economic losses made by Fisheries Development Oman

Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, to the question about the issue of wall cracks in new buildings. In his response the minister said that the ministry oversees and inspects construction materials

products in coordination with the relevant authorities. The causes of cracks are many including the utilisation of concrete mixture instead of ready-made mixture and failure to conduct soil tests prior to construction.

The Office of Majlis Ash'shura

also reviewed a briefing request submitted to the Chairman of the Oman Investment Authority (OIA) regarding the financial and economic losses made by Fisheries Development Oman.

It requested to inform the Majlis Ash'shura of the oversight

tools for following up state-owned companies, the number of non-Omani employees, the Omanisation rate registered by the end of 2023 as well as the volume of the financial losses recorded until the beginning of this year.



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LITTLE PHYSICAL CHORES BENEFICIAL INSTEAD OF BIG WORKOUTS

Walk instead of driving to a nearby place, take the stairs instead of the lift, perform the daily household chores to keep your living environment clean with an aim of breaking the inactivity times as much as possible

KABEER YOUSUF
[@kabeeryousef](#)

Health risks are high while exercising during Ramadhan, fitness experts advise gym-goers or people exercising at home during the holy month. Indeed, fasting is a challenge to one's mind, body and spirit by staying aloof from food, water or any other mental or physical indulgence. But that doesn't indicate that one should not be active and fit. Instead, health experts advise one to engage themselves in certain activities and physical fitness regime.

"Engaging oneself in sports during the holy month is highly beneficial for overall fitness or mind and body and to remain fit while fasting is a best tool to burn that extra fat in the body," says Jaison P Mathai a fitness trainer said.

"Besides doing exercise helps one to stay fit, for those above forty, they should make it a

compulsory activity especially during the month to increase muscle efficiency and to help burn extra fats and sugar from the rich meals one might have had during the iftar meals," said Mathai..

According to health experts, it is preferable to exercise after Iftar or shortly before it to allow the body to replenish calories. In addition, it's crucial to drink plenty of water, in view of the fact that the body may lose water during exercise while fasting, leading to dehydration.

"Consuming a good quantity of water between Iftar and Suhoor is of paramount importance as one get easily dehydrated during fasting and if symptoms of dehydration or thirst appear, one shouldn't delay in avoiding exercising."

What kind of exercises can one we do during Ramadhan? He says that it depends on his/her physical activity levels prior to Ramadhan and suggested doing light to moderate exercises which are generally safe, because getting oneself engaged in high intensity and high volume of exercise,

especially while fasting, may result in suppression or even lowering one's immunity levels. Therefore, one should refrain from such high-pumping activities in work out.

However, doing little daily chores can keep oneself healthy and fit and get rid of the likely sedentary lifestyle. For example, walk instead of driving to a nearby place, take the stairs instead of the lift, perform the daily household chores to keep your living environment clean with an aim of breaking the inactivity times as much as possible. But whatever you do, you should start slow and go slow.

"In case you have been physically active and exercising regularly, you can continue with your current physical activity levels. One shouldn't increase exercise frequency, intensity and duration when you are fasting and your ultimate aim should be to exercise for maintenance, and not to push your limits or set new personal records," said Mathai.



National Museum hosts lecture on maritime heritage

MUSCAT: The National Museum organised a lecture titled “Maritime Heritage between the Sultanate of Oman, Yemen, and Morocco: Similarities and Differences”, presented by Dr Yahya Latif Abdullah al Abali, an academic researcher at the National Institute of Archaeological Sciences and Heritage in the Kingdom of Morocco and Assistant Professor of Cultural Heritage at Hajjah University in the Republic of Yemen, on Tuesday. The lecture was attended by several employees of the National Museum and individuals interested in archaeology and tangible and intangible heritage.

The lecture addressed maritime heritage between the Sultanate of Oman, Yemen, and Morocco in both its tangible and intangible aspects, focusing on Omani aflaj, Yemeni katzaims, and Moroccan khattaras, highlighting their



Dr Yahya Latif Abdullah al Abali presents the lecture at the National Museum on Monday.



technical, natural, and cultural characteristics, and their roles in the development of societies. It also discussed the challenges facing them, means of preserving them, geographical similarities and differences reflected in the deep heritage of our Arab

countries.

It is worth mentioning that khattaras are one of the oldest traditional irrigation systems concentrated in the southeastern regions of Morocco, relying on underground water channels to bring water from highlands and

irrigate lower lands based on the law of gravity.

As for katzaims, they are a method that utilises water for irrigation and mainly relies on a network of underground channels dug in the valleys towards a straight horizontal line,

connecting to each other openly on their edges, and flowing downwards until reaching solid ground. These katzaims are usually concentrated in the Sana’a Basin area.

The organisation of this lecture comes within the

framework of the bilateral cultural cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman, represented by the National Museum, and the sisterly Kingdom of Morocco, represented by the National Institute of Archaeological Sciences and Heritage.

Indian Social Club celebrates International Women’s Day

MUSCAT: Indian Social Club Oman, organised an event to celebrate International Women’s Day in the premises of Indian Social Club at Darsait on March 7.

The event kicked off with the women’s coordinator Mariam Cheriyam highlighting the great strides women have made through the years. It was followed by the women dancing to the thumping musical beats of the DJ of the evening, Prakash Wadhwani.

The women danced to their hearts content. There were exciting spot prizes some of which were complimentary gifts sponsored by Mawarid Trading Company and Sanghani Trading Co. The women enjoyed their special day

thoroughly. The assorted live chat kept them fuelled to expend all their energy on the dance floor.

The selfie corner was yet another attraction for the ladies to indulge in photography sessions with their stylish poses.

The placards with catch phrases were very inviting to the selfie corner.

The event concluded with the vote of thanks by the women’s co-ordinator conveying her appreciation to the Chairman of the Indian Social Club, Oman, Babu Rajendran for the continued support of ISC for such events. It was indeed a memorable evening, for all those who attended the event.



Participants at an event to mark International Women’s Day in the premises of Indian Social Club at Darsait



Rains put a green crown on Al Batinah North

SIHAM AL SAIDI
SUHAR, MARCH 19

The recent rains in the wilayats of Al Batinah North Governorate have added a dash of green to the area enhancing its soil fertility, greening mountains, and ensuring the continuous water flow in Wadis and springs.

This surge in precipitation is expected to lead to a significant increase in crop yields, marking a promising season for farmers.

One of the most notable effects of the plentiful rainfall is the revival of soil fertility. The rains supply nutrients and create an ideal environment for plant



growth. Farmers across the region have reported healthier crops and higher yields, attributing their success to the richness of the soil nurtured by the rains in recent months. Moreover, the greening of mountains has been a picturesque sight across Al Batinah North. The mountains

and hills that were dry are now crowned in lush greenery.

Adil al Saidi said, “Al Batinah now looks like Dhofar in Khareef with mountains covered in grass.” This transformation not only adds to the natural beauty of the area but also provides habitats for various wildlife species.

The flow of Wadis and springs has been robust and continuous, thanks to the sustained rainfall. Dry wadis are now filled with water, supporting local communities with a steady supply of water for farming and domestic use. This uninterrupted flow is crucial for maintaining agricultural productivity and

sustaining livelihoods. Not only that, these wadis and waterfalls attract tourists and encourage families for picnics to places like Wadi Bani Omar in Saham and Wadi Shafan in Al Khabourah.

As a result of the adequate water, crop yields have seen a remarkable increase. Farmers have witnessed bumper harvests of staple crops such as wheat, barley, and dates which can meet the demands of local markets and provide export opportunities.

A farmer from Saham said, “This year we witnessed early growing for some crops like wheat and we expect more output than before due to the recent rains.”

Oman-based artists showcase works at ‘Treasures of Oman’

MUSCAT: The Scientific College of Design is conducting a 15 day-long art exhibition, which began on Monday.

Dr Khamis al Balushi, Board of Trustees Chairman, at Scientific College of Design (SCD), inaugurated the art exhibition along with Dr Mona Kamal Ismail, Dean, Scientific College of Design, Dr Imad Adel, BoD Representative, and Dr Mohammedh Tarik.

Over 30 Oman-based artists will showcase about 40 of their works of art on a theme based on “Treasures of Oman”.

Artist Rema Sivakumar who has curated the exhibition says, “This is a great experience to work with all the heads of the

department, professors, students and artists where one feels like a college ambience and the artists themselves felt like students by observation, understanding various works. The theme includes abstract, realism, contemporary art along with photography, sculpture art, ceramic art works and beautiful calligraphies associated with Oman.”

The artists, during their explanation of their ideas and actions, showed a deep level of knowledge and know-how they had performed their tasks. The glass gallery at the SCD is the platform to showcase different unique works of art based on different colours and mediums.

Dr Mona, SCD Dean, also



Dr Khamis al Balushi, Chairman, Scientific College of Design, inaugurating ‘Treasures of Oman’ art exhibition on Monday



Oman-based artists showcase works at ‘Treasures of Oman’ exhibition during its inauguration

expressed admiration for the artwork which took into account works of art inspired by the Omani environment, Arab and Islamic culture, in addition to the ideas of modernity and contemporary art.

Some of the artists taking part in the two-week long exhibition include Parul Razdan Bradoo, Rachel Eapen, Mona Ahmadi, Krishna S, Simran Ali, Mina Rezaee, Aisha Dosani, Saleem Saki,

Mohammed Rafi, Radhakrishnan, Anjali Babu, Anuradha Shanbhag, Lisa Janssens, Emerson Sumaoang, Mohammed Mehdi, Idris bin Thani al Harrasi, Nessie Nazerane, Soni Budhia, Kavitha

Shali, Mehren, July, Maryam Mottaghi, Rema Sivakumar, Naif bin Salim al Ghafri, Tatinee Dey, Yelo, Abolfal Hodaee and Rashmi Dauria. The exhibition concludes on April 9.



ISRAEL USES STARVATION AS ‘WEAPON OF WAR’: UN



A boy fills water containers from a hose in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. – AFP

GENEVA: The UN said on Tuesday that Israel’s severe restrictions on aid into war-ravaged Gaza coupled with its military offensive could amount to using starvation as a “weapon of war”, which would be a “war crime”.

United Nations human rights chief Volker Turk denounced the rampant hunger and looming famine in Gaza.

Turk said that “the situation of hunger, starvation and famine is a result of Israel’s extensive restrictions on the entry and distribution of humanitarian aid and commercial goods”.

It was also linked to the “displacement of most of the population, as well as the destruction of crucial civilian infrastructure”, he said.

“The extent of Israel’s continued restrictions on the entry of aid into Gaza, together with the manner in which it continues to conduct hostilities, may amount to the use of starvation as a method of war,

The extent of Israel’s continued restrictions on the entry of aid into Gaza may amount to the use of starvation as a method of war, which is a war crime

VOLKER TURK
UN human rights chief

which is a war crime.”

His spokesman, Jeremy Laurence, told reporters in Geneva that the final determination of whether “starvation is being used as a weapon of war” would be determined by a court.

The comments came after a UN-backed food security assessment determined that the war-torn Palestinian territory is facing imminent famine.

The devastating war since October 7 has left roughly half of Gazans — around 1.1 million people — experiencing “catastrophic” hunger, the

assessment warned.

Without a surge of aid, famine would hit the 300,000 people in Gaza’s war-battered north by May, it said.

Israel’s retaliatory offensive has killed more than 31,800 people, most of them women and children, according to Gaza’s health ministry.

Jens Laerke, spokesman for the UN humanitarian agency OCHA, pointed to the difficulty of clearly determining if the strict criteria have been met to declare a famine.

“The famine thresholds may already be the case in northern

Gaza,” he told reporters, highlighting that for weeks people had already been reduced to eating bird seed, animal fodder, wild grass and weeds.

Looking ahead, he warned that without more aid, Gaza could soon be looking at “more than 200 people dying from starvation per day”.

Turk said that “the clock is ticking”. “Everyone, especially those with influence, must insist that Israel acts to facilitate the unimpeded entry and distribution of needed humanitarian assistance and commercial goods to end starvation and avert all risk of famine.”

He demanded “an immediate ceasefire, as well as the unconditional release of Israeli captive still held in Gaza”.

Israel’s diplomatic mission in Geneva rejected Turk’s statement, insisting that he was seeking “once again to blame Israel for the situation and absolve the responsibility of the UN”. — AFP

Food aid from Cyprus reaches the north

NICOSIA: A US-based charity said a consignment of almost 200 tonnes of food aid had reached starving people in northern Gaza on Tuesday, a week after being despatched via a maritime route from the Cypriot port of Larnaca.

World Central Kitchen (WCK), working with the United Arab Emirates and Spanish charity Open Arms, sent the food via the 322-km sea route from Larnaca to a makeshift jetty off Gaza.

A convoy of eight trucks belonging to the World Food Programme (WFP) then ferried the aid — the equivalent of half a million meals — to its final destination on Tuesday.

A UN-backed report said on Monday that famine was “imminent” in the northern Gaza Strip, where some 300,000 people are trapped by fighting. Across the whole Gaza Strip, the number of people facing “catastrophic hunger” has risen to 1.1 million.

