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Meeting ensures price stability of foodstuff during Ramadan

Muscat - A high-level meeting of several competent authorities was held on Thursday to ensure the availability of basic food commodities and the stability of their prices during the holy month of Ramadan.

The second joint meeting on providing basic commodities in the local markets was held at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) on Thursday.

The meeting discussed many issues of priority pertaining to the food security sector. It reviewed the developments and the availability of basic commodities in the local markets, like wheat, rice and vegetable oils.

The meeting also took note of the mechanisms set to ensure price stability and the availability of all foodstuffs and consumer commodities in all markets of Oman's governorates.

The meeting was chaired by H E Dr Saud Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources.

During the meeting, a package of incentives was announced to boost the food reserves in the local markets, including the provision of free food reserve stores for a number of foodstuffs imported directly from target markets, as well as facilitating the imports through Omani ports.

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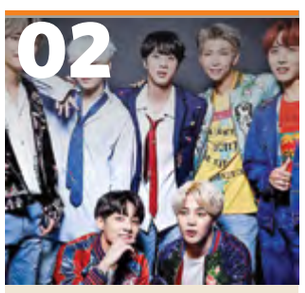


Korean Wave on Omani shores

ROP fights scourge of drug abuse

ROP seizes 21 tonnes of narcotics, 2mn pills of psychotropic substances in 2021

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Twenty-one tonnes of narcotics and 2mn pills of psychotropic substances were confiscated in 2021 by the Royal Oman police (ROP).

Lt Col Suleiman bin Saif al Tamtami, director of enforcement administration at the Directorate General of Combating Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, said, "ROP is making great efforts to combat narcotics and psychotropic substances and illicit trafficking of them. Narcotics are a dangerous international scourge that has devastating effects on the security and safety of countries and societies in the present and future."

Lt Col Tamtami stressed that ROP is carrying out proactive security operations to prevent the entry, smuggling, trafficking and promotion of drugs. The monitoring, tracking and apprehending smugglers is being done through the use of modern and advanced security techniques. "Smugglers use a variety of means to transport and hide drugs using fast boats and drop them on beaches," he said.

Narcotics have devastating effects on the security and safety of countries and societies

LT COL SULEIMAN AL TAMTAMI

Smugglers sometimes hide drugs in construction materials, foodstuffs, and others.

Smugglers sometimes hide drugs in construction materials and foodstuffs

(Supplied photos)

He explained that drug dealers and promoters target all segments of society without exception, especially the youth.

Lt Col Tamtami said that Royal Decree No 17/99 and its amendments by Royal Decree No 34/2015 stipulate strict penalties for drug- related crimes, even the death penalty in cases of smuggling and participation with international gangs, and absolute imprisonment for felonies, in addition to fines of up to RO50,000.

He added that ROP has constantly sought to prepare and train forces to fight the drug menace, arming them with legal and police skills and knowledge, and providing them with the financial and technical capabilities to perform the tasks to the fullest.

"The Royal Oman Police thanks the citizens and residents for their continuous contribution to the police by reporting drug crimes," Lt Col Tamtami concluded.

Confronting Islamophobia needs joint international action: Oman

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Following the United Nations (UN) General Assembly approving a resolution setting March 15 as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia, Oman welcomed the decision saying that confronting extremism, fanaticism and hatred has become a necessity of joint international action.

The resolution, adopted by consensus by the 193-member world body, emphasises the right to freedom of religion and belief and recalls a 1981 resolution calling for the elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief.

H E Dr Mohamed bin Awad al Hassan, permanent representative of Oman to the UN, said before the general assembly - as part of its discussion of the item entitled 'Combating the phenomenon of anti-Islam and Muslims (Islamophobia)' - that Oman has made it clear that respect for the other is one of the noble goals and objectives on which the mission of the UN is based.

The hostility to Islam and Muslims is a growing phenomenon that affects the lives and rights of many people

H E DR MOHAMED AL HASSAN

"Confronting extremism, fanaticism and hatred has become a necessity of joint international action. The sultanate affirms its rejection of any attempts aimed at offending religious symbols, and that it is not wise to exploit freedom of expression as a pretext to offend religious symbols and the beliefs of others," he said.

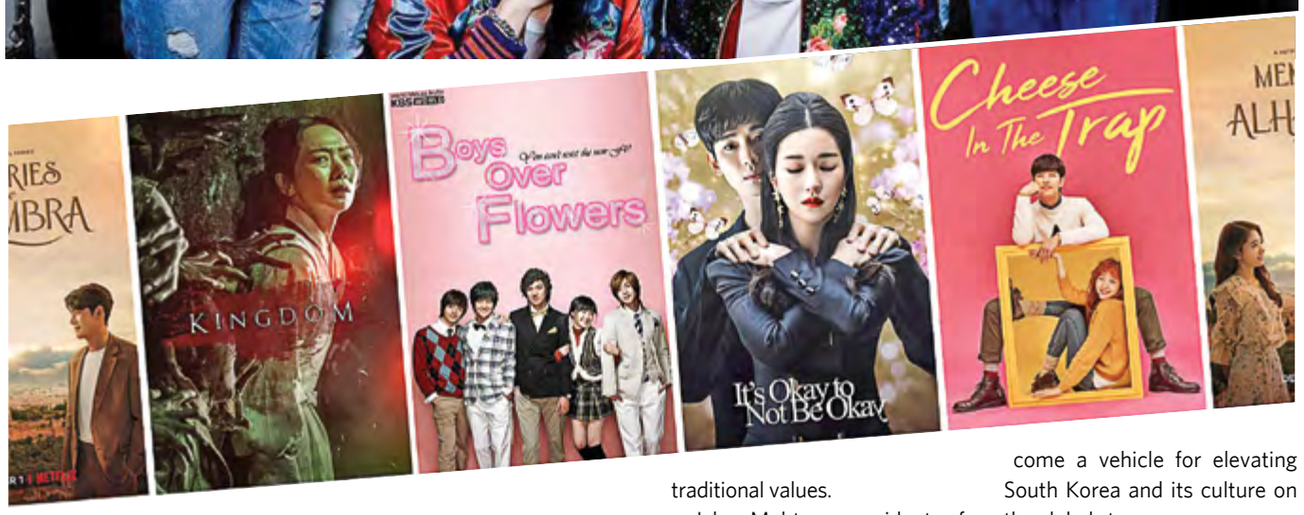
He added that Oman calls on all countries to take all means to confront these phenomena and hold the promoters of intolerance and hatred to account, noting that respect is a duty, and coexistence is a necessity to bring ideas and cooperation closer.

"The hostility to Islam and Muslims is a growing phenomenon that affects the lives and rights of many people around the world and must be confronted and cannot be underestimated under the pretext of freedom of expression," H E Dr Hassan said.

According to the UN, the resolution expresses deep concern at the overall rise in instances of discrimination, intolerance and violence, regardless of the actors, directed against members of many religions and other communities in various parts of the world.

Korean Wave on Omani shores

This global phenomenon is entrenched in youngsters, both citizens and residents in Oman too



Muscat - Korean culture has taken over the world by storm. Korean language, cuisine, fashion, music, TV series and movies have a significant influence on youngsters in many parts of the world. Referred to as the Korean Wave, it has spread far and wide since its origins in 1990s, influencing teenagers and young adults from Asia to Africa to Europe.

This global phenomenon reached Omani shores, too, some time ago and is now deeply entrenched in some sections of youngsters, both citizens and residents, who embrace many aspects of Korean culture. It's not uncommon to find millennials watching K-drama, dancing to K-pop tunes, even actively learning Korean.

The heightened emphasis on delivering high-quality products has enabled Korean brands and the entertainment industry to provide premium quality products and content to the rest of the world and attract new customers.

Known for affordability and fast fashion, Korean clothes have evolved rapidly and now compete with some of the top international brands. Bold yet balanced, colourful yet tasteful, Korean fashion has created popular trends. The clothes of popular K-pop and K-drama artists are influencing the rest of the world, redefining fashion standards, breaking barriers and making South Korea a fashion destination for many.

The influence of Korean fashion is reflected in the way the youth of Oman are dressing, as can be seen at popular hang-outs of hipsters. Ankle-length pants, baggy pants, oversized shirts and bucket hats – all influenced by Korean fashion trends – are in clear display.

> *When I first started listening to BTS, even though I didn't understand the language, the music and vibe drew me in*
>
> FATIMA FOUDA

Fatma al Saadi was inspired to adopt Korean fashion because of its simplicity and uniqueness. "The beauty of their fashion is that it immediately makes you think of Korea, and their contemporary style is rarely seen in western films and pop music," she said.

"I also feel that Korean culture has a few similarities to Omani culture," Fatma claimed.

Besides fashion, youngsters in Oman are increasingly developing a keen interest in K-drama and films. Korean series and films, including *Train to Busan*, *Crash Landing on You*, *Parasite* and *Squid Game*, have been lapped up by young people in Oman and created viewership records. Striking a balance between good visuals and emotional appeal, Korean content taps on a wide variety of unexplored themes and underlying traditional values.

Isha Mehta, a resident of Oman from India, is 'hooked' to Korean culture. "I love the detailing in direction, plots, brilliant casting and original soundtracks in their movies and dramas. It inspired me to learn the language so that I can know more about their culture," Isha said.

Often seen as the international face of South Korea, K-pop has been dominating the pop music industry around the world. Strategically orchestrated as unshakeable earworms, K-pop is known for its seamless tunes, synchronised choreography and extreme attention to detail. K-pop has skyrocketed in popularity in recent years. Bands like *BTS*, *Blackpink* and *Bigbang* have broken records and have become a vehicle for elevating South Korea and its culture on the global stage.

Fatima Fouda, an Egyptian resident in Muscat, said, "I have been following K-pop for a few years now. Their songs don't just have deep meaning, but can also instantly lift my mood and make me happy. When I first started listening to *BTS*, even though I didn't understand the language, the music and vibe drew me in. "

Youth across the sultanate are coming together in their love for Korean culture. With fan pages solely dedicated to Korean culture enthusiasts in Oman, it has become a driving force for people to feel closer to one another, forming communities and developing strong parasocial relationships.

(Contributed by Aashna Sanghani)

Municipality to set up 'Grill Zone' in Amerat

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To facilitate a work environment conducive to street vendors in Amerat, Muscat Municipality has announced a project called Grill Zone in the wilayat which will bring all mobile vendors to one place to conduct their activities in an organised way.

In a statement, Muscat Municipality said, 'The project aims to regulate the activities of street vendors in the governorate. Setting up Grill Zone will get all mobile vendors to one integrated place, in addition to facilitating control over food quality and protecting residential sites from harmful grilling fumes.'

According to Muscat Municipality, the site will have tables, chairs, garbage containers and lighting, besides place for 20 mobile vending carts.

The civic body indicated that the project will reduce traffic congestion in Amerat where street vendors currently operate and improve the overall aesthetics of the wilayat.

Residents welcome the project

"I enjoy mishkak and visit mishkak sellers frequently - almost every week. But the current location where street vendors sell mishkak is very congested as it's near the road, making it inconvenient for motorists. Hope Grill Zone is conveniently located," said Fuad al Farsi, an Amerat resident.

Announcement of the project with better facilities has come as a relief to the street vendors. "Currently, we are operating from a site along a narrow road which is not ideal for our business. Once the project is complete, we will be relieved and probably attract more customers," said Mohammed Ali, a mishkak seller in Amerat.

281 new parking spaces in Khoula Hospital

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Muscat Municipality has built parking space for 281 more cars in Khoula Hospital in efforts to improve civic facilities.

A statement said, 'Muscat Municipality, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, has established 281 new parking spaces in Khoula Hospital. With this, the ministry has confirmed that the total number of parking spots in the hospital is 899.

'The project was implemented for the convenience of hospital visitors who were struggling to find parking spots, reduce frequent congestion near the hospital and prevent random parking of vehicles.'

170 new COVID-19 cases reported

Muscat - The Ministry of Health (MoH) reported 170 new COVID-19 infections on Thursday registered in a 24-hour period, taking the total number of cases in Oman to 387,180. No deaths were reported in this period.

'The total number of COVID-19 related deaths reported in the country stands at 4,250,' an MoH statement said. The ministry added that the total number of recoveries is 380,425, after 330 COVID-19 patients recovered on Thursday, accounting for a recovery rate of 98.3 per cent.

'There were 23 new hospitalisations in the past 24 hours,' MoH stated.

WEATHER WATCH

	Max	Min
Abu Dhabi	28	17
Doha	29	17
Kuwait City	26	16
Manama	26	18
Muscat	29	19
Riyadh	31	17

PRAYER TIMINGS

Fajr	4.56am
Sunrise	6.11am
Duhr	12.20pm
Asr	3.45pm
Maghrib	6.23pm
Isha	7.33pm

Dates Industrial Complex in Nizwa begins trial operations

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Perceived to be a game-changer in healthy food and sustainable agriculture projects in Oman, Dates Industrial Complex in Nizwa - one of the largest date processing plants in the world - has started its trial operations.

As part of its efforts to help the sultanate achieve self-sufficiency in food security, Nakheel Oman Development Company (NODC) announced on Tuesday that trial operations of the complex has started.

Nakheel aims to invest in date palm, healthy food and sustainable agriculture to produce better food for better life. The complex will have an annual capacity of 50,000 tonnes.

NODC's complex will be dedicated to post-harvesting operations (fumigation, warehousing, sorting and packaging) and other related manufacturing activities in accordance with the highest industry standards.

NODC is a partnership of the Diwan of Royal Court (represented by the Directorate General of the One Million Date Palms Plantation Project) and Oman National Investments Development Company (Tanmia).

Flu jabs now available for chronically ill: MoH

Our Correspondent
Muscat

To prevent flu infection, the Ministry of Health (MOH) has announced that seasonal influenza vaccines will be available at its health centres.