A second vessel is now moored at Larnaca with 240 tonnes of food onboard, waiting to travel pending weather conditions, WCK and Cypriot government officials said.

“WCK is ready to send tonnes of food weekly to Gaza with support from the international community,” WCK said.

Aid agencies say the food that can be delivered by sea to Gaza, though welcome, is completely

inadequate for the scale of people’s needs and they have urged Israel to allow far more aid in by road.

Cyprus, which backed the WCK initiative, aims to coordinate more aid to the besieged Palestinian enclave. It will host officials from a number of countries on March 21 for talks on the issue, government spokesperson Konstantinos Letymbiotis said.

“There will be an exchange of views on what material support states could offer... The extent of humanitarian assistance non-combatants have in Gaza requires the support of many countries,” he said.

More than five months into Israel’s ground and air campaign, launched in response to October 7 attack, there are widespread shortages of food, medicines and clean water in Gaza, doctors and aid agencies say. The Kamal Adwan hospital, caring for Fadi, had also treated most of the 27 children the health ministry in Gaza says have died of malnutrition and dehydration in recent weeks.

Disease is aggravating the dire lack of food. Dehydration from diarrhoea, which the World Health Organization says is rampant in the mass tent cities where displaced people cram together without proper sewage or clean water, hastens malnutrition. — Reuters



Palestinians gather to receive food as Gaza residents face crisis levels of hunger, in Jabalia. – Reuters

Qatar ‘cautiously optimistic’ as Gaza truce talks progress

DOHA: Negotiations for a Gaza ceasefire and captives release are progressing in Doha and a counter-proposal could soon be presented to Palestinian movement group Hamas, Qatar said on Tuesday.

Israel’s spy chief has left the Qatari capital but technical teams are now discussing details of a potential deal, foreign ministry spokesperson Majed al Ansari said.

Mossad head David Barnea had flown in for talks with the Qatari premier and Egyptian officials on Monday, the first since mediators failed to secure a truce before the Muslim holy month of Ramadhan, which began last week.

“We are at the point now where we are expecting that

the counter-proposal would be presented to Hamas, but this is not the final step in the process,” Ansari said.

“I don’t think we are at a moment where we can say we are close to a deal. We are cautiously optimistic because talks have resumed, but it’s too early to announce any successes,” he added.

On Monday, a Hamas official said the Palestinian groups would accept a partial Israeli withdrawal before exchanging prisoners, easing previous demands for a complete pullout from Gaza.

The official Osama Hamdan, speaking to the Al Manar TV station of Lebanon, held out hope of a “complete end of military operations”, saying negotiations could be concluded “within days”.



This picture shows a view of destroyed buildings in the Palestinian territory following Israeli bombardments. – AFP

A threatened Israeli assault on the city of Rafah, where about 1.5 million Gazans are sheltering, could derail the talks

Last week, Hamas proposed a six-week truce and the release of about 42 captives in exchange for 20 to 50 Palestinian prisoners per captive. However, a threatened Israeli assault on the city of Rafah, where about 1.5 million Gazans are sheltering, most of them displaced by fighting elsewhere in the territory, could derail the talks, Ansari said.

“Any operation in Rafah right now will be a humanitarian catastrophe,” he said, adding

that it would be “difficult for the negotiation process to succeed within the parameters of such an attack”.

US President Joe Biden said on Monday he had asked Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to send a team to Washington to discuss how to avoid an all-out assault on the southern Gaza city.

Palestinian groups seized about 250 Israeli and foreign captives during the October 7 attack, but dozens were released during a week-long truce in November.

Israel believes about 130 remain in Gaza, including 33 who are presumed dead. Israel’s retaliatory offensive against Palestinians has killed at least 31,819 people in Gaza, most of them women and children, according to the health ministry in the territory. — AFP



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In brief

MARSEILLE



MACRON VOWS UNPRECEDENTED RAID AGAINST DRUGS

French President Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday pledged an “unprecedented operation” against drug trafficking in Marseille during a surprise visit to the southern port city beset by gangland killings.

“In Marseille and other cities in France, we have launched an unprecedented operation to put a stop to drug trafficking and ensure republican order,” Macron wrote on X.

The operation will require the mobilisation of thousands of police deployed weekly to end a crisis. “The goal is to try to destroy the networks and the traffickers to make those people who make your life impossible go away,” he said. — AFP

SYDNEY



TROPICAL CYCLONE TRAPS 700 PEOPLE IN NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

About 700 people were stranded in far northern Australia on Tuesday after a tropical cyclone barrelled through their remote community, cutting off links with the rest of the country.

The Australian Defence Force tried to evacuate residents of the small Northern Territory community of Borroloola, but attempts to land aircraft were hampered by wild weather.

The Category 3 storm pummelled the area with heavy rainfall and intense winds of around 170-200 kilometres per hour. “Poor weather prevented evacuations yesterday, but we expect new deployment will occur today,” said Emergency Minister Murray Watt. — AFP

NAIROBI



KENYA BUS CRASH KILLS 11 STUDENTS ON ACADEMIC TRIP

A collision between a bus and truck has killed 11 students from a top Kenyan university and injured dozens, prompting the government on Tuesday to announce investigations into a “spate of road accidents”.

The Kenyatta University students were enroute to the coastal town of Mombasa when the accident happened on a busy highway at Maungu. Ten died on impact and another died later in hospital, police said, adding that 42 people were seriously injured. “The driver was overtaking a fleet and as it was raining heavily, the bus skidded to the right side of the road,” police said. — AFP

Washington will not let Ukraine fail

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE: Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin promised on Tuesday that the United States will not let Ukraine fail in fighting off Russia, even as further aid remains stalled in Congress and Kyiv’s forces face shortages of munitions.

The Republican-led House of Representatives has been blocking \$60 billion in assistance for Ukraine and the United States has warned that a recent \$300 million package would only last a few weeks.

“The ‘United States will not let Ukraine fail’, Austin said at the opening of a meeting in Germany of Ukraine’s international supporters, at which he is seeking to secure further assistance for Kyiv.

“We remain determined to provide Ukraine with the resources that it needs to resist the Kremlin’s aggression,” he said.

Washington announced \$300 million in assistance for Ukraine last week, but Austin said it was only possible due to savings on recent purchases.

“We were only able to support this much-needed package by identifying some unanticipated contract savings”, Austin said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said in a statement the day before that it is “critically important for us that the Congress soon completes all the necessary procedures and



Ukrainian civilian women practice with weapons as they attend training for women focused on the use of weapons and combat medical kit, in Kyiv. — AFP file photo

makes a final decision” on aid for Kyiv.

Top US military officer General Charles “CQ” Brown told journalists en route to the Ukraine meeting that Kyiv’s troops are “having to pay attention to their supply rates and how they execute.”

There is an “incremental kind of back and forth between Ukraine and Russia”, with “incremental gains on both sides”, Brown said.

But he noted that “even as the

“We remain determined to provide Ukraine with the resources that it needs to resist the Kremlin’s aggression

LLOYD AUSTIN
US Defence Secretary

Russians have gained territory, they do it at a pretty big cost in number of casualties, like in personnel, but also in number of pieces of equipment that are being taken out.”

Austin said in his remarks on Tuesday that “Russia has paid a staggering cost for President Vladimir Putin’s imperial dreams”, using “up to \$211 billion to equip, deploy, maintain, and sustain its imperial aggression against Ukraine.”

“At least 315,000 Russian

troops have been killed or wounded” since Russia launched its all-out attack of Ukraine in 2022, Austin said, adding that Ukraine has also “sunk, destroyed, or damaged some 20 medium-to-large Russian navy vessels.”

Austin and other US officials have spearheaded the push for international support for Ukraine, quickly forging a coalition to back Kyiv after Russia attacked and coordinating aid from countries. — AFP

India stares at summer water crisis as reservoir levels slide



Men fill a tank with water in a residential neighbourhood that is facing water scarcity, in Bengaluru. — Reuters file photo

NEW DELHI: India’s main reservoirs have hit their lowest March levels in five years, government data showed, indicating a possible squeeze on drinking water and power availability this summer.

In major centres such as India’s ‘Silicon Valley’ Bengaluru, home to firms like Google, water supply to firms like Google, water supply is already being curtailed.

The 150 reservoirs monitored by the federal government - which supply water for drinking and irrigation and are the country’s key source of hydro-electricity — were filled to just 40 per cent of capacity last week, government data showed.

In the southern state of Karnataka, home to Bengaluru, the main reservoir was down to 16 per cent capacity.

Water reserves are the lowest for March since 2019, when reservoir capacity fell to 35 per cent and saw southern cities such as Chennai run out of water.

The situation could escalate the crisis in central and southern cities which face extreme heatwaves in April and May. India’s water resources get replenished only around June with pre-monsoon and monsoon rains.

In other industrial states such as Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and agricultural states Uttar Pradesh and Punjab levels are below their 10-year averages.

Longer term, there is a risk of water wars if governments do not act now, said Sandeep Anirudhan, convener of the Coalition for Water Security.

The low water levels follow a

monsoon season last year that saw the lightest rains since 2018, after the El Nino weather pattern made last August the driest in more than a century. The monsoon was also uneven, with some areas receiving more rain than others.

A senior official in the federal power ministry said the ministry is monitoring reservoir levels but does not yet anticipate a situation that could lead to a shutdown of plants.

“If the situation becomes worse due to lack of rains, drinking water supply will get priority over power generation,” he said.

The federal water resources ministry and the water commission did not respond to e-mailed requests for immediate comment.

— Reuters

UK deputy PM launches global push to protect elections from AI

SEOUL: Democratic countries around the world should band together to confront the threat of AI used by malign states to threaten free elections and spread misinformation, British Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden said on Tuesday.

In Seoul for the Summit for Democracy, Dowden on Monday announced what he hopes will be a “groundbreaking” new global government compact on countering deceptive use of artificial intelligence by foreign states in elections.

South Korea is hosting the third Summit for Democracy conference, an initiative of US President Joe Biden aimed at discussing ways to stop democratic backsliding and erosion of rights and freedoms.

Details of the compact are still being worked out, but Dowden said several countries had signed on, without naming any.

Citing how major technology companies agreed at the Munich Security Conference in February to coordinate responses to AI-generated deepfakes that deliberately trick voters, Dowden

said it is time for governments to follow suit.

“What the UK is leading on is a government-led process, a government-led agreement to tackle the threat from AI from foreign states,” he said in an interview at the UK Embassy in Seoul.

Britain has been embroiled in a debate over an edited photograph of Kate, Princess of Wales, for which she apologised after several leading news organisations, including Reuters, withdrew the picture citing post-publication analysis that showed it did not meet editorial standards.

Dowden said that incident is “totally separate” from the misinformation risks from “malign foreign states” seeking to interfere in democratic elections.

The compact “is not about the internal politics of each individual nation states that’s rightly a matter for nation states”, he said.

The risks from AI come amid other challenges to freedom and democracy around the world, Dowden said. — Reuters



Britain's Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden (L), South Korea's Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul (2nd L), US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (2nd R) and other leaders pose during the Third Summit for Democracy in Seoul. — AFP

Oman’s natural soft power



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The writer is an entrepreneur and innovation adviser

More than eight thousand years ago, many areas in the Arabian Peninsula, including the Sultanate of Oman were green and lush wadis which are now dry riverbeds, according to several archeological studies. This is evident in historic rock paintings that depict vibrant flora and fauna around Oman. As climate changed, migrations ensued, and populations settled and thrived in a new power centre — in Mesopotamia and the more Fertile Crescent. Today, with climate change happening before our eyes it is also likely to alter the balance of power not only in our region but also around the world. Deserts, oceans and mountains and their enormous wealth guarantees that our world’s attention stays focused on Arabia, for the foreseeable future. **The power of deserts** Contrary to a common belief deserts are anything but empty. Deserts are full of people, animals and plants that have not only mastered living in hot and arid conditions, but also fell in

love with the poetic souls, soft sands, clear skies and bright stars. The opportunities today are endless, not the least being the rising silicon economy, that refers to our increasing reliance on microchips in easing and digitising our lives, there is an increasing demand for rediscovering what precious metals the desert sand can offer. **Ocean and wadis** Ecotourism matches the rising demand of present and future generations for more sustainable travel. In addition to ecotourism, the slower and simpler pace of life in nature is helping us maintain our social and mental balance that were impacted by city life and social media. As people around the world seek a healthier disconnection our oceans and wadis can be excellent slow life attractions. **Mountains** Muscat is the only Arabian Gulf capital with mountains and wadis. All over Oman, Mountains have preserved their pristine landscape in the face of over development.

Rediscovering the geology of mountains is not only refreshing, it can share with us valuable secrets about the universe and how they survived millions of years of earth evolution. **Oman In Focus** Stories are soft power in a time when power means safety, security and wealth. Nature tells so many untold, authentic stories. For example, a recently released natural history documentary, titled Oman in Focus, shows the insatiable beauty of the biodiversity of Arabia’s wonder. This documentary masterpiece, produced by Maisa al Hooti and aired recently on Al Jazeera Documentary, brings to life the interwinding stories of how drops of rain and Indian Ocean water seep into shiny sand dunes and rugged rocks of Al Hajar Mountains and Samhan mountain. In our times that are filled with human made tragic visuals of conflicts, this natural history documentary is the perfect invitation to focus on the bigger picture and accumulate this gift of natural history visuals to present and future generations.

The Netherlands: the world’s global legal battlefield

From conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East to salt mining in Brazil — courts in the Netherlands have become Ground Zero in a global legal battlefield with far-reaching implications. A strong legal tradition, home to many multinationals and international organisations, and global ease of reach: the country has several trump cards making it the preferred legal arbiter of choice. Three months into 2024, the city of The Hague’s two most influential international courts have already cast headline-grabbing rulings on Russia’s attack on Ukraine and the spiralling conflict in Israel and the Gaza Strip. In early March, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for two high-ranking Russian commanders, while in January the UN’s top International Court of Justice (ICJ) handed down emergency measures telling Israel to boost aid in Gaza and to protect its population. At the same time, a local civil court handed down a landmark judgement halting the supply of F-35 fighter jet parts from the Netherlands to Israel. Victims of devastating salt mining in the Brazilian city of Maceio are suing petrochemical giant Braskem for compensation before a Rotterdam court — one of many international compensation suits launched in recent years. An Amsterdam court in February quashed an appeal by Russia in a record \$50-billion case involving a compensation claim by former shareholders of the dismantled oil giant Yukos. Recent years have also seen Dutch courts hand down rulings in major climate cases including one won by NGO group Milieudefensie in 2021. In that case, the court ordered petrochemical giant Shell to curtail greenhouse emissions in what is considered the first major climate change ruling against a corporation. “Cases with international implications regularly reach the Dutch courts partly because the Netherlands is home to transnational companies with a global reach, such as Shell, Unilever or Heineken,” added Leon Castellanos-Jankiewicz, senior researcher at the Asser Institute for International and European Law. Coupled with good infrastructure with global reach and the perception that the Netherlands was a “neutral ground” made it an appealing choice for parties seeking an impartial resolution, experts said. The Netherlands also hosted several international courts and tribunals as well as agencies such as the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and Europol, “embedding these organisations in the Dutch legal landscape,” legal experts said. — AFP

The image in the imagination of artificial intelligence



Dr Muamar bin Ali Al Tob

The writer is an academic and researcher

Some of us try to translate our thoughts into images by imagination, and others — especially in childhood — attempt to turn these thoughts into pictures drawn on blank papers, hoping these visuals can aid their deeply held wishes or desires to come true. Thus, they find their possible solace through the creativity of converting these emotions and thoughts into still images that in their moment, transport them to a lost world. This wish is no longer confined to children’s scribbles and artists’ innovations but has become possible through artificial intelligence tools and models capable of generating images in the same manner, “imagination.” This article will focus on one of the most important image-generating tools used in artificial intelligence, known as DALL-E which is part of the ChatGPT 4 model. I will introduce the reader to this smart tool, its working mechanism, capabilities, and personal experience after using it, which could highlight its strengths and weaknesses. OpenAI first introduced the DALL-E in 2021, making it part of the smart tools associated with ChatGPT 4, which recently included other tools, some of which are considered subsidiary under the umbrella of main tools like DALL-E. Currently, there are about a dozen subsidiary tools related to DALL-E, all concerning image generation, sharing a general function of generating images. The name DALL-E is derived from the Spanish surrealist painter Salvador Dali (1904-1989), a prominent figure in the school of surrealism, and also from the character WALL-E created by Pixar, a company specialised in computer-animated productions. DALL-E employs a deep learning algorithm, which relies on mathematical systems to assist in its crucial stages, particularly the “learning or training” phase. One of the key systems is BackPropagation, along with the cost Function or loss function, which evaluates the training capability of the algorithm on the given data and measure its fit and



The name DALL-E is derived from the Spanish surrealist painter Salvador Dali (1904-1989), a prominent figure in the school of surrealism, and also from the character WALL-E created by Pixar, a company specialised in computer-animated productions.

THE ONGOING DIGITAL EVOLUTION PROMISES MORE BREAKTHROUGHS IN AI-DRIVEN IMAGE GENERATION, MAKING IT WIDELY ACCESSIBLE AND CAPABLE OF BRINGING ANY IMAGINATION TO LIFE.

suitability. These are general principles shared by most artificial intelligence algorithms based on deep learning. This article will delve into the working mechanism of the DALL-E tool, where the training phase is one of the first and most crucial tasks undertaken by the algorithm. Here, training on a wide variety of images allows the tool to understand diverse image patterns and imagine their artistic aspects, closely resembling the human brain’s mechanism in imagining and mentally generating images, both awake and in dreams. The digital system core of DALL-E consists of an auto-encoder, which branches into two systems: the encoder, which receives images, and the decoder, which generates images after decrypting their digital codes.

This main system, relied upon by DALL-E is similar to the Transformer system used by the ChatGPT model in generating texts. During the training phases of DALL-E the transformer system intervenes by transferring the descriptive text of images -described by humans to the model in text form- into another input that aids the DALL-E in imagining and generating images. This explains the significant computational capacity required by the DALL-E tool compared to the lesser computational capacity needed for the text-generating model. My exploration of the DALL-E tool wasn’t driven by a passion for art, but a curiosity about its algorithm and image generation capabilities. I experimented with various interaction methods, providing descriptions in both Arabic and English, varying from vague to highly detailed, and requesting modifications post-generation. These experiments revealed the tool’s strengths and limitations. It effectively translates detailed descriptions into realistic images, but struggles with vague ones and sometimes misses specific features despite modification requests. These challenges are typical for such digital models and are expected to improve with future advancements. The ongoing digital evolution promises more breakthroughs in AI-driven image generation, making it widely accessible and capable of bringing any imagination to life.

Finding happiness in everyday life

Can we say we are just really happy with where we are in life? Why is it that whenever we become happy about something, the opposite of it always happens? Sometimes, most things in our lives are good, and one thing could still make us unhappy. Why is it so?

The answer could lie in the fact that it is totally normal to not feel happy at times, even when life is going great. Very often, it happens that most aspects of our lives may be positive, but one area could still drag us down and stop us from feeling as happy as we could be.

When you no longer feel the same happiness you once enjoyed, it may seem like life has lost its meaning. Being happy and cheery is not a consistent feeling because ups and downs happen in our lives.

However, it's possible to find the happiness that we're all seeking, and it just takes a bit of patience and practice.

After my retirement nearly a couple of years ago, many of my friends and well-wishers asked me whether I was happy with my present life and its routines. My answer to them is, "I retired only from something, but I retired to something new."

I never looked back and tried to always be happy, despite much desperation. Slowly, I started to learn how to be happier. In addition to reading and writing in line with my passion and profession, I started listening to other people talking about their own happiness!

I also have a small farm where I grow vegetables and other plants. My identity is not wrapped up in what I do. I talk to the plants every morning and evening while watering them. They respond to me. I can clearly see that, and it gives me a sense of peace and tranquillity.

There is no denying the fact that along the way, and even now, there are days where unhappiness creeps into my life. There are times when things turn bleak and I feel sad.



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After all, a happier life doesn't mean there are always rainbows and sunshine in our lives, which are an assortment of anger, frustration, boredom, loneliness, and even sadness!

As everyone wants to be happy, countries around the world are looking at happiness as an indicator of national well-being and considering happiness in policy making.

Why I write all these is because the world is celebrating Happiness Day today, March 20.

This day is all about feeling happy, being healthy, and taking care of our minds.

It's a reminder to all of us that happiness is important and that we should do things that make us happy.

Past experiences show that happy people engage in their communities and help others, making them important individuals for flourishing societies, thus shaping a nation's happiness.

Editors of the World Happiness Report, an insight into happiness for the young, the old, and everyone in between, argue that the goal of government should be to implement those policies that are best positioned to increase happiness in society.

"Happiness is increasingly considered a proper measure of social progress and a goal of public policy," they say. This means making the happiness of people in a country a policy priority.

As such, increasing people's happiness will also lead them to behave in ways that benefit others around them.

Happier people more often engage in their communities and help others, making them important building blocks for flourishing societies and shaping a nation's happiness.

I am now coming back to where I started. While we all aspire to be happy in our lives, we should not allow those 'numb' emotions to cripple our day.

The fact is that we have to take care of ourselves. We hold the key to your happiness. It's as simple as that!

THERE IS NO DENYING THE FACT THAT ALONG THE WAY, AND EVEN NOW, THERE ARE DAYS WHERE UNHAPPINESS CREEPS INTO MY LIFE. THERE ARE TIMES WHEN THINGS TURN BLEAK AND I FEEL SAD

THE POWER OF VOTE!



A college student with a painted face spreads awareness for first generation voters during an election campaign ahead of India's upcoming national elections in Chennai on Tuesday. – AFP

Big tech shocks electric utilities...

If John D Rockefeller were around today, he'd be screwing a Google Nest – the pioneering smart thermostat – into the wall of his home. The notoriously thrifty oil baron would have jumped at the chance to save on his monthly energy bill.

Traditional energy companies, from ExxonMobil (the direct descendent of Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company) to local utilities, have begun to embrace Big Tech, brimming with both hope and trepidation. Will companies like Google, Amazon and Meta put the meter reader and his bosses out to pasture? Who wins if they do?

Big Tech has already shown a propensity to disrupt. Just 25 years ago, a "googol" — the inspiration for the search engine's name — was an unfathomably large number, a cloud was a billowing puff in the sky, and 5G was the row in which you parked your car at the garage. In the intervening decades, tech companies have upended industries both at the enterprise and retail levels.

Consider pharmacies, which relied on the patience of shoppers to wait days for a prescription and stand in queues to retrieve them. Now some companies will confidentially sell overnight drugs to calm your nerves, grow your hair, or put you in the mood. Meanwhile, One Medical, which Amazon purchased last year, offers 24-hour on-demand virtual care and same- and next-day appointments — quite a feat considering the average wait time to see a physician in major American cities is more than three weeks. No wonder the profit



Todd G Buchholz

The writer is a former White House director of economic policy under president George H W Bush and managing director of the Tiger hedge fund.



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margins of brick-and-mortar drugstores have fallen, plunging Rite-Aid into bankruptcy.

Just as the world needs better access to medical care, it also needs more efficient and reliable power. Too many people are sitting in the dark too often, and for too long. Even in developed countries like the United States, the average duration of a blackout doubled between 2013 and 2021, from 3.5 hours to more than seven hours, while their frequency jumped by nearly 20 per cent. Not surprisingly, Americans are taking a dimmer view of their local utilities, with 71 per cent saying they would switch providers, while businesses complain that power outages cost them \$150 billion per year.

That doesn't mean utilities deserve all the blame. In the US, local and state politicians and regulators dictate profits and prices, while delaying capital upgrades. The US Department of Energy spends around five years assessing a new project before approval, leaving roughly 2,000 gigawatts of annual capacity waiting in the queue.

Fast-growing trillion-dollar tech companies cannot afford to lose power, so they are taking matters into their own hands. Amazon's clean-energy portfolio, which comprises solar and wind projects in more than 20 US states and 27 countries, is now big enough

to power 7.2 million American homes each year. In Nevada's Blue Mountain geothermal field, Google is partnering with clean-energy start-up Fervo to power the tech behemoth's data centres by tapping the heat trapped below Jurassic rocks.

Unlike a utility saddled with old plants that need to be decommissioned, tech companies can start anew. The average age of an oil-burning steam-turbine plant in the Midwest is pushing 70 years. In fact, Whiting, Wisconsin, runs a hydropower facility built in 1891 — 40 years before actor Boris Karloff was hooked up to lightning-conducting electrodes in the original Frankenstein.

Although self-interest motivated tech companies to create new power supplies, they have their sights set on residential consumers.

Fortunately, Big Tech is already welcome in the home. Amazon evolved from delivering brown boxes of books to answering questions with Alexa and recording doorbell activity with Ring cameras.

Google recently merged Nest Renew, its service to help users optimise their electricity usage, with the software business OhmConnect to align the energy consumption of households across the country. The new company, Renew Home, will pay people to lower their thermostats and turn off their lights during peak hours or even, when combined with artificial intelligence-enabled weather forecasting, before lightning storms strike.

Executives at traditional electric utilities should respond to these free-wheeling, free-spending

technical wizards by rewatching The Godfather, Part II, and heeding mob boss Michael Corleone's advice: "Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer." At the same time, they should focus on communicating better with their customers. Has your utility ever sent you a newsletter, a movie link, or a dozen roses? Or does it come to mind only when you have a complaint, whether about the lights going off or a meter reader skulking in the backyard?

Lastly, utilities should work with Big Tech to boost efficiency. A few weeks ago, Southern Company announced a deal with Samsung SmartThings to create an innovation laboratory aimed at prodding communication among smart refrigerators, dishwashers, and garage-door openers in an effort to save power.

In San Diego, the utility company Sempra is partnering with Fermata Energy so that electric vehicles can sell their battery power back to the grid when demand peaks.