A statement issued by the ministry said, 'Seasonal influenza vaccine will be available at health institutions in all governorates of the sultanate for people with chronic diseases, those aged 65 years and older, and travellers heading to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to perform Umrah. Being vaccinated is one of the conditions imposed by Saudi Arabia to perform the rituals.'

The ministry called on the target groups to visit the nearest health centre to get the seasonal influenza vaccine to avoid infection. Influenza affects the respiratory system, which may cause serious complications, especially for people with certain medical conditions and the elderly.

The ministry also stated that flu vaccines are available in private healthcare institutions for those who are not in the target groups.

MoH recommends seasonal vaccines for vulnerable groups, including healthcare workers, pregnant women, the elderly (65 years and older) and patients with chronic conditions, such as respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, kidney and liver disorders, and diabetes.

As many as 177 cases of seasonal influenza and two deaths resulting from it were recorded in the sultanate in 2020/2021, according MoH.

Outbreaks of seasonal flu, caused by influenza viruses, resulting in acute respiratory infection are witnessed in all parts of the world.

Seasonal flu claimed 29 lives in Oman between July 2018 and June 2019. According to MoH, there were 1,248 laboratory confirmed cases during this period.

The number of cases registered in the 2019/2020 flu season, however, decreased. This was due to precautionary measures adopted worldwide to counter the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, including partial lockdowns and border shutdowns, school instruction and office work moving online, suspension of travel, and face masks being made mandatory in public places.

Oman launches two projects to combat obesity

Our Correspondent
Muscat

H E Dr Ahmed al Sa'eedi,

The Ministry of Health (MoH), in collaboration with Novo Nordisk Pharma Gulf and the Danish Embassy in Muscat, launched two pilot projects - Oman Obesity Clinical Practice Guidelines and Obesity Epidemiology Study – on Thursday.

The projects will educate healthcare professionals on how to proactively and efficiently engage in medical management of obesity and estimate the prevalence of obesity related co-morbidities in hospital settings, besides assessing the top ten co-morbidities prevalent in Oman.

The two projects were launched in a meeting held under the patronage of H E Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Sa'eedi, Minister of Health, in the presence of H E Ole Emil Moesby, Ambassador of Denmark to Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen.

Drawing attention to the rise in obesity related health issues worldwide, H E Dr Sa'eedi expressed concern that obesity is taking a toll not only on the well-being of individuals, but also on societies. It also hampers productivity and puts strain on healthcare systems and economies.

Over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted another global issue – the obesity epidemic. Poor nutrition coupled with technologies that enable a sedentary lifestyle have been linked to a rise in obesity.

A recent cross-sectional community-based survey of the population of Oman found that almost two-thirds - 66 per cent - of the population was overweight or had obesity (body mass index U 25).

Associated with an alarming 195 health impairments and as a major risk factor in chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes and cancer, obesity is fast becoming one of the most serious health problems in the world.

Omani dates market in Mall of Muscat

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As many as 22 farmers and date processing firms will take part in the Omani Dates Market in Mall of Muscat from March 22-29.

An official at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR), said that participating businesses will come from various governorates. "The outlets will be open to public from 10am to 10pm at Mall of Muscat," he said.

"The market will display most important varieties of dates such as Khalas, Al Dhahirah, Fard, Khenizi Berni, Handal Bunarenga, Khasab, Umm al Sala, Majhoul, Sukkari, and others."

"The outlets aim to promote and support farmers' products, increase the value of Omani dates, and encourage further investment in farming to increase local production, raise quality and marketing it in an efficient way," said the official.

According to MAFWR, dates production in the sultanate increased in 2019 compared to 2018 and 2017.

According to the statistics, the sultanate produced 377,000 tonnes of dates in 2019, 369,000 tonnes in 2018 and 361,000 tonnes in 2017.

MAFWR uses drones to spray fertilisers

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has launched a new service to spray fertilisers using drones with the objective of developing the agricultural sector and supporting farmers.

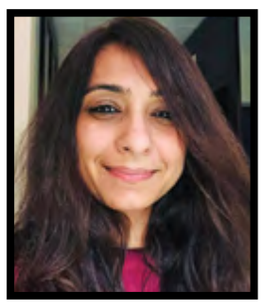
According to an MAFWR official, the ministry, in cooperation with Wakan Tech, has started using drones to spray fertilisers on large expanses of agricultural land.

"The initiative will support the agricultural sector and farmers through the use of modern technology. Drones save labour and time, and are very economical. The technology helps cover large areas of agricultural land in a short period of time," the ministry official said.

Besides spraying fertilisers in required proportions, the drones are equipped with AI-powered sensors to plant seeds in designated places.

Wakan Tech recently undertook a project to pollinate more than 600 date palm trees in a Directorate General of Agricultural and Animal Research farm in Barka, South Batinah.

BEYOND WORDS



VAISHALI HAMLAI

The columnist is a certified MBTI coach and author, and writer who delves into the complexities of the mind and soul to guide and interpret social behaviour

It's been more than two years that we've been bundled up into our wonderland called home, with no one to judge us and tell us anything except of course our family. We did everything that was socially unacceptable and acceptable without tagging it as acceptable and unacceptable; because it was at home, in our haven.

We all have at some point attended an office zoom meeting with crumpled track pants at the bottom and crisp well ironed starched white shirt above. We all have made incessant attempts at baking, without which COVID-19 was incomplete, the sourdough. Most of us, including me, miserably failed.

I must ask what's it with COVID-19 and baking? Or making Dolgano coffee. But I look at it as a desperate attempt to stay connected. Surprisingly I stayed in touch with those who I would have never spoken to, if COVID-19 pandemic didn't happen. The menacing craze where families met online to play games. Made me think when the last time was, I had connected with that cousin who apparently now has a teenage daughter I didn't know of; no, I'm not suggesting anything out here, I'm sure he was married. Many of them came out with their illicit demands to shame the ones who didn't attend such family online gatherings. Our need to be attached was out there in the open, bare and exposed.

> We value small things in life a little more now, than then. COVID-19 was a way to tell us to stop and smell the flowers. But it was a high price to pay to sit back and look inside

IS IT OVER?

The uncanny riots at the grocery stores where you are prepared for a war like situation. The time when you come back home and almost need an alcohol-soaked bath thereafter. The time when you are petrified of a sneeze. But the one thing that struck my chord was the harmony. We as humans came together, so what if it was for Dolgano coffee; or office zoom meetings or online family games night.

I witnessed my collogue's son who she keeps talking about, looks very different and taller than in the pictures she showed me. It added a human touch to the person we knew, now we understand them better.

Finally, the clan that embraced this situation naturally, the kids; they were barely scratched by this insanity. I saw my kids and their friends subconsciously creating the best coping mechanism for themselves. The way they swept through this time with a few bumps here and there was something to marvel at. They adapted to the new norms faster than adults. They were the unshattered lot and they also made sure they support their shattered friends. They have displayed heroism at its best. They went above and beyond to talk to all their friends, be it in the country or outside. They melted into the new coronavirus world.

Be it kids or adults we all have come out stronger and humbler than before. We value small things in life a little more now, than then. COVID-19 was a way to tell us to stop and smell the flowers. But it was a high price to pay to sit back and look inside. Maybe this is what we needed to bring the light back within us, or maybe not, to tell you the least it was a very harsh blow, a blow I wish to not encounter ever again!

The views and opinions expressed in this column are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of *Muscat Daily* or Apex Press & Publishing

Galfar reports improvement in financial performance in 2021

Despite the economic situation and reduction of spending in public projects, Galfar continues to maintain significant projects pipeline of RO405mn

Our Correspondent
Muscat

(Muscat Daily)

Galfar Engineering & Contracting Company, the largest construction firm in the sultanate, has reported a major improvement in its financial performance during the year 2021 despite the pandemic-related challenges and weak economic growth.

For the year ended December 31, 2021, the parent company achieved a net profit of RO4.63mn compared to losses of RO26.11mn in the previous year, Galfar said in its yearly report submitted to the Muscat Stock Exchange.

This improved performance, Galfar said, is on account of various initiatives taken by the company as part of its turnaround strategy to reorganise, improve projects performance and implement stringent cost controls.

'The positive bottom-line results came despite various challenges such as drop in revenues by approximately 10 per cent compared to the previous year, continued COVID-19 challenges and cash flow constraints due to late receipt of payments,' the company noted.

> *For the year ended December 31, 2021, the parent company achieved a net profit of RO4.63mn compared to losses of RO26.11mn in the previous year*
>
> **GALFAR ENGINEERING & CONTRACTING**

Galfar's group financial statements for the year 2021 recorded a decreased turnover of RO187.9mn (against RO208.9mn in 2020) with a net profit of RO1.3mn (against a net loss RO28.3mn in 2020).

By the end of 2021, Galfar (the parent company) has certified overdue receivables of more than RO42mn, majority of which are related to long-completed transportation projects and waste water network projects, the company said.

It added that the delay in receiving overdue amounts continues to exert significant strain on the company's cash flow, which resulted in suboptimal execution of certain projects and delay in completion of others. As a result, revenues in 2021 were lower than planned and lower than previous year.

For the year ended December 31, 2021, Galfar received new project awards worth RO147mn and RO59mn of additional work orders through variations and extensions of ongoing projects.

Despite the economic situation and reduction of spending in public projects, Galfar said it continues to maintain significant projects pipeline of RO405mn.

Within this order book the company is still waiting to receive the commencement order for projects awarded in previous years such as Dualization of Haima-Thumrait Package-4 Project (awarded in July 2020), Wadi-Alyen Water Network Project (awarded in July 2019) and Muscat Airport Southern Runway Refurbishment Project (awarded in October 2021), for which commencement orders continue to be delayed.

Galfar said its board and management are determined to turnaround and improve the financial performance of the company with continued focus to implement the company's turnaround strategy.

'Going forward, the management expects to maintain a solid project pipeline in excess of RO400mn with a significant number of tenders under evaluation across a diverse array of sectors and clients. We reasonably expect to be successful in a number of those which will ensure stability and sustainability of our strong market position,' the company said.

In addition, Galfar said it has identified various diversification opportunities in construction technology, energy, minerals and other sectors that will provide long-term sustainability and growth opportunities for the company in the future.

Galfar said it is optimistic about 2022, especially because the company continues to have a large order book of contracts in hand, totalling more than RO400mn.

'The focus is on achieving a positive return from this orderbook through the implementation of several strategic objectives in the transformation strategy, which will improve the company's financial situation as well as further strengthen it by gaining new contracts for each business unit,' the company added.

IEA urges to start 'measures' to cut oil use over supply fears

Paris, France – The International Energy Agency (IEA) on Friday urged governments to urgently implement measures to cut global oil consumption within months following supply fears stemming from Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The IEA also called on the OPEC+ group of oil-producing nations led by Saudi Arabia and Russia to help 'relieve the strain' on markets, while warning that the world faced the biggest shock to supply 'in decades'.

The outbreak of war in Ukraine has sent prices for the fuel up sharply and led to major economies, such as the United States and Canada, sanctioning Russia by banning imports of oil.

The IEA warned earlier last week of the risk of a global supply crisis as major oil companies, trading houses, shipping firms and banks have shunned Russia.

With the threat that supplies of Russian oil could be cut even more, 'there is a real risk that markets tighten further and oil prices escalate significantly in the coming months' as the world enters its peak demand season, the IEA said.

"As a result of Russia's appalling aggression against Ukraine, the world may well be facing its biggest oil supply shock in decades, with huge implications for our economies and societies," IEA executive director Fatih Birol said in a statement.

US pressures OPEC

Increases in supply of the crucial commodity 'would not be able to ease the current strains' after the 'disappointing outcome' of a recent monthly meeting of OPEC+, the IEA report concluded.

The OPEC+ group has resisted US pressure to step up production for months, agreeing only to modest increases in output at its regular meetings, even after Russia invaded Ukraine.

The IEA was hoping for 'some good messages which could help to relieve the strain on the oil markets' after the group's next meeting on March 31, Birol said at a press conference to present a plan to cut demand.

The 10 proposals put forward by the IEA could cut oil consumption among advanced economies 'by 2.7mn barrels a day within the next four months', it said.

The measures, put forward together with the French government, could reduce consumption among those countries by 2.7mn barrels a day, while these currently consume between 44mn and 45mn barrels a day, according to IEA estimates.

Together the world's advanced economies account for 'around 45 per cent of global oil demand', it said.

AFP

NPI Pharma

NATIONAL PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRIES CO. (SAOC)

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ORDINARY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AGENDA

The Board of Directors of **National Pharmaceutical Industry Co** (SAOG) is pleased to invite the Company's shareholders to attend the company's Ordinary Annual General Meetings, to be held **at 3.00 pm. on Thursday , 31 /03/ 2022,** via the electronic platform to hold general meetings which can accessed through the website of Muscat Clearing and Depository Company (www.mcd.gov.om) If the required quorum is not satisfied another an Ordinary Annual General Meetings would be held on **Monday 04/04/2022 , at 3:00.pm** via the same electronic platform to discuss the following Agenda:

1- To consider and approve the Board of Director's Report for the financial year ended 31 December 2021.
2- To consider the Auditors' Report and to approve the Financial Statements (Balance Sheet and Profit & Loss Account) in respect of the Company for the financial year ended 31 December 2021
3- To consider and approve the proposed final cash dividend to Shareholders, as per the date of the meeting, in the rate of …6……% of the company's capital of per share .006 baisa …….. for each share) for the financial year ended on 31/12/ 2021.
4- To approve the sitting fees of the Board meetings paid to the Board of Director's members for previous financial year ended 31/12/ 2021, and to determine the sitting fees for the next fiscal year ending on 31/12/ 2022 (as per Attachment:).
5- To consider and approve the transactions entered into by the company with related parties during the fiscal year ended on 31/12/2021 (as per Attachment)
6- To consider and approve the transactions the company will enter into with related parties during the financial year ending on 31/12/2022 (as per Attachment)
7- Electing a member to fill the vacant position from among the shareholders and non-shareholders, anyone who wishes to be nominated for a membership in the Board of Directors must fill in the nomination form which can be obtained from the company, and submit the form after filling it to the company at least Five 5 working days before the meeting of date, no later than the end of the business day of **Thursday 24/03/2022** The company will not accept any application form after that.
8- The appointment of the Auditors for the Company for the financial year ending 31/12/ 2022 and approve their fees.