Ever since the age of Rockefeller and Thomas Edison, utilities were the Steady Eddies of investments, the clichéd favourite of dividend-seeking widows and other risk-averse investors. Whether or not the climate is getting warmer, the sector is getting hotter. And as Big Tech enters, sparks are beginning to fly. ©Project Syndicate, 2024



World also needs more efficient and reliable power.

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SEEB CROWNED OVL CHAMPIONS

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 19

Seeb were crowned champions of the Oman Volleyball League (OVL) after defeating Al Salam 3-1 in the final that was held at the Sultan Qaboos Complex in Bausher on Monday night.

The match was held under the auspices of Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi, Under-Secretary for Education at the Ministry of Education and Head of the Oman School Sports Association.

Seeb started nicely, winning the first and second sets, while Al Salam returned to the match by taking the third set. However, Seeb claimed the fourth set to take the trophy.

The first serve of the match came in favour of Al Salam



but was missed by Amjad al Saadi, then Al Salam quickly corrected his mistake by scoring the equaliser through Murad Khan. Seeb scored two points to take a 3-1 lead. Al Salam reduced the difference by scoring a point, then Seeb earned 6 points to make the score 9-4. The excitement continued between

the two teams until the first set ended in favour of Seeb 25-19.

In the second set, Al Salam started strongly to take a 3-0 lead.

Seeb came back into set tying at 4-4 and later took the lead at 16-13. Seeb players maintained their performance to take the second set 25-18.



Seeb players continued in the same way and they were able to open the scoring in the third set with two points, while Al Salam scored a point to make it 3-1. Al Salam tried hard to take advantage and led 13-10. They withstood Seeb players' challenge to prevail 25-21 in the third set.

In the fourth set, Al Salam

players were able to open the scoring, then Seeb came back well to equalise.

The two teams exchanged scoring points to make the score 16-16, after which Seeb players managed to control and score 4 points to make it 20-16. Seeb kept their advantage and won the set and match at 25-20.

INDIVIDUAL AWARDS

After the end of the final match, Seeb were crowned with the champions trophy, Al Salam claimed the runners-up prize and Majees finished third.

Among the individual awards of the league, Seeb's Abdullah al Muqbali won the award for the best libero, Seeb's Mohammed al Muqbali won the award for the best setter and Ahmed al Tobi (Seeb) and Khalid al Muqbali (Al Salam) won the award for the best players in Centre 3.

Mahmoud al Saadi (Seeb) and Hilal al Muqbali (Majees) won the award for the best players in Centre 4 and Al Salam's Murad Khan won the award for the best hitter, while Seeb's Saud al Maamari, bagged the award for the best all-rounder of the league.

Oman eye win to revive chances in WC qualifying

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 19

Oman will eye a win against Malaysia to revive their chances in leading the Group D as they will meet on Thursday in the third round matches of the Preliminary Joint Qualification - Round 2 for the Fifa World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027.

The match will kick off at 10:00 pm (Oman Time) at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex. Malaysia are currently topping the group by six points from two games while Oman are second with three points.

It will be the first official task for Oman's new head coach Jaroslav Silhavy, who replaced former Croatian coach Branko Ivankovic. Ivankovic has landed a job as new head coach of China.

The Jaroslav Silhavy-coached side wants nothing less than a win that will ensure reviving Oman's chances in topping the group.

Oman team, under the watchful eyes of Silhavy, will conclude their latest technical preparations by a final training session on Wednesday at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex and the rivals will have the training at the same venue. The Czech coach led Oman training sessions couple of days ago and he focused on different technical and tactical areas.

The pre-match press conference will take place on Wednesday as both teams head coaches will highlight on their readiness for the game. A player will accompany the head coach.

The away game takes place in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday. The Red Warriors will travel on the



following day of the match to Kuala Lumpur. The coaching staff is fully aware of the importance of snatching the winning points from these two games. Hence, it is expected that Oman team will show top performance in both

games after the disappointing match against Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek which ended for the hosts by 1-0 in the second match of the double qualifiers while Oman's campaign started with a 2-0 win against Chinese Taipei.

On the other side, Oman Football Association (OFA) announced attractive prizes for the fans who will attend the match to support the national team. Six cars will be in a lucky draw for the audience at the stadium. Oman will look to exploit home conditions and maximise the outputs.

NEW PHASE

Shaikh Salim al Wahaibi, OFA Chairman, expressed his gratitude for the great support from Omani fans to the national team. "We highly appreciate the efforts made by the fans, considering them as an integral part of the collective efforts to ensure the success of the team especially in the double qualifying event to the Fifa World Cup 2026 and AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027," he said in a press statement.

"The audience, in all its

spectrums, has the right to be disappointed because they are a loving and passionate audience for the team. It is natural that negative results for the team do not satisfy the fans, nor do they satisfy us. It is necessary to search for positive solutions for the team, and we appreciate all the reactions of the fans for the sake of the national team's interests first and foremost," he added.

"The national team is entering a new phase of competitions with great aspirations to reconcile its loyal and beloved fans. It is very important to support the team in this crucial phase. The team's stars understand and will play a significant role in presenting an honourable and impressive performance that reflects their readiness for the new phase," the OFA chief concluded.

Afghanistan dominate Ireland to win T20I series



Afghanistan's players celebrate winning the third Twenty20 match against Ireland at the Sharjah Cricket Stadium in Sharjah. — AFP

SHARJAH: Afghanistan proved too strong with bat and ball against Ireland as they claimed a 57-run victory in Sharjah on Monday to edge the T20I series 2-1.

A superb 72 not out from Ibrahim Zadran, backed up by the bowling of Azmatullah Omarzai, gave the hosts victory in the final match of Ireland's tour against Afghanistan.

"It is a great series win for us," said Afghanistan captain Rashid Khan, going on to praise the performance of his young side.

The Irish were unable to chase down a target of 156, with Omarzai's four wickets for just nine runs helping bowl the tourists out for 98 inside 18 overs.

Ireland won the first T20I

of the mini-series last week but consecutive wins on Sunday and Monday ensured Afghanistan recovered to take the three-game series, after earlier winning the ODI series 2-0.

For the third consecutive time, Khan won the toss against Ireland and as he did in Monday's 10-run win, he elected to bat first.

Batting at three, 22-year-old Zadran anchored Afghanistan's innings with his career-best T20I score of 72, which boosted the hosts to a total Ireland could not match.

Opener Rahmanullah Gurbaz rounded off a T20I series he will hope to forget on a personal level, after scores of zero and three in the first two matches, when Harry

Tector took a superb diving catch to dismiss him for six at the start of the third over.

Afghanistan were then ticking along nicely with Zadran and Sediquallah Atal at the crease, until Atal chipped a turning ball straight back to Gareth Delany.

In the very next over, Omarzai, on back-to-back golden ducks, was dropped by Delany on one but departed just two deliveries later, after lobbing Curtis Campher to Josh Little.

Mohammad Ishaq's arrival steadied the ship for Afghanistan as he mounted a crucial fourth-wicket stand of 54 with Zadran, until the number five mistimed a lob on 27 and Paul Stirling snaffled up the ball.

With just over five overs left, Zadran kept the scoreboard moving along for Afghanistan.

Ijaz Ahmadzai ably deputised him at the end with 10 runs from three balls, including a monster six in the last over, before he was run out trying to get his partner back on strike for the final delivery.

Ireland's run chase never really got underway, especially after Naveen-ul-Haq bowled both Andy Balbirnie and Lorcan Tucker with consecutive deliveries in the second over.

Some resistance came from Campher and Delany's 36-run sixth-wicket stand but the visitors were never really allowed to form any partnership of great merit by Afghanistan's pace attack. — AFP

Mumbai skipper Pandya fit to bowl in IPL, Kohli returns

NEW DELHI: All-rounder Hardik Pandya has declared himself fit to bowl in the upcoming Indian Premier League (IPL), a major boost for Mumbai as well as India ahead of the T20 World Cup in June.

Pandya has been out of action since last October after suffering an ankle injury during a 50-overs World Cup match in Pune.

The 30-year-old has replaced Rohit Sharma as Mumbai Indians captain for this year's IPL, which begins in Chennai on Friday.

"Yes, I will be bowling," Pandya told reporters on Monday, adding that he had regained full fitness in January.

"My injury in (the) World Cup was a freak injury. It had nothing to do with my past injuries, it had nothing to do with my fitness."

A fully fit Pandya will be India's preferred seam bowling all-rounder at the T20 World Cup in West Indies.

The change in leadership at Mumbai surprised many but Pandya did not think it would affect his relationship with India captain Rohit, who led the franchise to five IPL crowns.

"I don't think it will be awkward, or anything different. It will be a nice feeling because we've been playing (together) for 10 years," said Pandya, who led Gujarat Titans to the 2022 IPL title in their debut season.

The 30-year-old has replaced Rohit Sharma as Mumbai Indians captain for this year's IPL, which begins in Chennai on Friday.

"I've played my whole career under him, and I know he's going to have a hand on my shoulder always."

"He's been travelling, he's been playing. It's been a couple of months since we've seen each other. Once he comes, we'll definitely have a chat."

KOHLI BACK

Mumbai signed English left-arm fast bowler Luke Wood as a replacement for injured Australian Jason Behrendorff on Monday.

Royal Challengers Bangalore stalwart Virat Kohli will also return to action in the IPL after skipping India's 4-1 Test series victory against England due to personal reasons.

"It's really good to be back, firstly playing cricket and just starting off the IPL," Kohli told RCB TV.

"It's always exciting to come back to Bangalore for the start of the IPL season."

"I am pretty happy and excited to be back and I hope all the fans are excited and happy as well." — Reuters



Mumbai Indians' captain Hardik Pandya (L) and coach Mark Boucher attend a press conference in Mumbai, ahead of the Indian Premier League 2024. — AFP

Islamabad United clinch PSL title in last-ball thriller

KARACHI: Resilient Islamabad United snatched a last-ball thriller to beat Multan Sultans by two wickets in the final in Karachi on Monday, winning the Pakistan Super League title for a third time.

Young Hunain Shah pushed the final delivery of the last over for a boundary towards backward point as United overhauled a modest 160-run target at the National Stadium.

United needed eight runs off the 20th over bowled by Mohammad Ali and Hunain's elder brother Naseem Shah hit a boundary off the second delivery but with a single needed off the last two deliveries he fell caught behind.

However, Hunain kept his cool to give Sultans defeat in their third successive finals.

United skipper Shadab Khan

praised a total team effort.

"It was a total team effort," said Shadab. "We peaked at the right time in the league and that mattered in the end."

United also won the inaugural PSL title in 2016 and doubled it two years later.

Earlier, Sultans managed 159-9 in their 20 overs after winning the toss and electing to bat.

They were guided by a 40-ball 57 by Usman Khan and 26 by skipper Mohammad Rizwan.

Khan hit seven boundaries and a six but once he fell in the 16th over, Sultans lost five wickets for just 13 runs, slumping to 127-9.

Left-arm spinner Imad Wasim was the chief destroyer with 5-23 while Naseem grabbed 3-32.

It was Iftikhar Ahmed who revived the innings with a

whirlwind 20-ball 32 not out with three sixes and as many boundaries, scoring 31 in the last two overs.

United were also derailed from 121-4 to 129-7 but Wasim guided late order batters with a calm 17-ball 19 to help them cross the finish line.

For the winners, former New Zealand opener Martin Gupthill top-scored with a 32-ball 50 with three sixes and four boundaries.

Azam Khan hit a 22-ball 30 with a six and four boundaries.

United, Sultans, Peshawar Zalmi and Quetta Gladiators qualified for the play-offs while Karachi Kings and defending champions Lahore Qalandars were knocked out in the first round of the ninth edition of the League. — AFP



Islamabad United's players hold the Pakistan Super League (PSL) trophy as they celebrate their victory against Multan Sultans during the award ceremony for PSL Twenty20 final match at the National Stadium in Karachi on Tuesday. — AFP



SPURS ACE
SON BACK
ON ROAD
TO WORLD CUP

JAPAN ALSO EAGER TO MOVE
ON FROM ASIAN CUP SETBACK

HONG KONG: Son Heung-min and South Korea must move on from their turbulent Asian Cup when they return to World Cup qualifying on Thursday, while Japan face North Korea in a double-header that sees them travel to Pyongyang.

Asian football is back on the road to the 2026 World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico, a month after Qatar retained the continental crown on home soil with a 3-1 victory over Jordan.

Much has happened since South Korea were dumped out 2-0 by unfancied Jordan in the semifinals of the Asian Cup, including the sacking of coach Jurgen Klinsmann.

It emerged that skipper Son and Paris Saint-Germain attacking midfielder Lee Kang-in had been involved in a fracas on the eve of the match, leaving the Tottenham attacker with a dislocated finger.

Legendary German striker Klinsmann was dismissed after having promised to take South Korea to their first Asian title in 64 years. He was replaced on an interim basis by Hwang Sun-hong.

Son and Lee have since made up, and Hwang included the duo in his squad for the home game with Thailand on Thursday and the return fixture five days later.

“Lee Kang-in wanted an opportunity to apologise to fans and his team-mates from the bottom of his heart, and Son Heung-min said we should all embrace Kang-in and move forward,” Hwang, South Korea’s under-23 coach, said.

“Based on my experience as a national team player, I think issues like this can end up making the team even tighter,” he added.

Before Klinsmann’s departure, South Korea thrashed Singapore 5-0 and won 3-0 in China to top Group C and will be fully expected to collect six more points against Thailand.

Japan are also eager to move on from the Asian Cup, where they went out 2-1 to Iran in the quarterfinals and never justified

their tag as pre-tournament favourites.

Hajime Moriyasu remained coach despite the disappointment and Japan face two matches against North Korea, travelling into the unknown on March 26 when they play at Kim Il-sung Stadium in Pyongyang.

Moriyasu will have to make do without Brighton winger Kaoru Mitoma, who looks set to miss the rest of the Premier League season with a back injury.

Winger Junya Ito has been left out of the squad after an allegation of sexual assault. He denies the claim and is suing for 200 million yen (\$1.3 million) in damages.

Japan have a perfect six points from two games with 10 goals scored and none conceded.

QATAR SKIPPER BOWS OUT China’s Asian Cup was also a letdown, bundled out in the group stage with two points and no goals.

The Croatian coach Branko Ivankovic took over from Aleksandar Jankovic and China travel to Singapore for his first game in charge.

Of the Asian Cup finalists, Qatar will be expected to make it four wins from four in Group A when they play Kuwait home and away.

They will do it without Hassan al Haydos, who captained them to a second Asian Cup crown in a row last month but retired at the weekend from international duty aged 33.

He made a record 183 appearances for his country, scoring 41 goals.

While Qatar are on course for the next round of World Cup qualifying, Asian Cup runners-up Jordan sit third behind Roberto Mancini’s Saudi Arabia and Tajikistan in Group G on one point from two matches.

With only the top two progressing, Jordan need to pick up six points in back-to-back games against basement side Pakistan. — AFP



Oman explores green hydrogen partnerships in Germany

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, MARCH 19

In a strategic move towards advancing green energy initiatives, an esteemed delegation from the Sultanate of Oman recently visited Germany, sparking discussions and cooperation opportunities in the realm of green hydrogen.

Led by Oman's Minister of Energy and Minerals, Eng Salim al Aui, and Oman's Ambassador to Germany, Maitha al Mahrouqi, the delegation engaged in high-level talks with key industry players in Leipzig and Bad Lauchstädt.

The visit commenced with a meeting at the headquarters of VNG AG in Leipzig, where the Omani delegation, accompanied by representatives from regional companies, delved into discussions on hydrogen as an energy carrier and explored avenues for market expansion in Germany and Europe.

Emphasising the transition towards green gases, particularly hydrogen, VNG AG's CEO, Ulf Heitmüller, highlighted the significance of international collaborations in driving the energy transition.

Amidst the discussions, the focus was on the hydrogen needs in the Central German region, Oman's potential to export green hydrogen, and technical aspects of hydrogen storage, including underground storage in salt caverns.

The delegation also explored opportunities for enhanced cooperation between companies in Central Germany and Oman,



Oman's Minister of Energy and Minerals, Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aui, leads the delegation in high-level talks with key industry players in Leipzig and Bad Lauchstädt, Germany. (Supplied photo)

aiming to leverage each other's strengths for mutual benefit.

In a post, VNG AG's CEO, Ulf Heitmüller, said "Oman is of particular interest with its great potential and ambitions to produce green hydrogen, especially for the decarbonisation of the industrial sector. As VNG, we are in the midst of an entrepreneurial transformation to actively shape the energy transition in eastern Germany from natural gas to green gases such as hydrogen and biogas. This requires international cooperation."

The Sultanate of Oman emerges as a key player in the production of green hydrogen, with a vision to drive decarbonisation in industrial sectors. Germany, recognising the need for hydrogen imports to meet future demands, eyes Oman



Oman is of particular interest with its great potential and ambitions to produce green hydrogen, especially for the decarbonisation of the industrial sector.

ULF HEITMÜLLER
CEO, VNG AG

as a valuable partner in ensuring regional energy security.

The potential collaboration between the two nations holds promise for a sustainable energy future, bridging geographical gaps to meet growing energy needs.

"In the future, Germany will not be able to cover its hydrogen needs through domestic production alone, but will also be dependent on imports.

The mutual exchange of experiences is therefore very valuable for us. Discussions with international partners, such as the Sultanate of Oman, are crucial for the success of the energy transition. This is the only way green hydrogen can be exported to Germany in the future," Ulf Heitmüller added.

Following their visit to



Oman's Minister of Energy and Minerals Eng Salim bin Nasser al Aui and Oman's Ambassador to Germany, Maitha al Mahrouqi, sign the Golden Book of the City of Leipzig in the presence of Leipzig's Lord Mayor Burkhard Jung. (Supplied photo)

Leipzig, the delegation toured the Energy Park in Bad Lauchstädt, where they gained insights into the ongoing developments of a pioneering green hydrogen project.

The consortium, comprising leading industry players, is spearheading efforts to test the entire value chain of green hydrogen production on an industrial scale, encompassing generation, transportation, storage, and utilisation in Saxony-Anhalt and Central Germany.

A key milestone in this endeavour was witnessed in November 2023 with the retrofitting of a natural gas pipeline for hydrogen transport, marking a significant stride towards green energy adoption.

Furthermore, Germany's first

green hydrogen supply contract with TotalEnergies Refinery Mitteldeutschland, scheduled for delivery by the end of 2025, underscores the tangible progress towards sustainable energy transitions.

The visit of the Omani delegation not only signifies a step towards international energy collaborations but also underscores the shared commitment of Oman and Germany towards a carbon-neutral future.

With Oman's rich energy resources and Germany's expertise in energy transition, the partnership holds immense potential for driving innovative solutions in green hydrogen production and fostering sustainable energy practices on a global scale.

8 contracts signed to boost agricultural production in Al Batinah North



A farmer harvests his field of wheat. Image for illustration only. – Reuters

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 19

In a significant move aimed at enhancing agricultural productivity and fostering economic growth, eight contracts were recently signed for the cultivation and production of agricultural crops in Al Batinah North.

The signing ceremony took place in the presence of distinguished officials including Eng Abdullah bin Mohammed al Haddabi, Director General of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in Al Batinah North, and Eng Ali bin Ahmed al Maashani, Director-General of Urban Planning in Al Batinah North.

The contracts, facilitated by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, pertain to lands under the usufruct system, signalling a strategic effort to harness agricultural potential for sustainable development.

With an investment value exceeding RO 800K, covering an extensive area of 336,000 square meters, these agreements are poised to stimulate agricultural activity and contribute to the

region's economic prosperity.

The initiative underscores the government's commitment to achieving food security objectives outlined in Oman Vision 2040, which emphasises the importance of enhancing local agricultural production and creating employment opportunities, particularly for Omani youth.

Notably, the signing of these contracts marks a significant milestone for the participating Omani youth, who have undergone specialised training under the agricultural and fisheries incubator programme at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources.

Their involvement reflects a concerted effort to empower local talent and promote sustainable practices in the agricultural sector.

The contracts are expected to generate a multitude of employment opportunities across various agricultural-related sectors, including marketing, rice production, and labour.

This strategic investment is poised to elevate the region's agricultural output, bolstering food security and improving the quality of agricultural products.

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 19

Potable water supply to Muscat and Al Batinah South – the most populous of Oman's governorates – is set to be boosted by around mid-year when a new Independent Water Project (IWP) comes into operation at Barka.

Dubbed 'Barka V IWP', the 100,000 m3/day capacity (equivalent to 22 million imperial gallons /day MIGD) desalination plant is being built by GS Inima Barka V Desalination Co SAOC, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Spanish-based international water infrastructure company GS Inima Environment.

Madrid-headquartered GS Inima Environment was selected by Nama Power and Water Procurement Company (PWP), the sole procurer of new power and water capacity in the Sultanate of Oman, to execute the project under a Build-Own-Operate (BOO) model covering a 20-year operational timeframe effective from launch around mid-2024.

GS Inima Environment announced at the time that total investment in the IWP was around \$138 million. In a post, a top official of

Construction of Barka V desalination project nearing completion



Barka V desalination plant nearing completion in Al Batinah South Governorate.

GS Inima Environment said construction work on Barka V has now entered its final stretch.

"I'm very proud to witness the continuous progress of the Barka V Desalination Plant works.

It's going to be two years since GS Inima began on March 30, 2022 the works, and we are facing the final sprint with the commissioning phase and the first tests," said Alejandro Torrecillas Almansa, Chief Operating Officer – GS Inima Environment.

Barka V IWP is the fifth of a

series of water projects that have been built in phases in a cluster at Barka in Al Batinah South Governorate.

Based on high-efficiency reverse osmosis (RO) technology, the new plant will displace older, less-efficient water desalination plants that were bundled with power generation components.

According to Nama PWP, Water Purchase Agreements (WPA) signed with at least two older desalination plants in the Barka hub are set to expire at the end of this month.

It includes Barka IWP – owned by Barka Power and Water Company (ACWA) with a combined capacity of about 100,000 m3/day, and Barka II IWPP, owned by SMN Power Barka, with a capacity of 120,000 m3/day.

Yesterday, March 19, 2024, Barka Power and Water Co announced in a filing to the Capital Market Authority (CMA) that it has been granted an extension of its Water Purchase Agreements for a period of three months until June 30, 2024.

AJIA launches exciting offers on new MINI models this Ramadhan



MUSCAT: Al Jenaibi International Automobiles (AJIA), the official importer of BMW Group vehicles in Oman is offering those seeking a fun-filled and joyful driving experience with exciting offers on new 2024 MINI models this Ramadhan.

Whether looking for a MINI 3-Door or MINI 5-door for that go-kart feeling behind the wheel or the cutting-edge MINI Countryman, customers will experience extra joy this Ramadhan when they purchase any 2024 MINI model.

Throughout the holy month, customers will experience MINI's 'Big Love' with MINI Service for 5 years or 100,000 km (whichever comes first), MINI warranty for 5 years or 200,000 km (whichever comes first) and MINI roadside assistance for 5 years or 200,00 km (whichever comes first).

For a more hassle-free driving experience, customers will also benefit from free first year of insurance and registration, as well as complimentary window tinting.

For those looking to experience MINI's sense of adventure and fun with the purchase of a 2024 MINI model complete with generous offers can book their vehicle by visiting the Al Jenaibi International Automobiles Jenaibi MINI showroom in Qurum.

To learn more, customers can contact 80050008.

Hongqi unveils exclusive Ramadhan offer: A chance to win with every purchase

MUSCAT: Since its inception in 1958, the iconic Hongqi brand has epitomised luxury and prestige in the automotive industry.

Recognised as the quintessential state vehicle for Chinese leaders and major national events, Hongqi has evolved over the decades, blending tradition with innovation to set new standards in automotive excellence.

In alignment with its commitment to innovation and customer satisfaction, Hongqi Oman is delighted to announce an exclusive Ramadhan offer, inviting customers to experience the unparalleled elegance of Ramadhan with every purchase of a Hongqi vehicle.

The Ramadhan offer presents an extraordinary opportunity for customers to indulge in luxury and sophistication. With the



purchase of any 2024 Hongqi vehicle, including the H5, Ousado, HS3, HS5, or H9, customers automatically qualify for a chance to win a lavish Hongqi H5.

In addition to the chance to win a Hongqi H5, customers will enjoy an array of premium benefits

tailored to enhance their ownership experience: 7 years/155,000 kms service package, 7 years roadside assistance, 7 years unlimited mileage warranty, complimentary insurance and registration for the first year, a RO 250 gift voucher, a fuel card worth RO 100, and an

Amouage special edition gift box for the first 50 customers.

The Hongqi Ousado is available at an attractive price of RO 9,900. Along with this attractive price, avail the benefits that come along with the Ramadhan offer, and enjoy peace of mind on every

Hongqi purchase.

The Ramadhan offer is valid till April 20, 2024 for customers purchasing exclusively from the Mohsin Haider Darwish dealership.

Mohsin bin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD ACERE, expressed his enthusiasm about the Ramadhan offer, stating, "At Hongqi, we are committed to delivering exceptional experiences to our customers, blending tradition with innovation to redefine luxury. Our exclusive Ramadhan offer is a testament to our dedication to providing unparalleled value and sophistication to our esteemed clientele." To avail of the exclusive Ramadhan offer and explore the exquisite range of Hongqi vehicles, visit our showroom in Azaiba or call 80080777.

Ooredoo kicks-off its 20th Goodwill Journey



MUSCAT: Celebrating two decades of making an effective contribution for good, Ooredoo kicked off its 20th Goodwill Journey, one of the telco's flagship and community-led Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives.

Every year during Ramadhan, volunteers travel across Oman to upgrade the worlds of communities and citizens, including women, youth, and people with disabilities, by driving sustainable change and partnering with local stakeholders to make a real difference to everyday lives.

This year, the celebratory send-off from Muttrah took place under the auspices of Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat. Originally launched in 2004 to support communities during Ramadhan, the Goodwill Journey is part of the company's broader CSR Programme.