According to the Company's Articles of Association and the controls of holding General Meetings using electronic platform , we would like to draw your attention to the following

a) Juristic persons only, have the right to appoint a natural person as a proxy to attend the General Meeting and vote on its behalf through technical means, provided that this natural person has an investor number in MCDC.
b) Voting on any of the agenda items begins no more than three days before the date of the General Meeting until the voting process ends on the day of the General Meeting. If the shareholder's shares are increased or decreased, the voting process will be canceled, and the shareholder will have to vote again on the day of the General Meeting.

For further information please contact Mr.Vinod Hari Pillai on phone No 24449070

India defends Russian oil purchase

New Delhi, India – Indian government officials on Friday defended the continued buying of Russian oil, saying European countries were still purchasing hydrocarbons from Moscow and that high crude prices left New Delhi with little choice.

Indian oil refiners have in recent days reportedly purchased several million barrels of discounted Russian oil even as the West seeks to isolate Moscow economically over its invasion of Ukraine.

But an Indian government official said on Friday that the world's third-biggest consumer of crude relied on imports for almost 85 per cent of its needs, with Russia supplying a 'marginal' less than one per cent of this.

"Geopolitical developments have posed significant challenges to our energy security. For obvious reasons, we have had to stop sourcing from Iran and Venezuela. Alternative sources have often come at a higher cost," the official said on condition of anonymity.

"The jump in oil prices after the Ukraine conflict has now added to our challenges... India has to keep focusing on competitive energy sources," they said.

"Countries with oil self-sufficiency or those importing themselves from Russia cannot credibly advocate restrictive trading," the official added, referring to the United States and European nations respectively.

> *The jump in oil prices after the Ukraine conflict has now added to our challenges... India has to keep focusing on competitive energy sources*
>
> **INDIAN GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL**

New Delhi, which historically has had close ties with Moscow, has called for an end to the violence in Ukraine but has stopped short of condemning Russia's invasion, abstaining in three votes at the United Nations.

The White House said this week that it did not appear any Indian oil purchase would violate US sanctions.

But press secretary Jen Psaki urged foreign nations to "think about where you want to stand when history books are written" on the conflict.

New Delhi has been working on a rupee-rouble trade mechanism to facilitate trade with Russia, bypassing the need to denominate trade in US dollars, according to local media reports.

In addition to oil, India also imports large volumes of Russian arms – Moscow is its largest supplier – as well as fertilisers and rough diamonds to be cut and polished and then exported elsewhere.

Indian exports to Russia include pharmaceuticals, tea and coffee.

Oil prices had already risen sharply before the Ukraine conflict, squeezing consumers in India where the average daily wage among rural workers was just ₹175 (US$2.30) in 2018, according to UN figures.

"We are a relatively poor country and these oil prices matter a lot: Electorally, politically, socially and otherwise," Lydia Powell of the New Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation told AFP.

AFP

MARKET ANALYSIS - OMAN

MSX index closes the week marginally lower

The benchmark index of the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) posted marginal decline for the last week compared with the previous week's closing level.

The MSX30 index ended the week lower by 0.29 per cent. While Financial index closed lower by 0.77 per cent, Industrial index and Service index were up by 0.74 per cent and 0.28 per cent, respectively. The MSX Shariah index closed lower by 0.56 per cent.

Local news

▶National Gas informed its shareholders that due to the recent pandemic effects and substantial escalation in the steel prices and construction costs, it is envisaged that the India LPG terminal project cost could escalate. In the shareholders' interest, the company has been in negotiations for the divestment of its entire 60 per cent share in the project. The company has been able to conclude the negotiations and informed the shareholders that the divestment would be at a premium that would result in a gross profit of US$3.5mn (RO1.35mn). The gross proceeds that the company expects to receive is RO6.24mn. It intends to pay off its loans with the proceeds and will be able to consolidate and strengthen its balance sheet for future expansion and growth purposes. The transaction is expected to take two-three months to close.

▶Oman's decision last week allowing foreign investors with a First-Class Residency Card to buy property in the country will spur local real estate and ancillary businesses connected to it and, thereby, boost the national GDP in fiscal 2022. Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shu'aili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning announced the decision. This decision will encourage long-time residents from Asia, Europe and the Americas, living and working in Oman, to buy property.

▶Under a five-year plan, the sultanate's government is planning to list as many as 35 state-owned companies on the Muscat Stock Exchange with one or two oil sector firms likely to be listed during 2022, according to Haitham bin Salem al Salmi, CEO of MSX. "There is a government plan to list 35 companies in the market over a period of five years. The plan is expected to begin in the second half of this year. We are focusing on listing one or two companies from the oil sector during the current year," Salmi told CNBC Arabia in an interview last week.

▶The directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to reduce the fees for the recruitment of expatriate workforce reflects the high care and vision to improve the business environment and raise the competitiveness of Oman, the chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) said. Eng Ridha bin Juma al Saleh expressed the private sector's gratitude for the generous directives from His Majesty the Sultan to improve the business environment and raise the competitiveness of the Oman.

GCC markets

The Central Bank of Bahrain (CBB) has decided to raise its key policy interest rate by 25 basis points. CBB's key policy interest rate on the one-week deposit facility is raised from 1.0 per cent to 1.25 per cent. The CBB has also decided to raise the overnight deposit rate from 0.75 per cent to 1 per cent, the four-week deposit rate from 1.50 per cent to 1.75 per cent, and the lending rates from 2.25 per cent to 2.50 per cent.

The Central Bank of the UAE (CBUAE) has decided to raise the base rate applicable to the Overnight Deposit Facility (ODF) by 25 basis points, effective from March 17, 2022. This decision was taken following the US Federal Reserve's announcement to increase the Interest on Reserve Balances (IORB) by 25 basis points. The CBUAE also has decided to maintain the rate applicable to borrowing short-term liquidity from the CBUAE through all standing credit facilities at 50 basis points above the base rate.

The Saudi Central Bank (SAMA) decided to raise its repo rate to 125 basis points from 100 basis points and its reverse repo rate to 75 basis points from 25 basis points. SAMA follows the interest rate moves of the US Federal Reserve due to the riyal-US dollar peg.

The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) raised is discount rate by a quarter of a percentage point to 1.75 per cent. In addition, it changed the rates of monetary policy instruments by varying percentages for the entire interest rate yield curve, up to the ten-year term. This includes repurchases, CBK bonds and tawarruq, term deposits, direct intervention instruments, as well as public debt instruments.

The Qatar Central Bank raised its repurchase rate by 25 basis points to 1.25 per cent. It maintained its deposit rate at its current level of 1 per cent and the lending rate at its present level of 2.5 per cent.

Recommendation

US stocks rose after the Fed's announcement that raised the Fed's fund rate by 25 basis points. It also reaffirmed its intention to raise rates six more times this year. The positive response by both stock and bond investors demonstrates the sentiment that the rate hikes will help with inflation.

Regionally, the markets ended the week mixed as oil prices has dropped, following two weeks of continuous increase.

Locally, annual general meetings season is still ongoing and the level of the dividend announcement is still the main driver of the appetite.

By special arrangement with U Capital

US Fed raises interest rate in battle against high inflation

Washington, US – The US Federal Reserve escalated its battle against the wave of price increases battering the US economy, raising the benchmark interest rate last week even as it acknowledged the risks posed by the war in Ukraine.

At the conclusion of its two-day meeting on Wednesday, the policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) announced a quarter-point rate hike, the first since 2018 and since it cut the rate to zero at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The central bank clearly signalled that the move, already well telegraphed by Fed officials in the weeks leading up to it, would be the first in a series.

"We're not going to let high inflation become entrenched. The costs of that would be too high," Federal Reserve chair Jerome Powell told reporters, adding that the FOMC is committed to using its 'powerful tools' to prevent that.

The central bank is walking a tightrope to ensure its inflation-fighting efforts don't derail the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic even as Russia's invasion of Ukraine introduces new uncertainty in an economy battered by supply chain snarls and labour shortages.

US Fed chair Jerome Powell

In a statement, the FOMC said the fallout from the war in Ukraine is 'likely to create additional upward pressure on inflation' and also could 'weigh on economic activity', although the 'implications for the US economy are highly uncertain'.

The Fed moved swiftly in March 2020 to prevent the pandemic from sending the world's largest economy into a severe downturn, but as the virus waned and businesses reopened, inflation has roared back, with prices for gasoline, food, cars and rents pushing the consumer price index to a four-decade high.

Powell said supply chain issues were worse and more long lasting than expected, and acknowledged that 'inflation is likely to take longer to return' to the Fed's two-per cent goal.

Blaming the 'elevated' inflation on 'supply and demand imbalances related to the pandemic, higher energy prices and broader price pressures', the statement said 'ongoing increases' in the policy rate will be 'appropriate'.

Markets are expecting a total of seven rate hikes this year, and while the committee typically moves in quarter-point steps, Powell said it could be more aggressive if needed.

"If we conclude that it would be appropriate to raise interest rates more quickly, then we'll do so," he said.

Powell warned that in addition to higher global oil and commodity prices, "the invasion and related events may restrain economic activity abroad and further disrupt supply chains, which would create spillovers to the US economy."

But he said there is little chance of a recession in the next year, noting that 'the American economy is very strong and well positioned to handle tighter monetary policy'.

AFP

IEA sees 'good message' in next OPEC+ meeting

Paris, France – The head of the International Energy Agency (IEA) said on Friday he hoped oil-producing nations would step in to ease supply fears as the Russian invasion of Ukraine sent shockwaves through markets.

IEA Executive Director Fatih Birol said at a press conference he was looking for 'some good messages which could help to relieve the strain on the oil markets' after the next meeting of OPEC+, which is led by Saudi Arabia and Russia, on March 31.

AFP

AL JADEED EXCHANGE AJX الصراف الجديد

SUMMARY OF ASSETS AND LIABILITES of Al Jadeed Exchange LLC
101A,1st floor, Muscat Grand Mall office , Muscat Sultanate of Oman
(Money Exchange Establishment) AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2021

ASSETS	31.12.2021 (RO' 000)	31.12.2020 (RO' 000)	LIABILITIES	31.12.2021 (RO' 000)	31.12.2020 (RO' 000)
1. CASH IN HAND	3,873	1,805	1. CAPITAL AND RESERVE	3,878	3,801
2. DEPOSITED WITH CENTRAL BANK OF OMAN	120	120	2. BORROWING FROM BANKS	849	393
3. PRECIOUS METALS	-	-	3. BALANCES DUE TO BRANCHES	-	-
4. BALANCES DUE FROM BANKS	3,286	3,087	4. BALANCES DUE TO MONEY- CHANGER	358	412
5. BALANCES DUE FROM BRANCHES	-	-	5. LOANS AND ADVANCES PAYABLE	-	-
6. BALANCES DUE FROM MONEY-CHANGER	14	14	6. CHEQUES AND DRAFTS ISSUED AND OUTSTANDING	-	-
7. CHEQUES AND DRAFTS PURCHASED	-	-	7. OTHER LIABILITES	3,436	1,600
8. LOANS AND ADVANCES	-	-			
9. INVESTMENTS	-	-			
10. FIXED AND INTANGIBLE ASSETS	547	502			
11. OTHER ASSETS	681	678			
TOTAL	8,521	6,206	TOTAL	8,521	6,206

WE CERTIFY THAT THE ABOVE BALANCES ARE IN AGREEMENT WITH THE BOOKS AND RECORDS OF THE COMPANY AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2021

AL JADEED EXCHANGE LLC
27 FEBRUARY 2022

MGI VISION CHARTERED ACCOUNTANTS

Arabia Falcon Insurance العربية فالكون التأمين

Directors' Report 2021

DEAR SHAREHOLDERS,
On behalf of the Board of Directors of Arabia Falcon Insurance SAOG, I have the pleasure in presenting to you the financial performance of the Company for the Year ended 31 December 2021.

GENERAL ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT
A difficult year globally, regionally, and locally.
After the challenging 2020 financial year, signs of improvement in Oil price, country credit rating and the improved capability of dealing with the Covid 19 pandemic gave hope that 2022 will be a better year for the Sultanate. Difficult market conditions continued through the year, with business distribution and work from home style. and Some sectors were badly affected by the pandemic with pressure on liquidity and tough competition.

With oil prices reaching $85 per barrel in the fourth quarter of 2021, Oman economy is expected to deliver growth in 2021 by 3% and 3.7% in 2022 after contracting by 2.8% in 2020.
Higher oil prices and fiscal reforms helped lessening the external financing pressures relative to recent years. Deficit narrowed to around 3.4% of GDP in 2021, from 16.1% of GDP in 2020. The revenue growth driven largely by a 28% rise in Oman's average fiscal oil price and accounted for more than half of the narrowing in the budget deficit. The government has made progress with implementation of its medium-term fiscal plan, which aims to balance the budget and lower government debt/GDP to 61% by 2025. In January-October non-oil revenue grew 40% yoy, helped by the introduction of a 5% VAT in April and gradual economic normalization, as Covid-19 related-restrictions were lifted, and Oman's vaccination drive accelerated.