Bassam al Ibrahim, Chief Executive Officer at Ooredoo, said "Over the past two decades, Ooredoo's Goodwill Journey has been based on turning good intentions into action. Every year, volunteers travel thousands

of kilometres across Oman to create a positive, long-term and measurable impact on our communities.

As we focus on sustainability, we can measure the progress we have made in achieving our purpose, which is to upgrade the worlds of Omani people while fostering sustainable growth by making effective contributions to society."

Through various projects across three main focus areas: People & Society, Economy & Development, and Sustainable Environment, Ooredoo aims to provide people with the knowledge, skills and/ or means to improve their lives in both big and small ways.

The Goodwill Journey 20 will centre on social development, education and training, digital projects and empowerment.

The specific themes include 'A Digital Lifestyle in Education and Training', 'Youth, Women, and Small Office/Home Office (SoHo)', 'Environment', 'People with Disabilities and Special Needs', and 'Community-Wide Support projects.'

Enjoy peace of mind in Ford Everest's Season of Generosity benefits

MUSCAT: Now is the perfect time to own a Ford Everest 4x4 SUV and make the most of Ford Oman's Season of Generosity benefits. Customers buying a new Ford Everest 4x4 SUV can look forward to 5 years peace of mind ownership experiences with 5 years/100,000 km service, 5 years /100,000 km manufacturer's warranty, 5 years/100,000 km roadside assistance and 1 year registration.

The campaign is valid up to May 9, 2024. (Conditions apply. For details visit a Ford showroom.) The Ford Everest 4x4 SUV is a popular choice for customers who desire fun both on the road and off-roads too.

The 7-seater SUV offer ample space and comfort along with a range of features and technology offering exceptional ownership experiences.

At the core of the Ford Everest is impressive capability due to which the Everest can handle tasks with ease. The Ford Everest's interior is premium, showcasing premium levels of craftsmanship while class-leading technology and safety features offer driver and passengers comfort and peace of mind on every journey.

A full-width coast-to-coast



instrument panel and centre console with dual cup-holder recesses, plus dash-mounted 'pop-out' cup-holders for front-seat occupants make the interior impressive.

It is equipped with integrated wireless charging and a svelte new leather trimmed e-Shifter and an electric parking brake. Access to the third row is much easier thanks to second-row seats that slide further forward than before.

Additionally, all occupants now have places to store their things and depending on the model, charge their devices with power outlets in all three rows.

In addition to a more refined and comfortable interior, Ford focused on incorporating the latest connectivity and technology features into the Next-Gen Ford Everest.

It comes with an 8-inch digital instrument panel that replaces the traditional analogue cluster, in addition to large, high-resolution portrait 10.1-inch or best-in-class 12-inch touchscreens.

With the advantage of a longer wheelbase, Ford designers were able to create a more progressive, muscular appearance.

They also put a lot of thought into the function and feel of the interior, taking inspiration from modern homes and bringing in plush materials, premium finishes and ambient lighting in areas customers will appreciate them best.

Next-Gen Ford Everest is loaded with Ford's latest SYNC4 A system, which comes customer-ready with its voice-activated communications, entertainment, and information systems.

AVOD products garner remarkable response at Gulfood 2024

MUSCAT: Areej Vegetable Oils and Derivatives (AVOD), esteemed as Oman's foremost brand, was met with ardent acclaim from attendees and trade partners at Gulfood 2024, a prominent annual gathering in the food service, hospitality, and retail held in Dubai.

The 28th Gulfood Show 2024, the world's largest food, beverage, and hospitality exhibition, spanned five days of business on February 19-23, 2024, hosted at the iconic Dubai World Trade Centre, a pivotal location for global trade.

Bringing together traders, retailers, food suppliers, distributors, wholesalers, chefs,

Industry experts and food service professionals from all over the world.

Initially established as a biennial event in 1987, Gulfood has expanded to become an annual showcase with over a record 5,500 exhibitors from 190 countries presenting raw materials and ingredients.

With its eight sectors including Cooking Oils, dairy, grains, pulses, beverages, food derivatives and world food, Gulfood serves as a platform, highlighting emerging tastes, trends, and innovations and has been shaping the future of the global food and beverage industry.

Counted among one of the



leading manufacturing companies in Oman, AVOD has garnered

substantial market share both domestically and internationally,

with exports constituting over 75 per cent of its total business.

Renowned for its modern, hygienic plant and a stellar line-up of high-quality Trans Fat Free cooking oils, Non-Hydrogenated ghee, margarine, specialty fats, mayonnaise, and butter products, AVOD continues to set industry benchmarks with its steadfast commitment to quality and integrity.

AVOD — as part of its transformative growth strategy — has been a part of Gulfood for over a decade and has continued to extend its portfolio and introduce new and innovative product offerings with each passing year.

As is true of each product from

the AVOD portfolio, they all come loaded with natural goodness, and health that is underpinned by the heritage brand's cornerstone 'Eat Right, Live Well' philosophy.

Eng Salim bin Nasser al Bartamani, CEO, AVOD, expressed his gratitude for the support and recognition received at Gulfood 2024, stating, "We are exhilarated and honoured by the positive response from visitors and partners alike.

Gulfood, a cornerstone event in the industry calendar, provided AVOD with an ideal platform to showcase our premium range of products, engage with industry professionals and stakeholders from across the globe.

Suhar Industrial City inks investment pacts worth RO 2.4m



MUSCAT: Suhar Industrial City, affiliated to the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), has signed three investment contracts totalling RO 2.4 million for projects specialising in plastic products, medical devices and mattresses.

Spanning across a total area of 16,900 square metres, these projects aim at delivering high-quality goods using state-of-the-art technology, catering to both local and international markets while boosting the national economy.

The first investment contract, valued at RO 1 million, was inked with Ammar International Furniture for a project spanning an area of 7,200 square metres.

The second contract was signed with Al Eman for Trade and Investment to establish a project focused on manufacturing plastic products from non-hazardous waste across 4,700 square metres, with an investment of RO 850,000.

The third pact, with Quality Medical Supply, involves establishing a manufacturing unit for instruments and appliances for medicine and surgery, and veterinary medicine, covering 5,000 square metres and backed by an investment of RO 550,000.

Opportunity Oman: A strategic relationship with Singapore



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Oman, a nation steeped in history, is emerging as a major economic player in the Middle East. With a strategic location and a focus on economic diversification, Oman presents exciting opportunities for international collaboration and investment.

This article explores Oman's strong relationship with Singapore, a global hub for innovation and business, highlighting the avenues for collaboration and the promising future it holds for both countries.

The relationship between Oman and Singapore boasts a rich history. For centuries, trade routes connecting Southeast Asia with the Middle East flourished, with Oman playing a pivotal role.

This historical connection laid the foundation for the robust economic partnership that thrives today.

Singapore's position as a financial powerhouse and regional headquarter for multinational corporations and Oman's strategic location as a gateway to the Middle East and East Africa create a natural synergy, fostering mutually beneficial trade and investment.

The economic landscapes of Oman and Singapore offer a compelling array of opportunities for businesses on both sides.

Singapore, renowned for its advanced infrastructure and pro-business environment, offers Omani companies access to

global markets and cutting-edge technology.

Conversely, Oman's strategic location, abundant natural resources and ambitious development projects make it an attractive destination for Singaporean and Singaporean based investors.

The recent State Visit by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to Singapore (December 13-15, 2023) marks a significant milestone, solidifying their commitment to a thriving partnership.

High-level discussions focused on advancing economic and technological cooperation in areas critical for growth, including Artificial Intelligence and data ecosystems.

A key outcome of the visit was the agreement to enhance trade and economic cooperation in several areas:

- Food Security and Sustainability: Collaboration in aquaculture, food security initiatives, and the blue and green economy holds immense potential.

- Logistics and Connectivity: Strengthening transport and logistics networks is crucial for facilitating trade.

- Start-up and SME Growth: Enabling better connections between start-ups and SMEs in both countries with global markets will foster innovation and entrepreneurship.

- Diversifying Trade: Both nations acknowledged the importance of leveraging and upgrading the existing Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (GSFTA) to further diversify and expand bilateral trade.

The GCC-Singapore Free Trade Agreement: A Boon for Businesses

The GSFTA, signed in Doha in 2008, marked a significant milestone for both regions. It offers substantial benefits for businesses on both sides, including:

- Duty-free access to key markets for both GCC and Singaporean businesses.

- Wider Halal market access for GCC businesses due to



GCC recognition of Singapore's Halal Certification Standards.

- Streamlined customs procedures under the GSFTA.

- Increased foreign equity ownership allowed by several GCC countries in sectors like education and construction, particularly attractive for Singaporean businesses.

Unlocking Opportunities For Omani Businesses

- Gateway to Asia: Singapore acts as a springboard for accessing the vast Asian market, leveraging its world-class logistics infrastructure and expertise in trade finance.

- Foreign Direct Investment (FDI): Singapore is a major source of FDI for Oman, bringing much-needed capital, technology and expertise to Omani industries, fostering economic diversification and job creation.

- Joint Ventures and Collaboration: Omani and Singaporean companies can leverage their complementary strengths to form joint ventures and collaborations specially in education sector where Singapore education one of best in the world.

For Singaporean Businesses:

- Investment Hub: Oman's stable political environment, strategic location and growing economy present a lucrative investment opportunity, particularly in sectors like tourism, logistics and renewable

energy.

- Regional Gateway: Oman serves as a gateway for Singaporean companies to access the wider Middle Eastern and African markets.

- Manufacturing: Oman's thriving manufacturing sector welcomes foreign investors. Relaxed ownership restrictions, substantial FDI inflows and the new Foreign Capital Investment Law create an attractive environment for establishing manufacturing facilities.

- Real Estate: Streamlined registration procedures, abolished foreign ownership limits and significant foreign investment in Special Economic Zones make Oman's real estate sector highly promising.

- Infrastructure Development: Tax incentives, customs duty exemptions and initiatives like the Fast Track Initiative make Oman an ideal location for infrastructure development projects.

- Duqm Special Economic Zone: This zone offers unique investment opportunities across various sectors like ports, airports, refineries and tourism, with robust infrastructure already in place.

- Greenfield Investments: The FTA agreement facilitates greenfield investments, allowing international businesses to establish new ventures and expand their presence in sectors like oil

and gas and financial services.

Challenges and Recommendations

Opportunities exist to strengthen ties between Oman and Singapore despite existing progress.

Language barriers and cultural differences can be addressed through collaboration on language training, cultural exchanges, and online business platforms.

Oman can further enhance its visibility by promoting tourism attract Singaporeans.

Additionally, utilising established channels like Enterprise Singapore for business connections is recommended.

Importantly, Omanis visiting Singapore can gain valuable firsthand experience of its fast-paced business culture, where transparency, advanced planning and clear communication are key for building trust.

The Oman-Singapore partnership has already yielded significant benefits for both nations. By remaining committed to open dialogue, collaboration and addressing existing challenges, this relationship has the potential to thrive even further in the coming decades.

With a focus on trade, investment and joint ventures, Omani and Singaporean businesses can unlock a wealth of opportunities in each other's markets, contributing to regional and global economic growth.

Transforming minds with green energy at KNO schools

SIHAM AL SAIDI
MUSCAT, MARCH 19

Through innovative integration of green energy, including a cutting-edge solar system, institutions work eagerly to foster environmental consciousness among students and society in general.

This commitment goes beyond powering the building, it serves as a tangible educational tool, offering students real experiences with renewable energy and environmental responsibility.

The impact is profound, shaping students into eco-conscious leaders equipped to tackle real world sustainability challenges.

Beyond academic excellence, the institution cultivates a culture of global citizenship.

KNO School, situated in Al Batinah North in the Wilayat of Al Khabourah, stands as a pioneering institution to lead an example of sustainable educational institution with 286 solar panels producing more than 130 KW.

Renowned for its commitment to green energy, the school has incorporated a cutting-edge solar system, marking a significant stride towards environmental consciousness.

As one of the first educational institutions in the region to embrace green energy, this school stands at the forefront of a transformative greening movement.

The solar system there not only powers the facility, but also serves as an educational tool, fostering a culture of sustainability among students.



The solar system there not only powers the facility, but also serves as an educational tool, fostering a culture of sustainability among students.

This tangible commitment to green energy aligns with a broader educational philosophy, emphasising environmental responsibility and resource conservation.

Kamis al Ajmi, the chairman of Tamkeen group and Board of School Trustees, said, "With solar

panels gleaming on its rooftops, KNO School is in process to integrate solar technology into its curriculum to illuminate young minds about the importance of sustainability.

"Students not only grasp the science behind solar power, but also explore its social and

economic impacts. This holistic approach fosters a generation of environmentally conscious thinkers and innovators. It gives them a real experience in the world of sustainable green life."

The impact on children's learning is profound. The integration of solar technology into the curriculum offers students first unique experiences with renewable energy, nurturing a deep understanding of environmental issues.

Beyond textbooks, they witness the practical applications of sustainable practices, building a sense of responsibility and awareness from an early age.

Al Hosni, a mother of two children at this school, said, "To see my children in KG and grade 1 able to discuss such terms like eco-environment, green energy, sustainability and solar system

was impressive which reflects the positive impact of some concepts like this applied at this school."

The eco-friendly environment enhances the overall learning atmosphere, promoting focus, creativity and a sense of global citizenship.

She added that to bring such perspectives to reality is amazing and widens the students horizons, raising their awareness of the Global perspectives and United Nation Sustainable Development Goals.

By investing in renewable energy infrastructure, the country aims to reduce its carbon footprint and build a greener tomorrow.

Such green initiatives are illustrating how embracing green energy can positively shape both education and the future perspectives of its students.

Bank plans gender parity for its UK dealmakers



French bank BNP Paribas is aiming for 50% of new hires within its UK investment bank to be female. The bank has set a target of half of new hires in its UK global banking operation to be women, according to people familiar with the matter.

It has already set a similar goal for those joining its ranks at the entry level.

BNP Paribas prime brokerage employee Stacey Macken successfully sued the bank two years ago for sexually discriminating on pay.

It is now required to identify differences in compensation between men and women, as well as come up with a plan to change any gender pay gaps.

The bank will focus first on the analyst and associate levels. However, it is aiming for gender parity across all levels of its

business.

“Diversity is a core element of our business and HR strategy, as is the need to invest in identifying solutions to ensure the continued progress of our people at all levels of the firm beyond hiring,” said Emmanuelle Bury Lucas, UK country head at BNP Paribas.

“This includes talent and leadership programmes, the promotions process and the monitoring of metrics.”

Many investment banks have long held a target to ensure at least 50% of graduate recruits are women.

But female representation in the upper ranks remains sparse. Exclusive research has shed light on the small proportion of female employees in key, revenue-generating roles.

It found that just 10% of managing director and partner level dealmakers at top

investment banks in Europe are women.

The numbers were based on more than 1,300 senior dealmaking roles across Europe at companies including Citigroup, Goldman Sachs and JPMorgan.

UK gender pay gap figures are published annually at the behest of the government.

However, despite a move to increase gender representation across the banking sector, those figures show there has been little change, with women still comprising a small proportion of banks’ highest earners.

BNP Paribas is also exploring another issue – using AI to collect data. It is looking at how large language models and generative AI can be used to gather data from text and unstructured sources.

The bank could use the technology to digest information from analyst calls,

quarterly results and company announcements — text-heavy documents where information is not always standardised.

“We are exploring use cases that include ingesting data from different sources such as public data,” said Andrei Serjantov, head of digital global markets at BNP Paribas.

Where a LLM (a large language model, is a type of artificial intelligence programme that can recognise and generate text, among other tasks.

LLMs are trained on large sets of data — hence the name “large”) is helpful, rather than some deep core issues like derivatives pricing models, it’s much more about getting the data into a set that can be used.”

BNP Paribas established an AI Lab in 2016 to develop tools for trading and sales. But it established another team in 2023 to look into use cases for LLMs,

after interest in both models and generative AI exploded following the launch of ChatGPT by OpenAI in November 2022.

“A very simple way of comparing ‘traditional AI’ with large language models in the trading context is that the former predicts the next price and the latter predicts the next word.

Hence, large language models can be useful for ingestion of, for example, unstructured historical data into trading, said Serjantov.”

The investment bank said it has so far implemented 700 use cases for AI and is testing 26 more for generative AI.

But the costs and data required needed to train AIs that LLMs make it unlikely that it will build one from the ground up.

“While developing large language models from scratch is expensive, we are evaluating the benefits and exploring the idea of fine tuning,” said Serjantov.

China’s bonds boom as investors face ‘asset famine’

A record-breaking rally in Chinese sovereign debt is hitting a fever pitch in another sign China’s financial system is low on confidence and overflowing with cash and bank deposits.

Yields at the longer end of China’s bond market have been crunched to record lows by the weight of available money, and bankers say savings bonds are selling out almost instantly to retail investors who queue up outside branches before dawn.

The moves are welcome for borrowers, especially the central government which is paying just 3% interest on 30-year debt.

But they also illustrate the fragility of economic expectations - because traders see further rate cuts ahead — and of confidence, given investors of all stripes are plunging into safe financial products instead of more productive assets.

Batches of savings bonds were “gone in seconds”, said a state banker in Shanghai, thanks to three-year rates of 2.38% which are only marginally better than term deposit rates.

Thirty-year Chinese government bond yields are down nearly 40 basis points this year, hitting a record low of below 2.4% in March. They came within a whisker of dropping below 10-year yields, which also have hit 22-year troughs.

China has been trying for years to nudge money out of banks and into growth assets with measures such as rate cuts. But those efforts have been met with resistance as a downturn in real estate has sapped appetite for all but the safest investments.

A Shanghai bond brokerage trader described the situation as an “asset famine,” with very little else for financial institutions to buy while deposits soar and loan growth slides.

The bond trader noted that much of the demand at the longer end was from financial institutions looking for

somewhere to park deposits that nobody wants to borrow. Data published last week showed lending growth at a record low 10.1% in February.

Chinese banks held a record 291 trillion yuan on deposit at the end of February, according to central bank data, and deposit growth is outpacing loans.

Foreign investors have been buyers too, but own less than 3% of the market and do not tend to drive price movements.

Analysts such as ANZ senior strategist Xing Zhaopeng said recent central bank market operations to drain cash from the banking system by declining to roll over policy loans showed authorities were aware of the cash logjam.

A net 94 billion yuan was withdrawn through a central bank’s bond instrument from the banking system in March — China’s first such move since 2022.

“The move echoed (wording in this year’s) annual government work report to ‘avoid idling funds stuck’ in the banking system,” said Xing, referring to a phrase last mentioned in 2020’s report.

China’s central bank also said this month it made a routine survey of rural lenders’ bond books to “guide... focus on their main responsibilities”, including rural areas and small businesses.

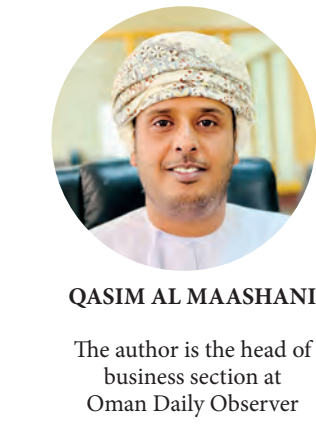
To be sure, the prices allow the central government to secure long-term funding at low cost, which it can use to benefit the country, and issuances are expected to steady the market.

Yet low rates complicate efforts to support the yuan and has analysts wary of a market that’s becoming inflated by so much money looking for a home.

“With long duration positions congested and curves flat, we are cautious near term,” said Ju Wang, head of China FX and rates strategy at BNP Paribas.

“Medium-term, a correction in China bonds could offer opportunities to re-load duration longs as (the) monetary easing cycle is not over.” — Reuters

Omanisation: Charting a course for a thriving Omani workforce



The Sultanate of Oman is experiencing a period of significant economic transformation. A key element of this transformation is the “Omanisation” policy, a national initiative aimed at increasing the number of Omanis employed within the country.

While national pride and a desire for a flourishing Omani workforce are strong motivators, the path towards achieving this goal presents unique challenges.

One of the most pressing hurdles is the current gap in experience between the Omani workforce and seasoned expatriate workers.

The established timeframe for Omanisation may be insufficient to effectively transfer the necessary knowledge and skills.

Imagine traversing the vast Empty Quarter in a single day — such is the challenge of ensuring adequate knowledge transfer within the current timeframe.

Expatriate workers, often just settling into their roles, find themselves pressed for time to mentor their Omani counterparts.

Additionally, their own heavy workloads leave limited capacity for dedicated training and mentorship. Another challenge lies within the cultural landscape.

Decades of oil wealth have fostered a mentality of relying on government employment, reflected in the proverb, “Why buy the camel when the milk flows freely?” This has resulted in a less robust private sector,



limiting options for skilled Omani professionals seeking diverse career paths.

However, the future remains bright. By cultivating a generation of skilled and ambitious Omani trailblazers, the Sultanate of Oman can overcome these obstacles.

Specialised training programmes, as vibrant and dynamic as a dhow race on Muttrah Sea Road, can equip Omanis with the in-demand skills coveted by the private sector. Immersive workshops and dedicated mentorship programmes can act as a potent cocktail to ignite a spirit of self-reliance and entrepreneurial drive.

Government support is also crucial in this journey. Imagine the government acting as the desert wind, propelling Omanisation forward. Accessible financing options, smoother than the polished floors of the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, can empower aspiring Omani entrepreneurs.

Business loans with interest rates as gentle as the morning breeze wafting through a frankincense plantation — this is the kind of financial oasis that will nurture a thriving Omani private sector.

Omanisation is far from a solitary trek across the dunes.

It is a collaborative caravan, a shared voyage requiring the collective effort of the government, the private sector, and society as a whole.

The government can assume the role of the wise navigator, charting the course and providing essential supplies for this journey.

The private sector, the energetic camel drivers, can create the necessary job opportunities and foster a dynamic environment for Omani professionals.

Finally, the society must act as an enthusiastic supporter, cheering on young Omanis and promoting a culture that values self-reliance and entrepreneurial spirit — as enduring as the majestic forts guarding our coastline.

Omanisation is a marathon, not a sprint. With unwavering commitment from all stakeholders, innovative solutions, and a spirit as strong as the frankincense that defines our land, we can create a future where Omanis stand tall, leading the charge across all sectors of the economy.

Let us embark on this journey together and write a resounding success story for Omanisation, one that will be celebrated for generations to come.

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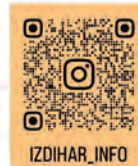
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VERSE OF THE DAY

The righteous will be amidst shades and fountains. And fruits as they desire. Eat and drink pleasantly, for what you used to do. This is how We reward the doers of good.

(al Mursalat)



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THE YOUNG
ENTREPRENEURS
OF NIZWA SOUQ



BY AMAL AL RIYAMI
PHOTOS BY SAMI AL HINAI

Nizwa Souq is a cultural hub in Oman, known for its traditional goods and vibrant marketplace atmosphere. It is not just a place of commerce, but also a focal point for social interactions and community bonding.

Many businesses in Nizwa Souq have been passed down through generations, forming a rich legacy of entrepreneurship and craftsmanship. No matter the day of the week you visit, Nizwa Souq is a bustling marketplace, one where even children are becoming an integral part of preserving legacies and culture.

For generations, the villagers of Nizwa have been teaching children about the intricacies of trade and entrepreneurship. Passing down business knowledge fosters a sense of camaraderie among young children, as they learn from each other and their elders. This shared learning experience strengthens social ties and promotes a sense of belonging within the community. By imparting business knowledge to young children, this legacy can continue to thrive. It allows them to understand the value of their heritage and encourages them to carry forward the family or community businesses with pride and dedication.

Bringing young children early into

the family business will also equip them with the skills to adapt to modern business practices and technological advancements. Integrating traditional business knowledge with contemporary methods ensures the relevance and sustainability of Nizwa Souq in the face of evolving market trends.

Because of the challenging conditions of modern times, many more families turned to commerce to also alleviate their family's condition. These families assign the kids some fun activities for them to do so they can take part in the family venture.

Many children are actively participating in trade by selling birds, sweets, leafy vegetables and popular cuisine, and working in restaurants and cafes. Some of them work as hosts, servers, or assistants at some food outlets.

These child entrepreneurs set up their merchandise on weekends, taking advantage of the bustling atmosphere, especially on weekends when the souq is crowded with shoppers. During the weekdays, you can find them balancing school and their trade activities, as most of them are between 10 to 18 years old.

Muntaser bin Hussam al Taiwani, a popular food seller in the souq, shared, "I have acquired the skill of dealing with customers. I also learned financial accounting skills. Today I can manage my free time and divide my time well. In the future, I am thinking of becoming a chef."

Majid bin Salim al Mahrouqi, a barista in a café, said: "Since I was young, I have been trying to prepare my commercial mind to become an entrepreneur in the future. Today, thankfully, I have gained experience in preparing different types of coffee. I gained social relationships with many people. I have financial independence, and I am thinking about saving money from now on. In the future, I will become a well-known coffee trader."

What distinguishes these children is their remarkable resemblance to experienced business leaders. They have negotiation skills, and different ideas in different fields to develop their businesses. You can observe the spirit of entrepreneurship in them.

The presence of these young traders in the Nizwa Souq not only enriches the vibrancy of the market, but also showcases the new generation's readiness in the field of trade and self-reliance, contributing positively to the community and economy.

As the country embraces modernisation while cherishing tradition, integrating traditional business wisdom with contemporary methods ensures the resilience and relevance of beloved marketplaces in the face of change. In passing down the torch of entrepreneurship to the next generation, people in Nizwa not only safeguard their cultural heritage, but also sow the seeds for a thriving future, where the spirit of Nizwa Souq continues to flourish.



HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF
MUSLIM FAITH

627

Siege of Bani Qurayzah: Muslims capture the Jewish stronghold.

The Siege of Banu Qurayza in 627 CE saw Muslims besieging a Jewish tribe in Medina, who had betrayed their pact. After 25 days, the tribe surrendered. This event solidified Muslim authority in Medina under Prophet Muhammad, upheld the importance of honouring treaties, and influenced Islamic jurisprudence on warfare ethics and treatment of non-Muslims. It remains significant for its role in consolidating the early Muslim community and shaping Islamic legal principles.