INSURANCE SECTOR OVERVIEW
Oman Insurance Industry overall gross written premium (GWP) recorded 3.6% growth in 2021 after contracting by 4.1% in 2020. As per the market data of Capital Market Authority (CMA), the total industry's Gross Insurance Premiums for 2021 is at RO 486 million against RO 470 million for the year 2020.

INCOME AND TECHNICAL RESULTS OF ARABIA FALCON
a) The Company recorded Gross Written Premium of RO 20.44 million in 2021 against RO 18.28 million in 2020, a growth of 12%.
b) The measures taken by the management resulted in reduction in overall net claims ratio to 37% in 2021 from 38% in 2020 in spite the increase in Life and Health insurance segments claim ratio and the effect of Shaheen cyclone.
c) The underwriting profit was higher by 2% to RO 3.57 million in 2021 from RO 3.50 million in last year, due to the improved net claim ratio and the higher non-Motor production in 2021 compared with previous year.
d) The general operating expenses was down by 5% from RO 3.209 million in 2020 to RO 3.059 million in 2021
e) Net operating profit before investment income and income tax increased by 122% from 0.384 million in 2020 to 0.853 million in 2021 as a result of the higher underwriting profit and lower operating expenses.
f) The investment income was down to RO 1.17 million in 2021 from RO 1.55 million previous year due to reporting large part of investment income related to the appreciation in the bond portfolio under other comprehensive income (gain of RO 0.263 in 2021 compared with loss of RO 0.530 in previous year). Total investment income including the unrealized income reported under other comprehensive income and investment income allocated to insurance portfolio was 28% higher in 2021 compared with previous year.
g) The Profit after tax in 2021 is at RO 1.68 million against 1.67 million of 2020, a 0.4% growth.
h) The total equity of the company in 2021 has grown to RO 20.375 million against RO 19.469 million in 2020. The net book value has grown from RO 0.188 as at Dec 2020 to RO 0.197 at the end Dec 2021.

DIVIDENDS
Our retained earnings at the end of Dec 2021 is RO 1,292,186 and the Board of Directors has proposed a cash dividend of 12.00 Baisas (10.00 Baisas for 2020) per ordinary share. The proposed dividend is subject to the approval of members in the Annual General Meeting.
On approval in the Annual General Meeting, Shareholders will receive cash dividend of 12.00 Baisas per ordinary share of 100 Baisas each aggregating to RO 1,239,619.92 (One million two hundred thirty nine thousands six hundred nineteen Riyal and ninety two Baisas) on the company's paid up share capital of RO 10,330,166.

OUTLOOK FOR 2022
The Financial Year 2022 Sultanate of Oman budget represents the second year of the Tenth Five-Year Development Plan (2021-2025) representing another step toward achieving the Oman Vision 2040 development objectives.

The budget sets a prudent and measured tone in both its revenue and expenditure projections. Oman is taking to diversify the economy, improving tax revenue, continued focus on other key sectors such as logistics, tourism, fisheries and manufacturing for economic diversification to reduce the dependency on oil revenue which is highly affected by the fluctuation in oil prices.

Capital Markets Authority has approved guidelines on unified Health Insurance policy. The Company is looking forward to benefit out of the scheme. Outlook for the year ahead is positive and the Board will continue to implement strategies and plans to ensure better profitable performance of the company in 2022.

CORPORATE GOVERNANCE
The Company stands committed to fully adhere to the Code of Corporate Governance issued by the Capital Market Authority. A separate report on Corporate Governance and Management Discussion & Analysis Report have been included in the Annual Report.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
I take this opportunity to wish all success to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq bin Taimur towards further development and prosperity of the Sultanate.
We would like to thank the Regulatory bodies for their continued guidance and support. We value the support extended to the company by our clients and business partners. On behalf of the Board of directors I would also like to place on record my sincere thanks and appreciation for the dedicated efforts of the management team and all employees of the Company.
We would like to convey our sincere thanks to the shareholders of the Company for the confidence they have placed on the Company and in its Board and for the support over the years.

For & on behalf of the Board of Directors of Arabia Falcon Insurance SAOG

Maroun Kyrillos
Chairman of the Board of Directors

Statement of profit or loss and other comprehensive income for the year ended 31 December 2021

	Year ended 31 December 2021	Year ended 31 December 2020
Income		
Gross premium written	20,443,018	18,285,838
Net underwriting results	3,571,627	3,496,091
Investment income - net	1,168,647	1,547,179
Other income	340,203	96,764
	5,080,477	5,140,034
Expenses		
General, administrative, and selling expenses	(3,059,182)	(3,209,006)
Net profit before tax for the year	2,021,295	1,931,028
Income tax expense	(345,784)	(262,268)
Net profit after tax for the year	1,675,511	1,668,760
Other comprehensive income:		
Items that are or may be reclassified to profit or loss		
Changes in fair value of available-for-sale investments	263,329	(530,394)
Total comprehensive income for the year	1,938,840	1,138,366
Basic and diluted earnings per share	0.016	0.016

Statement of financial position as at 31 December 2021

	31 December 2021	31 December 2020
ASSETS		
Non-current assets		
Property and equipment	292,392	105,832
Right-to use-asset	164,537	34,867
Goodwill	555,883	555,883
Intangible assets	295,740	330,160
Held-to-maturity investments	904,580	702,270
Available-for-sale investments	7,569,020	8,238,350
Term deposits - non-current portion	15,097,642	11,519,395
Deferred tax asset	191,061	221,000
Reinsurers' share of insurance funds	835,516	901,534
Total non-current assets	25,906,371	22,609,291
Current assets		
Financial assets at fair value through profit or loss	2,018,861	973,933
Term deposits - current portion	6,312,890	9,579,144
Insurance and other receivables	8,938,235	6,858,450
Reinsurers' share of insurance funds	22,870,452	27,840,439
Cash and bank balances	5,418,958	5,783,170
Total current assets	45,559,396	51,035,136
Total assets	71,465,767	73,644,427
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES		
EQUITY		
Capital and reserves		
Share capital	10,330,166	10,330,166
Share premium	1,749,442	1,749,442
Legal reserve	1,231,958	1,064,407
Contingency reserve	5,639,710	5,331,365
Investment fair value reserve	132,030	(131,299)
Retained earnings	1,292,186	1,125,588
Total shareholders' equity	20,375,492	19,469,669
Non-current liabilities		
Employees' benefit liabilities	116,440	148,238
Lease liabilities - non-current portion	101,277	11,095
Insurance funds	8,605,325	7,766,866
Total non-current liabilities	8,823,042	7,926,199
Current liabilities		
Lease liabilities - current portion	72,573	24,661
Insurance funds	28,038,607	34,310,250
Insurance and reinsurance contract payables	7,895,369	8,310,953
Claims and other payables	5,858,339	3,184,254
Provision for taxation	402,345	418,441
Total current liabilities	42,267,233	46,248,559
Total liabilities	51,090,275	54,174,758
Total equity and liabilities	71,465,767	73,644,427
Net assets per share	0.197	0.188

ARABIA FALCON INSURANCE COMPANY SAOG
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Email: info@afic.om, Website: www.afic.om

INFINITI QX80 voted 'Powerhouse Luxury SUV of the Year' in 2021

Recognised for its excellence and impeccable performance, INFINITI's full-sized luxury SUV, the QX80 Black Edition, received the 'Powerhouse Luxury SUV of the Year' award during the 2021 edition of Signature - The Luxury 100 Award.

Designed exclusively for customers in the GCC, the Infiniti QX80 Black Edition grade accentuates the SUV's presence on the road, combining bold proportions and a commanding exterior design with a spacious, high quality cabin with room for seven or eight passengers. Effortless performance, advanced drive-assist technologies and taut, yet refined, dynamics allow for a relaxing and confidence-inspiring drive, a press release said.

The Luxury 100, a unique initiative from Signature magazine that marks Oman's, and the region's, only list of iconic luxury products of the year, is a superlative compilation of the 100 brands that embody the spirit of luxury. Created after months of study and research, the editors of UMS, renowned luxury specialists, lifestyle journalists and a select mix of readers and industry experts weigh in to create this list and each featured product has proven its luxury credentials with its popularity.

A spokesperson for Infiniti Oman said, "We are honoured to be recognised at The Luxury 100 Awards ceremony. It is one of the most prestigious and respected awards in the luxury market. Infiniti QX80 Black Edition brings hand-crafted luxury, convenience, and refinement for up to eight passengers."

The exterior of the QX80 Black Edition features dark chrome and black exterior accents that highlight the front grill and fascia, side fender vents, door mirror caps and rear tailgate strip. The commanding stance is heightened with the addition of dark chrome 22-inch forged alloy wheels. The LED head and taillights provide improved visibility, while the Adaptive Front Lighting System illuminates corners by turning with the steering direction.

For the 2022 model year, the QX80 Black Edition has been significantly refined with a revised center cluster featuring a single InTouch 12.3-inch widescreen HD display that includes wireless Apple CarPlay and USB-based Android Auto compatibility for entertainment on the go. An all-new wireless smartphone charger is included along with a Bose® Premium Sound system.

Standard on the Black Edition grade, a Smart Rearview Mirror displays a sharp view behind the luxury three-row SUV when engaged, even if cargo or passengers obstruct rearward vision inside. An Around View Monitor with Moving Object Detection and Front and Rear Sonar System is included to help make navigating tight parking spaces easier. Additional driver-assistance systems are available for the flagship SUV, including Intelligent Cruise Control, Backup Collision Intervention, Lane Departure Warning, Blind Spot Intervention, and Lane Departure Prevention.

Inside, the 2022 QX80 features leather or semi-aniline appointed seats in all three rows, with the option of second-row captain's chairs. Climate-controlled front seats are also available, as is Bose® Performance Series Audio with 17 speakers.

The QX80art, powered by a 5.6ltr V-8 that delivers 400hp and 560Nm torque, paired to a 7-speed automatic transmission, is equipped with All-Mode Four-Wheel Drive as well as Body Motion Control System. It is as capable as it is comfortable.

Bank Muscat branches enhance financial inclusion

Bank Muscat is continuing to expand its range of services and features available for customers, a press release said.

For about 40 years Bank Muscat has been studying with great attention the needs of its different customer segments and coming up with an expansion strategy that aims to provide banking services and financial inclusion across all parts of the country. Today, the bank is proud to have the largest branch network spread across all governorates in Oman, offering customers easy banking accessibility close to their places of residence or work.

Speaking about the importance of the bank's branches, Taya Eid Bait Sabeea, deputy general manager - Interior Regions, Bank Muscat, said, "Since the bank's inception in 1982, Bank Muscat has been keenly implementing a strategic expansion plan that enhances the ease of banking and accessibility to its large family of customers, according to their varying needs.

The bank's 146 retail banking branches, including those in remote areas, ensure that customers can easily access the bank's services and facilities. They play an active role in promoting financial inclusion across Oman from Musandam to Dhofar. We would like to thank all our esteemed customers for their deep confidence in the bank and promise to continue enhancing our services and facilities in line with our customer-centric vision."

The bank's expanding branch network are in areas where developmental activities are gaining momentum, highlighting Bank Muscat's focus to remain the nation's bank of first choice. They feature 'best in class' security practices and state of the art facilities for the convenience and comfort of customers. Branches are staffed by well qualified and experienced Omani employees and offer an easy way to customers to access the full range of world class banking products and services from Bank Muscat.

The bank continuously launches new services and facilities according to customer feedback and global banking trends. In 2020, Bank Muscat launched two bus-based Mobile Banking Units which are able to easily travel to and operate in remote locations to enhance financial inclusion. Through its branches, Bank Muscat customers access different services including opening different accounts, getting different financing products like housing, personal and cars, attaining cards and many more.

Bank Muscat has also distinguished itself by providing the largest e-channel network for the benefit of its customers, with over 800 ATMs and CDMs.

Al Injaz holds kindergarten Qur'an recitation

At Al Injaz Private School organised a Qur'an recitation competition for learners of kindergarten schools on March 15.

Around 72 enthusiastic young reciters from six eminent schools of the city participated in this event, apress release said. Amira Fawzy Abdel Moneim Musa, Walid Hammoud Saleh al Amri, and Ashraf Mohammed al Hourani were the judges of the event.

The judges and the audience applauded the participating schools' participants for their outstanding performance. Parents and teachers were also overwhelmed to see the auditorium fill up with the sweet voices of the young reciters. They appreciated the efforts of Al Injaz Private School for organising such an event after two years of COVID-19 restrictions.

Director, Al Injaz Private School, Amita Sharma, said, "Learning opportunities like these are the real education which will take these learners a long way in life." She added that activities like this are regular calendar events and that the school is looking forward to hosting more such events in future as things return to normal.

Huawei nova 9 SE launched in Oman at MCC

Huawei Consumer Business Group launched the newest phone Huawei nova 9 SE at an exclusive event held at Huawei Experience Store in City Centre Muscat.

'Mid-range smartphones aim to combine flagship-level features with great value. You may have to compromise slightly on one aspect or another, but it's often totally worth it. They also come with many benefits besides their competitive price, they often boast premium features, they're on par with the performance of high-end phones and they allow you to update to a newer gadget without feeling as guilty,' a press release said.

Huawei's newest mid-range phone Huawei nova 9 SE is the latest addition to their mid-range offerings and is considered a great choice for a mid-range phone priced under RO130.

Huawei nova 9 SE is equipped with a 108MP AI Quad Camera system, which comprises of a 108MP main camera, an 8MP ultra-wide-angle lens, a 2MP Bokeh lens, and a 2MP macro lens. With an impressive pixel count, the 108MP ultra-high-definition main camera allows users to unleash their creativity in sublime detail. The larger sensor and advanced imaging technology allow the smartphone to deliver extremely clear shots in High-Res mode, creating lossless images even when they are zoomed in three times.