RAMADHAN
TRIVIA

HOW WELL DO YOU
KNOW THE HOLY MONTH

WHO GETS
LOCKED UP DURING
RAMADHAN?

Answer to yesterday's trivia: Zakat Al Fitr

RAMADHAN AROUND THE
WORLD

TURKEY



Islam has deep roots in Turkey, stemming from the 11th century when Turkic tribes embraced the faith. The Seljuk Turks further spread Islam in the region, followed by the Ottoman Empire, which made Islam the dominant religion. Today, Turkey's population is primarily Muslim, with around 98 per cent identifying as such.

During Ramadan, Turkey experiences a profound cultural and religious observance. Muslims fast from dawn till dusk, breaking their fast with iftar, a communal meal. Families gather to share traditional dishes like g  lla   and pide. Mosques are bustling with worshippers for Taraweeh prayers, and streets come alive with festive decorations and late-night markets. The Sultan Ahmed Mosque and the S  leymaniye Mosque in Istanbul are particularly vibrant during Ramadan, hosting special events and attracting visitors.

One unique Ramadan practice in Turkey is the tradition of "Mesir Macunu." Originating in Manisa during the Ottoman Empire, this herbal paste, believed to bring health, is distributed during Ramadan. The Mesir Macunu Festival in Manisa celebrates this tradition with cultural events, music, and food stalls.

DOS & DONTs:
ETIQUETTE
GUIDE

DURING THE
HOLY MONTH

BE AWARE OF
PRAYER TIMINGS.

Knowing prayer timings during Ramadan is essential in the workplace as it fosters inclusivity, enhances time management, and boosts productivity and well-being. Avoid scheduling meetings with Muslim co-workers during prayer timings. Accommodating prayer breaks demonstrates cultural sensitivity, legal compliance, and respect for diverse religious practices, contributing to a harmonious work environment.



TRY THESE RECIPES FOR A
MULTICULTURAL CULINARY
JOURNEY DURING YOUR
HOME IFTARS

BY LIJU CHERIAN
@lijuchermanoman

The holy month of Ramadhan is a time of spiritual reflection, self-discipline, and communal unity. As the sun sets, families and friends gather for iftar, the evening meal that breaks the day-long fast. It is a time of joyous celebration, marked by the sharing of delicious and nourishing food.

In the diverse landscape of the Sultanate of Oman, where cultures converge and traditions intertwine, Ramadhan holds a special significance. The holy month is not only embraced with fervour but also reflects the multicultural tapestry of Oman. Indian cuisine, with its vibrant flavours and aromatic spices, has found a cherished place on the iftar table, resonating with the tastes and preferences of the audience.

In this spirit of cultural fusion and culinary exploration, Chef Ananya Bannerjee shares five exquisite Ramadhan recipes, rooted in Indian tradition yet perfectly suited to tantalise the palates of all. Each dish embodies the essence of Ramadhan, fostering a sense of community and connection during this auspicious time.

"Let these recipes serve as a testament to the rich tapestry of flavours that unite us all, regardless of borders or backgrounds, as we come together to honour the blessings of Ramadhan and the spirit of togetherness it brings," says Chef Ananya.

A multifaceted personality, defying categorisation into a single genre, Chef Ananya, is also a globetrotting chef, painter, and lawyer by education, who also serves as a social influencer through her diverse body of work.

With a remarkable culinary journey spanning the globe, Chef Ananya has curated a rich tapestry of flavours, capturing the essence of various cultures. Her culinary expertise is showcased in two bestselling cookbooks namely 'Planet Global - 100 Most Popular Global Recipes' and 'Bangla Gastronomy - The Journey of Bengali Food.'

Chef Ananya's recent participation was at the three-day Bengali Food Festival at Shangri-La, New Delhi, showcasing her culinary finesse, and in March 2024, she also served on the prestigious NDTV Food Awards jury bench.

KEEMA PAO SLIDERS

Ingredients:

- 500 gm minced meat
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tsp ginger, minced



- 2 tomatoes, chopped
- 1 tsp cumin powder
- 1 tsp coriander powder
- 1/2 tsp turmeric powder
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Mini pao buns
- Pickled onions
- Yoghurt sauce (mix yoghurt with a pinch of salt and a dash of lemon juice)

Instructions:

1. Heat oil in a pan and saut   onions, garlic, and ginger until golden brown.
2. Add minced meat and cook until browned.
3. Add chopped tomatoes and spices, cook until tomatoes are soft.
4. Toast mini pao buns and assemble sliders with keema mixture, pickled onions, and a dollop of yoghurt sauce on top.

DESI CHICKEN
SHAWARMA ROLLS

Ingredients:

- 500 gm chicken boneless, sliced
- 2 tbsp yoghurt
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tsp ginger, minced
- 1 tsp cumin powder
- 1 tsp coriander powder
- 1/2 tsp paprika
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Roti or paratha
- Lettuce, tomatoes
- Garlic sauce.

Here is a simple recipe for garlic sauce (1/2 cup mayonnaise, 2 cloves garlic, minced, 1 tablespoon lemon juice, salt and pepper to taste, 1/2 teaspoon dried dill (optional))

Instructions:

1. Marinate chicken slices in yoghurt, garlic, ginger, spices, salt, and pepper for at least one hour.



2. Cook marinated chicken in a pan until fully cooked.
3. Warm roti or paratha and assemble rolls with cooked chicken, lettuce, tomatoes, and a drizzle of garlic sauce.

BLACKENED SHRIMP
ON A BED OF HUMMUS

Ingredients:

- 500 grammes prawns
- 1 tbsp blackening seasoning (1 tablespoon paprika, 1 tablespoon garlic powder, 1 tablespoon onion powder, 1 teaspoon dried thyme, 1 teaspoon dried oregano, 1 tsp chilli powder, 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon salt
- Hummus
- Pickled vegetables
- Olive oil
- Pomegranate molasses

Instructions:

1. Rub fish fillets with blackening seasoning.
 2. Heat olive oil in a pan and cook prawns until blackened and cooked through.
 3. Serve blackened shrimp on a bed of hummus, garnished with pickled vegetables, a drizzle of olive oil, pomegranate molasses.
- PISTACHIO ROSE LADOO**
- Ingredients:
- 1 cup roasted pistachios, finely ground
 - 1 cup almond flour



- 1/2 cup powdered sugar
- 2 tbsp rose water
- Desiccated coconut for coating

Instructions:

1. Mix ground pistachios, almond flour, powdered sugar, and rose water until well combined.
2. Roll the mixture into bite-sized balls.
3. Roll the balls in desiccated coconut until coated evenly.

CHICKEN MANSAF

Ingredients:

- 1 whole chicken leg
- 1 cup long-grain rice
- 1/2 cup plain yoghurt
- 1 tbs pine nuts
- 1/4 cup ghee
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 tbs garlic paste
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Pomegranates to garnish
- Corriander leaves and mint leaves
- Brown onions or Brista to garnish

Instructions:

1. In a large pot, heat clarified butter and saut   onions until golden brown. Add garlic and saut   for two minutes.
2. Add chicken pieces and cook until browned on all sides
3. Add water to cover the chicken, bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer until chicken is tender.
4. In another pot, cook rice according to package instructions.
5. In a separate pan, toast pine nuts until golden brown.
6. To serve, arrange rice on a platter, place chicken pieces on top, pour yoghurt over the chicken, and sprinkle with toasted pine nuts and ground cinnamon, pomegranate, coriander and mint leaves.



Who loves fashion more than a vintage clothing buff?

FEW PEOPLE ON EARTH put more thought, care or flair into their outfits than the aficionados at a rare vintage clothing sale.

The elite collectors invited to attend the opening-night cocktails for the Sturbridge Show in New York City on Thursday evening think about clothes the way many people think about food — consuming for sustenance as much as for pleasure. Minutes after the doors opened at 5 pm, the eager vintage hounds wove through rows of artfully merchandised booths noses down in search of something delectable.

"Tonight, it's the early birds — mostly dealers shopping for their own stores," said David Brockman, 63, who runs the show and brought the event to Manhattan from Massachusetts, where it normally happens the Monday before the Brimfield Antique Flea Market. "I wanted to have a very particular, curated, design-inspiration show," he said, alluding to the numerous fashion-design professionals who also come to shop, hoping to find old items from which to get new ideas.

In the 35 years he has been working with vintage clothing, Brockman has gotten to know "pretty much all of the people" who are serious about it, he said. Growing up on a family farm in Missouri, he was bitten by the vintage bug early on, when his mother, an avid antique collector, took him along with her looking for old gems.

Brockman said he couldn't pick a favourite item in this year's show,

which ended on Saturday. Although he favoured the old denim and the 1920s and '30s garments, he seemed to love it all. "Just look at that '70s Saint Laurent over there," he said, gesturing with great excitement at a red-and-pink printed dress hanging in a booth across the room.

Nearby, Laverne Cox, wearing a KN95 mask and a navy Mugler blazer embellished with silver rings, was on a mission. Cox had returned from Los Angeles the day before, still recovering from the 24-hour workday she put in interviewing stars on the Oscars red carpet on March 10. "Four am to 4 am," she clarified. "For a 51-year-old woman who's not usually out there like that, my body's like, 'Oooh, girl, what'd you do?'"

Exhaustion, however, proved no match for a love of vintage Mugler. Cox said she simply couldn't resist the urge to see what new surprises the Sturbridge Show might offer.

"My Mugler obsession started 30 years ago with the 'Too Funky' video," Cox said, referring to the 1992 George Michael music video that featured clothing by designer Thierry Mugler. "I couldn't afford Mugler in the '90s, or 2000s, and honestly most of the 2010s — um, it is what it is," she said, laughing. "So I just started collecting about six years ago. My Mugler collection now goes back to the '70s, through the end of his collections in 2002."

Cox hoped to find iconic pieces. "I am creating a Mugler room," she said. "Last year, I discovered my love of seeing things on

mannequins and dressing mannequins — which is a weird thing to realise about yourself at 50 years old, but I want to see the pieces displayed as art."

A passion for vintage fashion turns many enthusiasts into mini-historians and discerning experts. Fashion designer Anna Sui wasn't shopping for anything in particular. She wandered through the racks, examining Edwardian blouses, running her forest-green nails over baubles that had been laid out on the tables like candy. Sui, 59, attended last year's Sturbridge Show and came back again this year. "It's one of the best vintage shows I've been to," she said.

Sui would know. She searches for vintage "almost every day," she said, checking sites such as eBay and Etsy. "I was 16 when I bought my first vintage item. A vanity from the Salvation Army," Sui said. She brought it home and painted it a glossy black, which later became a hall-mark design element of her brand.

Tziporah Salamon, an author and New York sartorial fixture frequently photographed by Bill Cunningham, said vintage collecting had been her way of life for more than 40 years. What was she looking for this evening? "It's always a hat."

Salamon, cradling a bright, patterned turban plucked from a booth with many colourful hats, looked pained not to be able to put it on over the twisted headpiece already on her head. "It won't go with my outfit," she lamented. — NYT



'Kung Fu Panda' again beats sandworms in North America box office



FOR A SECOND WEEKEND running "Kung Fu Panda 4" battled its way to the top of the North American box office, narrowly edging out "Dune: Part Two," according to industry watcher Exhibitor Relations.

"Panda," a martial arts comedy from Universal and DreamWorks Animation, took in an estimated \$30 million for the Friday-through-Sunday period. "Dune" sequel, about war and survival in a sand-covered planet inhabited by giant worms, earned a respectable \$29.1 million.

"Panda" has now taken in \$107.7 million in theatres in the United States and Canada plus an additional \$176.5 million internationally. "Dune," released a week earlier, has seen domestic ticket sales of \$157.2 million and international sales of \$210 million.

After those two films, there was a sharp dropoff in North America, with Lionsgate's new release "Arthur the King" taking in just \$7.5 million.

"Arthur," the story of an adventurer who befriends an injured stray dog, may have an identity problem, said analyst David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research. "It's not a family film or a comedy, but it's not a hard adventure for moviegoers who like edg-



ier entertainment. All of that complicates the sell."

Mark Wahlberg plays the man; Arthur, for those keeping track, is played by Ukai, an Australian shepherd/border collie/Bouvier mix, according to dogtime.com.

In fourth, down one spot from last weekend, was horror film "Imaginary" from Lionsgate and Blumhouse Productions, at \$5.6 million. DeWanda Wise plays a woman who rediscovers her childhood teddy bear — and ends up wishing she hadn't.

And in fifth, also down one spot, was Angel Studios' "Cabrini," at \$2.7 million. Cristiana Dell'Anna plays Francesca Cabrini, an Italian nun in 19th-century New York who clashes with politicians and church officials while trying to care for impoverished immigrants.

Rounding out the top 10 were:

- "Love Lies Bleeding" (\$2.5 million)
- "Bob Marley: One Love" (\$2.3 million)
- "One Life" (\$1.7 million)
- "The American Society of Magical Negroes" (\$1.3 million)
- "Ordinary Angels" (\$1 million). — AFP