It can capture pictures in dark environments and increase the brightness while reducing noise and improving the photo's dynamic range. You can also snap perfect selfies in low light as the Super Night Shot feature can accurately recognise human faces and optimise the background while filtering out noise. With AI recognition shutter technology, enabling the smart adjustment of the shutter, the nova 9 SE captures dynamic scenes with precision.

Indian embassy organises India-Oman Business Meet

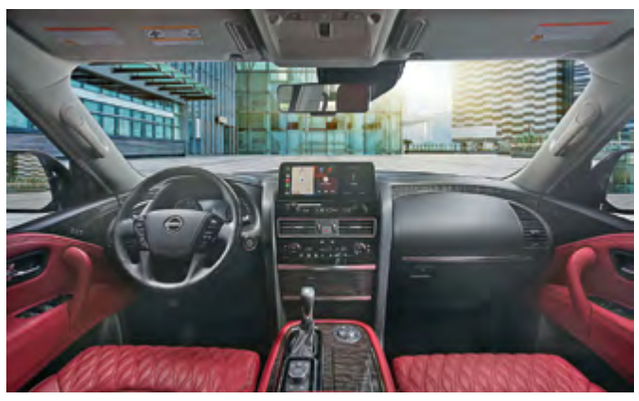
On the sidelines of the Oman Design & Build Week (ODBW), and Oman Real Estate Exhibition (OREX), an India-Oman Business Meet on Building and Construction sector was organised by the Embassy of India on March 15.

The event saw the participation of 23 Indian companies which were in Muscat to take part in ODBW and OREX as part of a delegation led by the Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO). From the Omani side, representatives of more than 30 companies and business houses from the construction and infrastructure sector attended the event for B2B interactions with the Indian companies.

The Business Meet – the first such B2B event organised by the Embassy of India after the COVID-19 pandemic – was jointly inaugurated by H E Eng Redha al Saleh, chairman, Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and H E Amit Narang, Ambassador of India.

During the course of the event, participants shared their experiences and discussed business opportunities available to both sides in these sectors. Indian participants displayed their strong credentials for enhancing exports to Oman and sought partnerships with Omani counterparts. With the economies of both Oman and India emerging from the pandemic with vigour, participants were enthusiastic about enhancing trade.

New Nissan Patrol has exciting upgrades



In celebration of Nissan Patrol's rich history and deeply-rooted connection to the region, Nissan Oman launched the new 2022 Patrol 70th Anniversary model in the country, following its world premiere at Expo 2020 Dubai.

The new edition of the icon of Nissan's SUV heritage, loved by generations of loyal customers, is now available in Nissan showrooms in Oman, a press release said.

Furthering the iconic SUV's success in the Middle East, the 2022 Patrol 70th Anniversary is a commemorative model exclusive to the gulf region, honouring its unmatched legacy of conquering all terrains.

Embodying power and premium quality, the 2022 Patrol 70th Anniversary model is more luxurious and connected than ever before with numerous stylistic and technological advancements.

A striking V-Motion grille and new 20-inch machine cut alloy wheels embellish the exterior of the iconic SUV, while all-new burgundy interiors elevate the level of opulence within the cabin. An all-new 12.3-inch infotainment screen with wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto connectivity along with new 10.1-inch rear entertainment screens, allow drivers and passengers to be more connected, while enhancing safety and enjoyment.

The Middle East formed a powerful attachment with the Nissan Patrol when the first-generation SUV landed in the Gulf in 1956. Proving itself as a reliable and capable SUV that can conquer all terrains, the 2022 Patrol 70th Anniversary models builds on the success of its predecessors and rewrites the benchmark for design, comfort, and technology.

Thierry Sabbagh, managing director at Nissan Middle East, said, "For decades, the Patrol has built a rich legacy of being the 'Hero of All Terrain', while becoming proudly linked to the region and its people. We are proud of the Patrol's journey and its ongoing evolution to cater to the unique needs and expectations of our customers across generations. We mark this 70th anniversary milestone with a special model truly worthy of the occasion, combining the best in luxury, performance, and connectivity. Our heritage continues to move us forward and we are excited to conquer the next 70 years together with our partners, stakeholders and customers in the region."

A spokesperson for Nissan Oman, from the house of Suhail Bahwan Automobiles (SBA) said, "Patrol is one of our longest-standing and most cherished models with a long and proud heritage. We are proud of the 70th Anniversary model which represents the peak of luxury and ultimate capability. We are sure that it will continue to provide authentic experiences."

Food Safety Academy renews partnership with UK's SFBB Systems

National Hospitality Institute (NHI) has re-affirmed its 10 year partnership with specialist UK food safety consultancy SFBB Systems.

NHI's Robert MacLean (Principal) has confirmed, that after two years of interruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, NHI's Food Safety Academy will continue to work closely with SFBB Systems and their lead consultant William Wood, a press release said.

With 25 years' experience in the industry, Wood will maintain hands-on support to the NHI team and work directly with clients in Muscat and across Oman in delivering tailored food safety training, auditing and risk-based food safety management / HACCP development programmes for the hospitality sector (hotel, restaurant and catering).

MacLean said, "The partnership, to date, has proved to be incredibly successful, and by continuing with this collaborative arrangement, NHI will be able to provide ongoing specialist advice and support to Oman's hotel and restaurant sector which, although still emerging out of the difficulties caused by the pandemic, is set to grow rapidly over the next few years."

He added, "We believe, that after such a difficult two years in the industry food establishments may have lost personnel responsible for managing hygiene/risk and may benefit more than ever before from tapping into specialist food safety advice which is easily accessible right here in Muscat."

NHI and SFBB Systems have become known across the industry for providing honest, practical and well-informed advice and have developed a good working relationship with clients such as Alila, The Chedi, Anantara and Occidental as well as building a trusted relationship with the Muscat Municipality Food Control Team.

Wood, who refers himself to clients as a 'critical-friend', said, "the NHI Food Safety Academy team will continue to assist food business operators in gaining a clear understanding of their responsibilities, how to comply with International, Regional and Municipality food safety and HACCP regulations and guidance, and most importantly, ensure they have the correct practices and procedures in place across their operations to ensure the delivery of safe food to their customers. The mantra of safer food means better business underpins everything we do.'

NHI announces, that in addition to its already successful Food Safety Award scheme, where food businesses are awarded a certificate and window sticker showing that they have passed a NHI Food Safety Audit, a new 3 year HACCP Certification Programme is now being offered through the accredited partnership organisation. The certification is awarded to hospitality food businesses who can demonstrate they are meeting internationally recognised standards and are consistently managing these across their entire operations.

JAC T8 pickup ideal for business needs

Natural Shrimp Aquaculture Company has been in the shrimp cultivating business for a long time and is amongst the market leaders courtesy the unmatched quality and freshness they provide in their shrimps. Everything to do with the cultivation is done inhouse from production to harvesting to preserving the quality.

When quality is super essential searching for a reliable transportation partner becomes extremely important. After a thorough market study, the first choice transportation partner became very obvious. The powerful and purposeful turbocharged JAC T8, a mid size pickup that delivers exceptional power and efficiency, making it an extremely reliable option for catering to business needs.

Once JAC T8 became a partner of Natural Shrimp Aquaculture the pickups are being utilised in multiple ways, primarily for laboratory shrimp sample transfer and also for transfer of personnel. JAC T8 is a powerful turbocharged pickup that generates enough power to give you the best performance in the most challenging terrains. Its body is sturdier, its powertrain is stouter, and its chassis is ready to endure the high demanding muddy, rocky, and sandy environments. Those hoping to hit the trails can enjoy its unique off-road suspension. Its solid and bold appearance complements the robust engine and makes it a stylish workhorse that can perfectly fit to carry out any number of tasks, a press release said.

JAC T8 is well-equipped, with a quiet upmarket touch screen infotainment system, including Bluetooth compatibility, a USB port and SD-card,tyre-pressure monitoring system, a reverse camera, dual airbags and artificial leather seats. Exterior amenities include a stylish roll over bar and running boards. Available in 2WD or 4WD and in Classic, Comfort and Luxury Plus configurations JAC T8 pick-up comes with 5years/200,000km warranty (whichever comes earlier) making it a safe and sound choice for all off-road enthusiasts and an excellent business transport solution for those living and working in the sultanate.

NMC offers endo-AVF for renal failure patients

NMC Speciality Hospital has launched a facility for AV (Arteriovenous) fistula which is the first of its kind in the sultanate in the private sector.

NMC Hospital, in association with Heart & Vascular Centre, Azaiba, and the support of IntraMedica, the distributer for 'WavelinQ' endoAVF technology in Oman, performed Endo AV fistula creation successfully for two hemodialysis patients last week.

The procedure was done at the state of the art Cath Lab at NMC Hospital under the supervision of Dr Faisal Alam, visiting senior consultant Vascular and Endovascular surgeon from HVC Azaiba.

"Patients undergoing regular hemodialysis sessions need a clean and safe environment along with specialised care, besides AV fistula formation for regular maintenance of dialysis," Dr Alam said. "It is a unique procedure through which the vein and artery are connected and hence the dialysis sessions can be carried out with minimum complications and long-standing issues.

"The new state of the art procedure, called 'endoAVF', ensures that the pain and complications in dialysis is reduced and provides maximum patient benefit. Traditionally, the AV fistulas are created surgically through a skin incision but endoAVF technology makes it possible to create a fistula through needle punctures." Dr Faisal added.

NMC Hospital, Ghubra, is the first hospital in Oman to perform the breakthrough procedure in association with Dr Faisal Alam, visiting vascular surgeon.

NBO provides new direct debit service for corporates

National Bank of Oman (NBO) has launched its new direct debit service for corporate clients. Under the guidance of the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) and for the first time in Oman, companies can now automise their monthly payments, eliminating the need for cheques.

To apply for the service, customers simply need to fill in the direct debit mandate and submit it at any NBO branch or via their assigned relationship manager for a secure, reliable and efficient payments' experience. Meanwhile, in line with the bank's digital strategy, it is also gearing up to introduce the service digitally, through its Corporate Internet Banking platform, a press release said.

Mohammed Yahya al Jabri, AGM - head of Global Transaction Banking at NBO, said, "Direct debit is a game changing solution for businesses. Working the same way as personal direct debit for monthly bills, it ensures that payments will be made automatically on a set date, removing the need to wait around for authorisation. Through it, we are helping our clients monitor, control and manage all their payments with greater operational efficiency and ease, so they never miss another bill payment."

NBO's direct debit service is available through CBO's fully dedicated system, which connects all of the banks in Oman, and offers a range of benefits for both large companies and SME's in a variety of industries including real estate, automotive, trading, finance, and many more. With a quick and simple registration process, immediate auto debit/credit, and predictable planned payments that can be easily tracked, managed and controlled, customers are empowered to operate the functionality with ease and at their convenience, along with a comprehensive dashboard of transactions.

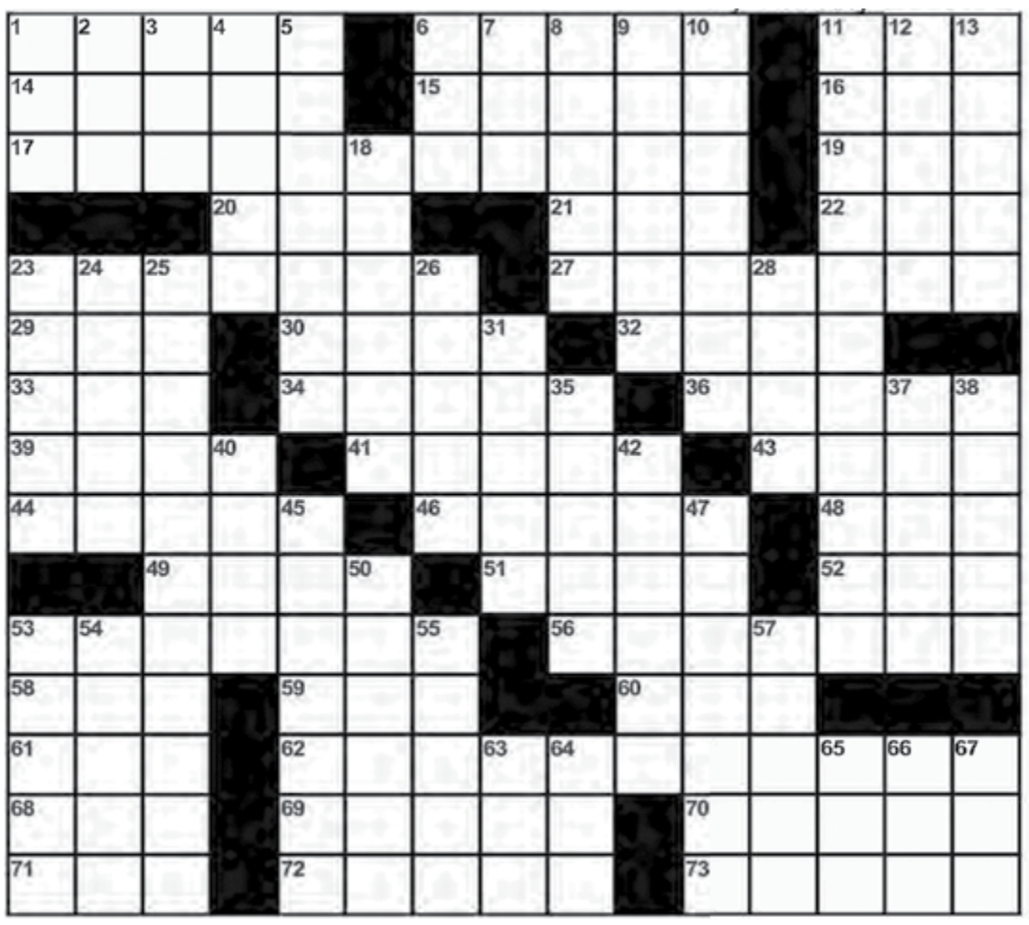
NBO's corporate banking suite offers a range of innovative solutions that cater to its customer's day-to-day banking needs, backed up with the support of experienced and dedicated relationship managers. Using cutting-edge technology, its Corporate Internet Banking (CIB) platform empowers companies and government entities to do instant transactions.

FILCOSOC

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Filipino Community Social Club (FILCOSOC) would like to invite all its bona fide members (members who are active and in good standing for at least three (3) months) to attend the General Assembly (GA) meeting on 25 March 2022 from 9AM onwards at Rozana Hotel, Al Khuwair.

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1) "The Reed Show"
6) Garden bulb
11) Impressive degree
14) Steer clear of
15) Protective layer
16) Apiece, in scores
17) Wood lighters?
19) Game for "it"
20) "Yo!"
21) Shake a leg
22) Dream Team country
23) Involve deeply
27) Emancipate
29) Secret agent org.
30) Carve in stone
32) Like a pink steak
33) Guinness World Records suffix
34) Put off
36) Health store beans (var.)
39) Brought into play
41) Some bays
43) Viral internet item
44) Fiery funeral mounds
46) Trials and tribulations, essentially
48) Subsidy
49) Part of a foot
51) Protein, often
52) Genetic material
53) Freeway catastrophe
56) Offspring acquired by marnage
58) "Aviv" header
59) Bird that can't take flight
60) Address for a dot-com
61) Foreman vanquisher
62) Old cinema star
68) Felt topper
69) "+" pole
70) Barely leading on the scoreboard
71) Service charge
72) Have a hunch
73) Three-player cardgames

DOWN

1) Beaver's work
2) Egg cells
3) "Ask_ what your country ... "
4) Comer of the market
5) Clung
6) Young'un
7) Certain machine gun
8) Ness and Lomond
9) More like a squid's defense
10) Former Spanish coins
11) Time for the elderly?
12) World-weary
13) Pond buildup
18) It may be beaten or bucked
23) Become frozen
24) Hip-hop's Elliott
25) Appear in thin air
26) Brilliant acclaim
28) Gift tag word
31) Female seal group
35) Affirmative responses
37) Acid type
38) It's hardly a convertible
40) Some animal shelters
42) Lady Liberty, for one
45) Frameworks
47) Common sound systems
50) Caring and decent to others
53) Group on the payroll
54) Donnybrook
55) Stage, as a show
57) Sound of a BB striking tin
63) Things displayed at checkpoints
64) "Originally named"
65) Narc's org.
66) Caught off base
67) CD predecessors

NOTE PAD

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19
You've shaken off the lingering remnants of that serious attitude you were recently forced to wear, and not a moment too soon! After all, you have your reputation to think of. It's long past time to have some fun, and your only dilemma now is which charming offer to accept and which to postpone, if absolutely necessary. It's absolutely necessary to free your self and have some fun.

TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20
This dutiful, responsible mood that has overtaken you has gone on for far too long, and you've decided that enough is finally enough. You're going to have some serious fun, and you're going to have it now! Whichever companion you invite along for the ride will be far beyond delighted. Feel free to say anything you might otherwise be hesitant about.

GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21
We all need to let loose and have some fun every now and then, especially you! It's not all that uncommon of a state of affairs for you, because after all, you can't live without variety. At the moment, though, you're even more freewheeling, optimistic, and ready to play than usual. There's just one thing to do: Gather the troops and organise something absolutely unforgettable!

CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22
Invitations aren't hard for you to come by, and it's not too hard to talk you into accepting them. The most attractive offer likely arrives via someone who wants to thank you for something sweet you did. This time, don't refuse the gesture! Everyone deserves their time in the spotlight when it's earned, and you've certainly earned it this time.

LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22
You're an entertainer. There are plenty of opportunities to strut your stuff over the next couple of days, and you should jump on all of them. You don't need an actual stage to perform. Try a dinner table, a gathering of friends, or your own home. No matter where you are, give your fans what they clamour for. You know what you are getting into; enjoy every entertaining moment. This is going to be fun.

VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22
No matter what your best friend says, you need to trust your instincts now and ignore all the doubts that inevitably come your way. If you do go against your intuition and it doesn't work out, you're likely to spend far too long wondering what might have happened. This way, at least you should know that there really was no other way for you to act or react. You may even cross paths with someone you'd never have met otherwise!

LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22
A sweet, frivolous invitation arrives, one that involves nothing but fun. After the past few weeks, you're unlikely to refuse or even think about refusing. You might need to talk your current significant other into joining you, but you should be able to entice them with either a romantic dinner or an espresso at that little out-of-the-way cafe . You've got what it takes to have the best of both worlds.

SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21
You don't mind at all when someone else steps on your lines or tries to steal credit from you. It's like they don't understand that making things happen is more important than simple recognition. No one loves operating from behind the scenes as much as you do, being in charge of the whole production without hogging the spotlight. Bring something awesome to life and forget about what history has to say.

SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER21
Recent events that you're somewhat less than pleased about might make it tempting to just hop in the car, on a bus, or on a plane and basically go anywhere that isn't here. That's not really your style, though. You're used to facing life head-on, and there's simply no reason for you to do anything differently now. Show up as expected with a grin and a wise comment.

CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19
As is so often the case, you've got something to show the world. This time the lesson involves the virtue of subtlety at a time when it's far easier for us all to just give in and make a show of things. Strutting your stuff, the same way the rest of the planet's population is strutting theirs, might be the easy thing to do, but that just doesn't tempt you. On the other hand, you prefer to go your own way.

AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18
You've already paid your dues, and nobody can argue with that. Your karmic account should now be firmly in the black, so it's definitely time for some much-deserved fun. Someone out there has noticed what you've been through lately, and they're more than willing to offer up their services to show you how to have a good time again. Go along on whatever adventure they've planned.

PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20
You're not expecting it from them, but a pal does you a tremendous favour. You're not expecting this particular person to go out of their way for you, and you're pleasantly surprised to note that they also don't take a single bit of credit for it. They might try to be totally anonymous in their efforts. If so, don't make a big deal of it, but do offer them a wink and a smile.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

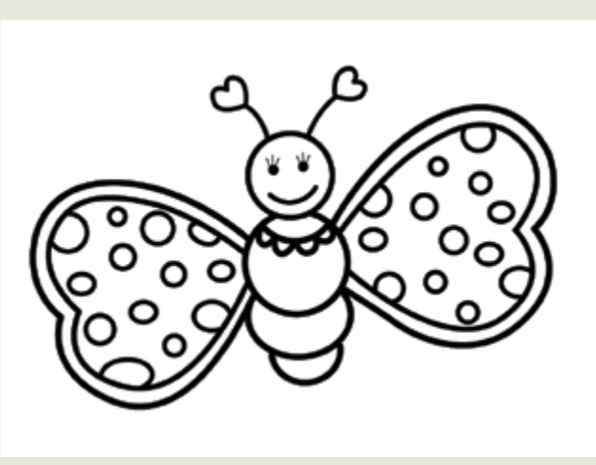
1. Baffin Bay is on which continent?
A. Asia
B. South America
C. Europe
D. North America

2. In cricket, what term is used to describe the situation when a batsman is 'out' for no score in both innings of the same two-innings match?
A. Golden duck
B. Bronze duck
C. Silver duck
D. Pair

3. What song was a UK #1 hit for Mike and the Mechanics in 1989?
A. Age of Reason
B. Reelin' in the Years
C. The Year of the Cat
D. The Living Years

Answers: 1. C 2. B 3. D

KIDS COLOURING



BOGGLER

R	L	L	S
A	I	U	I
I	M	G	M
A	T	Y	M

Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.
Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY: Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9 and only one instance of each number

			1			2		5
2	4	9	8		5			
					2	8	9	7
		8	6				2	4
		6				7		
4	9				1	6		
6	2	4	9					
			2		7	4	1	6
1		5			8			

WORD BUILDER

You have three minutes to find all the words contained in this word.

Rules: Words should be at least four letters long, proper nouns and duplicates don't count

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

8	3	7	1	9	6	2	4	5
2	4	9	8	7	5	3	6	1
5	6	1	3	4	2	8	9	7
7	5	8	6	3	9	1	2	4
3	1	6	5	2	4	7	8	9
4	9	2	7	8	1	6	5	3
6	2	4	9	1	3	5	7	8
9	8	3	2	5	7	4	1	6
1	7	5	4	6	8	9	3	2

Russia fires hypersonic missiles as Ukraine presses for peace deal

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky delivers a video address in Ukraine on Saturday (AFP)

This file photo shows Russia's MiG-31 supersonic interceptor jets carrying hypersonic missiles flying over Red Square during the Victory Day military parade in Moscow on May 9, 2018 (AFP)

Kyiv, Ukraine - Russia on Saturday admitted using advanced hypersonic missiles for the first time in the Ukraine conflict as Kyiv's embattled leader Volodymyr Zelensky called for urgent peace talks.

Moscow also said its troops had broken Ukrainian defences to enter the strategic southern port city of Mariupol and destroyed radio and intelligence sites just outside Odessa.

Ukrainian authorities said they had 'temporarily' lost access to the Sea of Azov although Russia has effectively controlled the coastline for weeks after ringing Mariupol.

Russia said it had on Friday used the Kinzhal (Dagger) high-precision hypersonic missile, which can elude most defence systems, to destroy an arms depot in Deliatyn, a village near the border with Romania.

Moscow has never admitted using the state-of-the-art missile in combat before.

"The enemy targeted our depots" but "we have no information of the type of missile," Ukrainian air force spokesman Yuri Ignat told AFP.

"There has been damage, destruction and the detonation of munitions," he said. "They are using all the missiles in their arsenal against us."

'Time to meet, talk'

Meanwhile Ukraine's leader once again appealed for peace.

"This is the time to meet, to talk, time for renewing territorial integrity and fairness for Ukraine," Zelensky said in a Facebook video.

"Otherwise, Russia's losses will be such, that several generations will not recover."

Ukraine claimed on Saturday that a Russian general had been killed by strikes on an airfield outside Kherson, just north of Crimea, saying he was the fifth top-ranking officer killed since the invasion began on February 24.

A US official said Russia's offensive remains largely stalled overall, with troops about 30km east of the capital Kyiv and facing heavy resistance.

Britain's defence ministry said Russia was struggling to provide its forward troops 'with even basic essentials such as food and fuel' because of Ukrainian attacks on their supply lines.

But as in previous negotiations there appeared to be little progress in reaching a ceasefire, with Russian President Vladimir Putin accusing Ukraine of 'numerous war crimes' during a call late on Friday with French President Emmanuel Macron.

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss accused Moscow of using the talks as a 'smokescreen' as it carried out 'appalling atrocities', saying she was 'very sceptical' they would produce a breakthrough.

Fighting rages

As Putin's ground offensive has met with fierce resistance, Moscow has increasingly turned to indiscriminate air and long-range strikes.

> *The enemy targeted our depots, but we have no information of the type of missile. There has been damage, destruction and the detonation of munitions*
>
> **YURI IGNAT**

Friday's attack on the arms depot was the latest strike in western Ukraine, which until a few days ago had remained relatively unscathed by Russia's push toward key cities from the north and east.

On Friday, Russian forces destroyed an aircraft repair plant near the airport of Lviv, where millions of people have fled as rockets and shelling continue to rain down on Kyiv.

In Mariupol, rescuers were still searching for hundreds of people trapped under the wreckage of a bombed theatre where over 1,000 people had been seeking shelter.

At the time of the attack, Mariupol's city council said that over 1,000 people were sheltering in the theatre's basement when it was hit on Wednesday.

There was still no information about potential fatalities, Zelensky said, but 130 people had been saved so far - some 'heavily injured'.

"This is no longer Mariupol, it's hell," said resident Tamara Kavunenko, 58. "The streets are full with the bodies of civilians."

Russian forces also carried out a large-scale air strike on Mykolaiv in the south on Friday, killing dozens of young Ukrainian ensigns at their brigade headquarters.

An ensign who gave his name as Yevgen said it was home to about 200 of them.

A military spokeswoman said the final toll was still unknown, as rescuers and soldiers were still pulling out bodies as well as survivors Saturday, according to AFP reporters at the scene.

"We're still counting but it's impossible to know, given the state of the bodies," one rescuer said.

More than 3.25mn refugees have fled Ukraine and countless others have sought havens in the country's west, though Putin said his forces were doing 'everything possible' to avoid civilian casualties during his latest call with Macron, according to the Kremlin.

But Zelensky accused Russian forces of blocking aid around hotspot areas.

"I escaped war to reach stability, only to find myself trapped in another war," said Mazen Dammag, a Yemeni who fled his war-torn homeland nearly six years ago for Ukraine.

He and several friends hired taxis to take them from Odessa to Poland, some 1,000km north, and eventually Bremen in Germany, where he spoke with AFP by video.

AFP

Rescuers carry a Ukrainian soldier saved after 30 hours from debris of the military school hit by Russian rockets, in Mykolaiv, southern Ukraine, on Saturday (AFP)

Dozens killed after military barracks hit

Mykolaiv, Ukraine - Dozens of soldiers were killed after Russian troops struck a Ukrainian military barracks in the southern city of Mykolaiv, witnesses told AFP on Saturday while a rescue operation was underway.

"No fewer than 200 soldiers were sleeping in the barracks" when Russian troops struck early on Friday, a Ukrainian serviceman on the ground, 22-year-old Maxim, told AFP without providing his last name.

"At least 50 bodies have been recovered, but we do not know how many others are in the rubble," he said.

Another soldier estimated that the bombing could have killed around 100 people.

Authorities have not yet released an official death toll.

The military facility located in the north of the city was fully destroyed after being hit by several rockets on Friday morning.

"Yesterday orcs hit our sleeping soldiers with a rocket in a cowardly manner," Vitaly Kim, head of the regional administration, said in a video on Saturday, using the Ukrainian nickname for Russian forces.

"A rescue operation is under way," he added. He did not provide further details, saying he expected to receive official information from the armed forces.

AFP journalists at the site earlier in the day saw the bodies of three people, including a shredded corpse extracted from under the rubble by rescue workers.

A survivor was also pulled out.

"We are continuing to count but it is impossible to know given the state of the bodies," a rescuer told AFP.

Mykolaiv's mayor Oleksandr Senkevych told local journalists that the city, which had a pre-war population of nearly half a million residents, had been struck from the neighbouring region of Kherson, now under Russian control.

For days, the Russians have bombarded Mykolaiv, which lies on the road to the strategic port city of Odessa some 130km down the Black Sea coastline.

AFP

Aid agencies struggle to reach trapped

Rome, Italy- Aid agencies are struggling to reach people trapped in Ukrainian cities ringed by Russian forces, the UN's World Food Programme said on Saturday, including hundreds of thousands of women and children.

"The challenge is to get to the cities that are encircled or about to be encircled," emergency coordinator Jakob Kern told AFP, describing the situation as 'dire'.

Lack of humanitarian access is making it almost impossible to deliver emergency food supplies to the besieged port city of Mariupol, the northeastern city of Kharkiv and the northeastern city of Sumy.

A volunteer cooks for Ukrainian evacuees at the Ukrainian-Romanian border in Siret, northern Romania, on Saturday (AFP)

It was a tactic that was 'unacceptable in the 21st century', Kern said.

The Rome-based WFP has had to start the mission to stock up Ukraine's warehouses 'from zero', and replacing broken food supply chains amidst bitter fighting is a 'mammoth task', he said. The agency hopes to reach 3.1mn people in Ukraine, but efforts to move supplies such as pasta, rice and canned meat around are hampered by difficulties in finding willing truck drivers.

"The closer you go to these cities, the more worried they are about their safety," Kern said.

"And that means we're not able to reach these people in Mariupol, Sumy, Kharkiv, in the cities that are almost encircled by now - or completely in the case of Mariupol," he added.

AFP

Elderly Ukrainians find shelter in subway car

Kyiv, Ukraine - It is not clear what makes Valentyna Katkova cry more: illness and old age, or the fact that she now lives in a Kyiv subway car, fleeing Russian bombing.

The 77-year-old is one of some 200 Kyivans who have found shelter in a metro station in the northwest of the city as Moscow's forces slowly try to encircle the city. Some of them are elderly people, who prefer the artificial leather seats of the subway car to sleeping on mattresses or in tents on the granite floor of the Syrets station.

A Ukrainian emergencies psychologist helps an elderly woman evacuated from a residential building damaged by shelling in Kyiv (AFP)

Katkova appears in the sliding doors of a blue subway car with a yellow stripe - Ukraine's national colours.

She is hard of hearing, speaks unintelligibly and cannot stop crying when asked about how many days and nights she spent in the cold and damp subway dungeon. "Since February 24," the woman says, the date when Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine.

The Kyiv metro, with some of the deepest stations in the world, has been a haven for thousands of Kyivans since the first days of the war.

Seventy-year-old Nina Piddubna, Katkova's neighbour in the next car, complains of having felt unwell in the first days of her stay here. "I felt very bad here, I had a fever," says the woman, sitting in the car and wrapped in a blue woollen blanket.

AFP

Syria's President Bashar al-Assad (left) meeting with the UAE's de facto ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, in the capital Abu Dhabi on Friday (AFP)

Syria's Assad visits UAE, first trip to an Arab state since war

Dubai, UAE - Syrian President Bashar al-Assad held talks in the United Arab Emirates on Friday, his first official visit to an Arab country since civil war erupted in 2011, UAE state media said.

The meeting is the latest sign of warming relations between Syria and the UAE, which had broken ties with Damascus in February 2012.

Assad met with the UAE's de facto ruler, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, discussing 'fraternal relations' between the two countries, the WAM news agency reported.

They also discussed efforts to 'contribute to the consolidation of security, stability and peace in the Arab region and the Middle East', it added.

Sheikh Mohammed said he hoped the visit would 'pave the way for goodness, peace and stability to prevail in Syria and the entire region', WAM said.

The pair also discussed ways of 'preserving the territorial integrity of Syria and the withdrawal of foreign forces from the country', it said, as well as means of providing 'political and humanitarian support for Syria'.

Syria's SANA state news agency said the meeting helped 'strengthen cooperation' between the two sides.

Photographs released by the Syrian presidency also showed Assad meeting with Dubai's ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum during the one-day visit.

Sanctions on Syria

Syria's economy has been battered by a decade of conflict and gruelling sanctions, and the Arab League suspended Damascus after the war broke out 11 years ago.

In December 2018, the UAE reopened its embassy in Damascus, suggesting an effort to bring the Syrian government back into the Arab fold.

The move was followed by the UAE's calling in March last year for Syria to return to the Arab League - having been a key backer of its suspension.

In November, the UAE's top diplomat met Assad in the Syrian capital for the first time since the conflict started, a move that triggered US denunciations of efforts to normalise ties with a 'dictator'.

About half a million people have died and millions have been displaced since the conflict erupted in 2011, after nationwide protests against the government were met with a brutal crackdown. It escalated into a devastating and complex war that drew in numerous actors including militant groups and regional and international powers.

The UAE is one of the six Gulf Cooperation Council member states that took a tough stance against Damascus in 2012 and eventually recognised an opposition umbrella group as the representative of Syria.

Damascus has struggled to secure international aid, namely from oil-rich Arab states.

But in recent years, some regional powers see warming up to Damascus as a way of luring Syria away from the exclusive regional influence of Iran - a staunch supporter of Assad's government that has expanded its military footprint in Syria throughout the course of the conflict.

Earlier this month, the UN commission for inquiry on Syria called for 'a review of the implementation and impacts of sanctions currently imposed on Syria' in light of deteriorating living conditions.

But on Tuesday, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and the United States said in a joint statement that they do 'not support efforts to normalise relations with the Assad regime'.

The statement was made to commemorate 11 years since the start of the anti-government uprising in Syria, which was marked by thousands of protesters in Syria's rebel enclave of Idlib.

AFP

4 US troops killed in military plane crash in Norway

This file photo shows MV-22B Osprey aircraft being operated during military exercise in Babadag, Romania on May 26, 2015 (AFP)

Oslo, Norway - A US military plane taking part in NATO exercises has crashed in Norway, killing all four American troops on board, the Scandinavian country's army said on Saturday.

The four were taking part in the Cold Response military exercises involving 30,000 troops from NATO and partner countries.

About 200 planes and some 50 ships are taking part in the exercises, which will continue until April 1.

Their plane, a V-22B Osprey aircraft belonging to the US Marine Corps, was reported missing on Friday evening south of Bodo in northern Norway.

At 01:30 (0030 GMT) on Saturday, 'the police arrived at the scene. The police in Nordland County now confirm that the crew of four have died. As far as the police know, the four are of American nationality', the Norwegian defence ministry said in a statement.

The US Marine Corps earlier confirmed 'a mishap' involving a MV-22B Osprey during the exercises and said Norwegian civil authorities were leading the search and rescue efforts. "It's with great sadness that we received the message saying that four American soldiers died in a plane crash last night," Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store said on Twitter.

The four were taking part in the Cold Response military exercises involving 30,000 troops from NATO and partner countries. About 200 planes and 50 ships are taking part in the exercises

Cold Response 2022 aims to test how Norway would manage allied reinforcements on its soil in the event that NATO's mutual defence clause were triggered. Tensions between Russia and NATO have soared following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, but the exercises were planned long before that offensive began on February 24.

AFP

Joe Biden warns Xi against China backing Russia's war in Ukraine

Washington, US - US President Joe Biden laid out to Chinese leader Xi Jinping on Friday the 'consequences' of any backing for Russia in its war against Ukraine, the White House said, as Beijing showed no sign of joining Western condemnation of the invasion.

The comments came during a nearly two-hour phone call between the leaders of the world's two largest economies, focusing on Ukraine, where China's close ally Russia is in the fourth week of a bloody assault.

The White House said that Biden described to Xi 'the implications and consequences if China provides material support to Russia as it conducts brutal attacks against Ukrainian cities and civilians'.

The White House refused to characterise Xi's response to the warning or say how hard Biden pushed him. "It wasn't about making asks, it wasn't about making assessments. It was about having an ongoing dialogue," Press Secretary Jen Psaki said.

But she said that 'is something we'll be watching and the world will be watching'.

Beijing was ambiguous about Xi's position after the call.

Chinese state television CCTV reported that Xi said the war was 'in no one's interest' and that 'state-to-state relations cannot go to the stage of military hostilities'.

This file photo shows Biden meeting with Xi Jinping during a virtual summit from the White House in Washington, DC on November 15, 2021 (AFP)

The White House said that Biden described to Xi the implications and consequences if China provides material support to Russia as it conducts brutal attacks against Ukrainian cities and civilians

However, there was no mention of direct criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin and a readout from the Chinese foreign ministry laid some responsibility for Russia's invasion of its neighbour to the West.

"The US and NATO should also have dialogue with Russia to address the crux of the Ukraine crisis and ease security concerns of both Russia and Ukraine," the foreign ministry noted.

With the Chinese leader refusing to condemn Putin, Washington fears Beijing could go further, delivering financial and military support to Russia and transforming an already explosive transatlantic standoff into a global dispute.

If that were to happen, not only could China help Russia to weather sanctions and continue the war, but Western governments would face the painful decision of how to strike back at the world's second-biggest economy, likely prompting turmoil on international markets.

Washington is racing to ward off that crisis, both by warning of fallout for China and appealing to Xi's ambitions to be a world player.

China should 'understand that their future is with the United States, with Europe, with other developed and developing countries around the world. Their future is not to stand with Vladimir Putin', Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman told CNN.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken earlier urged China to use its 'leverage' on Moscow.

The Biden-Xi call - the first since November - came after US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Yang Jiechi, the Chinese Communist Party's chief diplomat, held what the White House called a 'substantial' seven-hour meeting in Rome this week.

Against a backdrop of already intense US-Chinese tensions over Taiwan and trade disputes, the ability or failure of Biden and Xi to come to an understanding on the unfolding mayhem in Europe will reverberate widely.

Xi and Putin symbolically sealed their close partnership when they met last month at the Winter Olympics in Beijing - just before Putin launched his onslaught on Ukraine.

AFP

Glauco arrives at a hospital, in Manaus, Amazonas state, Brazil, on Thursday (AFP)

Lost Brazilian boys survive 25-day ordeal in rainforest

Manaus, Brazil - Two Brazilian Indigenous boys aged seven and nine have been found after surviving 25 days lost in the Amazon rainforest, where they ate fruit and drank rainwater to stay alive, officials said on Friday.

Brothers Glauco, 7, and Gleison, 9, were found on Tuesday 35km from the spot where they went missing, famished and dehydrated but otherwise fine.

"They are suffering from malnutrition and severe dehydration, but they are gaining weight, with no risk to their lives," Januario Carneiro da Cunha Neto, an indigenous health official in the northern city of Manaus, told AFP.

The boys, members of the Indigenous Mura group, went missing on February 18, when they left their village in the rural county of Manicore in Amazonas state and entered the dense rainforest to hunt for birds.

"They survived on rainwater, lake water and sorva," a local fruit rich in carbohydrates and fats, Carneiro said.

The authorities had given up the search for the boys. But local Indigenous residents kept looking for them, until one day a family friend who was out gathering wood found them by chance, Carneiro said.

He said the older boy had carried the younger one on his back when he grew too weak to walk.

The boys were taken Thursday to a hospital in Manaus and were being treated for some cuts and infections, but fortunately avoided any run-ins with snakes or other wildlife, he said.

AFP

China under threat by Omicron outbreak

The country reported two deaths in Jilin, hardest hit by the rise in cases

Shanghai, China - China reported two COVID-19 deaths on Saturday, its first in more than a year, underlining the threat posed by an Omicron outbreak that has triggered the country's highest case count since the pandemic's onset.

The National Health Commission said both deaths occurred in Jilin, the northeastern province which has been hardest hit by a nationwide rise in cases that has prompted lockdowns or tight restrictions in several cities.

The deaths were the first reported in mainland China since January 2021, and bring the country's death toll from the pandemic to 4,638.

China reported 4,051 new infections on Saturday, down from 4,365 the day before, the health commission said, with more than half of the new cases in Jilin.

Beijing's communist leadership has touted the low death rate relative to other countries as evidence of the strength of its one-party governance model.

The two new deaths were buried in the health commission's daily report, and state-controlled media made little mention of them.

Officials in Jilin later said both victims were male, 65 and 87 years old, and both had a range of underlying health problems associated with advanced age.

Zero-COVID under pressure

The coronavirus emerged in the central city of Wuhan in late 2019 but China has largely kept it under control through strict border controls, lengthy quarantines and targeted lockdowns.

But the highly transmissible Omicron variant is posing a challenge to the effectiveness and long-term viability of the government's zero-COVID strategy.

In recent weeks some official sources have suggested China may at some point need to co-exist with COVID-19 as other countries are doing, warning of the economic impact of mass lockdowns.

President Xi Jinping said on Thursday that China would stick with its zero-COVID strategy but allow for a more 'targeted' approach.

While in the past full lockdowns could be expected for any outbreak, authorities around the country have responded with varying measures to the latest viral spread.

Some cities have been closed off, including the southern tech hub of Shenzhen, home to 17.5mn people. But Shenzhen's measures were partially eased following Xi's comments.

Shanghai, meanwhile, has moved schooling online and rolled out mass testing, but has avoided a full lockdown.

Workers wearing protective gear look on as people wait to be tested for the COVID-19 at a residential compound in Shanghai on Friday (AFP)

Authorities have said people with mild cases can isolate at central quarantine facilities, having previously sent all patients with any symptoms to specialist hospitals.

But tens of millions of people remain under stay-at-home orders across China due to the outbreak, which has sent daily reported new cases soaring from less than 100 just three weeks ago to several thousand per day.

Beijing also has watched nervously as Hong Kong has struggled to contain an Omicron outbreak that has sent deaths in the semi-autonomous southern Chinese city soaring into the thousands.

Mainland China officials have moved to create new hospital beds over fears the virus could put the health system under strain.

Jilin has built eight 'makeshift hospitals' and two quarantine centres.

State news outlets this week broadcast footage of dozens of giant cranes assembling temporary medical facilities in Jilin, which has only around 23,000 hospital beds for 24mn residents.

AFP

Myanmar to resume international passenger flights from April 17

Yangon, Myanmar - Myanmar will resume international passenger flights from April 17, the military said on Saturday, lifting a two-year ban on foreign tourists.

The Southeast Asian nation closed its borders to visitors in March 2020 at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic in an attempt to prevent rising infections. Myanmar was further isolated after a coup last year saw huge protests and a bloody military crackdown on dissent, sending its economy - including its tourism industry - into freefall.

"We will open all international flights on 17 April, and can fly as regularly," said the National Central Committee on Prevention, Control and Treatment of Coronavirus Disease, citing falling COVID-19 infections.

In a statement it said the decision was 'in order to improve the tourism business sector, and in order to have smooth trip for visitors who come to visit Myanmar'.

Visitors will be required to quarantine for a week - undergoing two PCR tests - and must be fully vaccinated, according to the health ministry.

Myanmar's tourism industry was battered by the pandemic, with the country registering 40,000 daily COVID-19 cases at its peak last year. It has recorded almost 20,000 deaths in total.

Spiralling violence following the junta takeover has also dented business, with many international firms pulling out of the nation.

More than 1,600 people have been killed by security forces and over 11,000 arrested since the coup, according to a local monitoring group.

The junta indicated late last year it was moving to reopen to international visitors in 2022, hoping to take advantage of the slew of local traditional holidays.

AFP

This file photo shows a girl looking at souvenirs in front of a temple in Bagan in Myanmar on January 18, 2020 (AFP)

Drug kingpin wanted by US escapes Colombian prison

Bogota, Colombia - A notorious drug lord wanted by prosecutors in the United States escaped from a prison in Colombia on Friday, authorities confirmed.

Juan Larrinson Castro Estupinan, known as Matamba, is a powerful figure in the Gulf Clan drug trafficking organisation.

He was detained last May and accused of asset laundering and of trafficking cocaine and heroin.

But on Friday, he escaped from the La Picota prison in Bogota, allegedly with inside help.

President Ivan Duque told reporters that he had instructed the attorney general to ensure that those who helped Castro Estupinan escape are arrested.

One guard has already been detained, Justice Minister Wilson Ruiz said.

Duque said he was leading investigators in hatching a plan to 'recapture this criminal'. Castro Estupinan is also under investigation for committing crimes with the aim of committing murder, as well as extortion and the illegal carrying of weapons.

Formerly a communist guerrilla, he subsequently fought on the side of right-wing paramilitaries during Colombia's 60-year conflict between the government and radical left-wing rebels.

He then struck a deal with Gulf Clan leader Dairo Usuga, known as Otoniel, who is also in prison, to take control of a group of 200 men inside the cartel, authorities said.

After Castro Estupinan's escape, Duque announced 'a comprehensive reform of Colombia's penitentiary and prison system'.

The National Penitentiary and Prisons Institute (Inpec) has been embroiled in several scandals. Earlier this month, the government fired the Inpec head and the director of the country's largest prison over release permits granted to businessman Carlos Mattos, who is accused of bribery.

In videos published by the Caracol television channel, Mattos can be seen leaving La Picota prison on two separate occasions in an Inpec vehicle. The videos also show him walking around unaccompanied and entering a building where his offices are.

AFP

Drug trafficker of the Clan del Golfo, aka Matamba (centre) escaped from a prison in Colombia on Friday, authorities confirmed (AFP)

Pritzker Prize: Burkina's 'Opera Village' by its groundbreaking architect

Ouagadougou, Burkina - With its imposing, angular proportions made out of clay, laterite and other local building materials, the Opera Village cultural and educational project, designed by Burkina Faso-born architect Francis Kere, blends into the landscape.

It overlooks Laongo, a rural community not far from Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou, and is the sort of groundbreaking design that helped Kere scoop architecture's most prestigious award, the Pritzker Prize, this week.

In so doing, the 56 year-old, who holds dual Burkina and German nationality, became the first African to win the honour in its more than 40-year history.

Built on 20 hectares of a granite plateau, the Opera Village is shaped like a spiral, with 26 buildings housing workshops, a health centre, guest houses and a school. Eventually, at its centre will be a performance venue and covered exhibition area with 700 seats.

Built in the early 2010s with the aim of combining art, education and ecology, the project was the brainchild of late German theatre director and filmmaker Christoph Schlingensief.

'The simplest material'

Kere was hailed by the Pritzker's sponsors on Tuesday for designs that are 'sustainable to the earth and its inhabitants - in lands of extreme scarcity'.

His Opera Village used local construction materials, such as clay, laterite, granite and wood to allow it to withstand the extreme heat of the region, the site's administrator Motandi Ouoba said. "These are local materials that the architect found on site: blocks of compressed earth, bricks taken from the site, paving stones made from granite," he said.

Kere 'starts with the simplest material, which we commonly share... which our parents used, and he makes something noble out of it," he added.

"It''s the earth, it's all that's around us, when he brings them together, he brings to life something that is magnificent."

Schoolchildren play at the Village-Opera school, designed by Diebedo Francis Kere, in Laongo (AFP)

Francis Kere, who holds dual Burkina and German nationality, became the first African to win the honour in its more than 40-year history

It also blends well with local vegetation, contributing to a sense of harmony.

'Bioclimatic buildings'

The immense roofs overhang the walls and ventilation keeps the temperature in the rooms down, even when it's more than outside.

Kere ensured that 'our buildings are bioclimatic, with a double ceiling and openings to dissipate hot air', Ouoba said.

The health centre's consultation and treatment rooms have dozens of long windows that slide upwards. "With so many openings, patients feel less isolated by hospitalisation. They have a view of the landscape," doctor Issa Ouedraogo said.

The stylish classrooms filled with daylight are a far cry from the makeshift decor of many of the schools in Burkina Faso, a country battling a militant insurgency since 2015 that swept in from neighbouring Mali.

"The architecture of the buildings changes everything. We are in perfect classrooms because it is very hot here and not everyone can afford fans or air conditioning," said headmaster Abdoulaye Ouedraogo, who is also an actor and playwright.

AFP

QURM BEACH ROAD

WAVES OF *Change*

A solo exhibition of 200 photos by Hassan Ali Jawad showcases diverse faces of the beach road at Shatti al Qurm over the past four decades

Hubert Vaz

The Art & Soul Gallery in Water Front Mall, Shatti al Qurm, currently showcases an exhaustive collection of photographs, a nature lovers delight, revolving around a single street – the beach road at Shatti al Qurm - by Hassan Ali Jawad, an accomplished photographer and businessman.

Inaugurated by HH Sayyid Tarik bin Shabib al Said at the Art & Soul gallery on March 14, the exhibition, titled Waves of Change, is a visual treat for people of all ages, those who appreciate landscapes as well as those who love to view the winged visitors at Qurm. Through multiple frames of all sizes, the photographer attempts to celebrate nature's glory on a different plain and at the same time showcase his own obsession for capturing unique moments and occurrences at Shatti al Qurm.

Jawad had been drawn into photography from a very early age. At the age of 11, he had been gifted a camera by his father when photography in Oman was yet at its infancy. With a great eye for detail as well as the unusual, Jawad as been capturing what others may overlook without much thought.

A resident of Qurm for the past three decades, he has witnessed numerous changes on the beach road. Through this exhibition, Jawad has tried to share his collection over the course of the road's history, reminiscing its beauty, changes and development, to demonstrate his love for conservation and environmental awareness, as well.

> Digital photography has, in fact, given a different dimension to photography. It has given ample space and flexibility to a photographer
>
> HASSAN ALI JAWAD

"My theme basically concerns the 1km long road along Shatti al Qurm. It shows the history of this road from 1984 till 2022 – what changes this street has gone through due to the devastation of tropical cyclones like Gonu, Phet, Shaheen, erosion of the sand and stones along the seafront, normal stones, high tide, low tide, morning, evening, wind, all different types of phenomena which changes the environment there and how people react to it," Jawad said, adding, "A lot of people walk along this street everyday without giving any thought to the changes it has undergone over the years."

Jawad says he views everything around him as beautiful but he is most fascinated by different sunsets. He says, over the four seasons of the year, everyday the sunset is different, especially during winter and spring.

Asked about the technicality of a photographer's job, Jawad admits that he does not pay much attention to the technical aspects of photography – basically, it all depends on the eye of the photographer, he emphasises. With regard to the pictures shown in this exhibition, it was all about the eye for what one was looking for, without much attention to technical aspects, he pointed out.

Asked if the new age digital photography has taken a toll on the skill of photographers, Jawad did not agree. "Digital photography has, in fact, given a different dimension to photography. It has given ample space and flexibility to a photographer. Even the costs have come down, as one does not have to go through developing processes, like before," he said, adding that people of all ages can now take to photography. As for me, none of my shots are 'photo-shopped', as I believe in the pristine, original colours of every photo which my camera can produce."

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SLOW SHUTTER SPEED

BLURRING THE LINES

Reem al Shaikh's solo photography exhibition at National Museum of Oman showcases thought-provoking images of the human form in motion with deep connotations

Hubert Vaz

A pleasant breeze seemed to be moving around the room and all the images confined within frames on the walls suddenly break into movement – there is a display of swirling grace, figures lost in contemplation, exploration, gratitude, including the 'motion' of standing still...

For a minute, you wonder whether you are reeling under a bout of vertigo, as this collection of artistic photography on display appears to unleash a fantasy that churns within the limited confines of this gallery on the first floor of the National Museum of Oman. You then regain your balance and discover the unique effect of movement that the artist has created through photographs shot with a slow shutter speed, blurring the boundaries of every form and taking the viewer in its sway.

"Within my orderly life, I seek an unlimited and open dimension to create what I cannot experience – to capture what actually exists, yet set it free from its own reality," says Reem al Shaikh, an abstract fine-art photographer whose work discusses social norms and tradition, having a multicultural upbringing and an instinctive awareness of assumed cultural norms.

'Beyond The Form', Reem's solo exhibition currently on at the National Museum of Oman, showcases around 16 frames depicting various facets and moods of a lady. Every image appears not to be bound within its own form and as if attempting to get beyond the limitations that define its existence. The exhibition will be on till the end of March.

Reem explains her technique, saying, "My desire for freedom propelled me to create this body of work. In this photographic series, I utilise an in-camera technique to produce an effect contrary to what is traditionally sought in photography – a blurry image. By manipulating the camera's shutter speed, I am able to capture my subject as it migrates beyond the human form. Each unpredictable and non-replicable motion guides my imagination towards the final image."

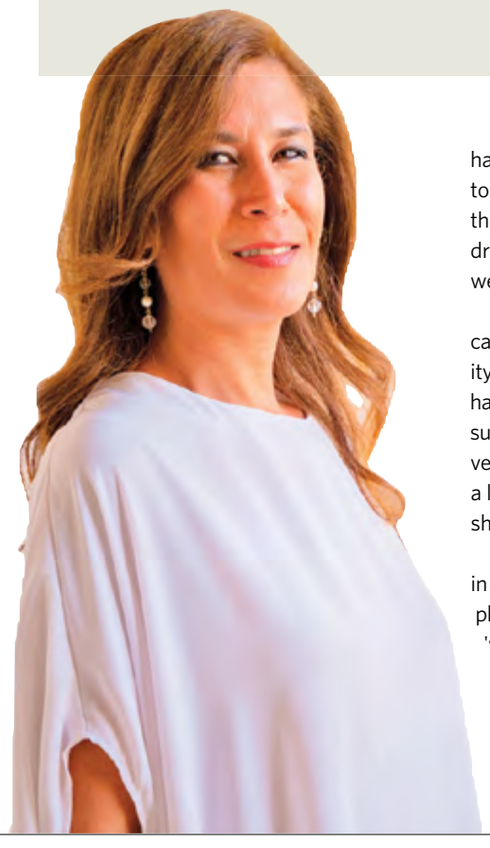
Blurring the defined outline of the subject removes the naturally existing boundary that restrains the human figure, allowing it to attain a free-form. "I create this art to transcend social norms and rules, deviating from my reality to travel to a world of my wishes," she asserts.

Having studied in the US and lived in a contrasting culture overseas during her formative years, Reem subsequently obtained a photography certification from the University of South Florida before returning to Oman in 2006. Since 2011, she has been pursuing photography a full-time and expanding her knowledge alongside some of the world's best-known photographers.

Reem's fine art photographs have been exhibited in over 20 group exhibitions in Oman and the US over the past decade, including the Omani Art Fair in 2019. Her photos have been finalists in multiple categories in the American 'Voice' Image Collection by Click & Co in 2019 and 2021. Her work also features in many private collections in the US, Australia, Canada, Lebanon, and Thailand, besides Oman.

Having taken to photography naturally, since her father was a photographer and she got many an opportunity to be behind the camera as well as in front of it from an early age, Reem says, "All the images in this exhibition depict a woman in a transitional stage, waiting to break free from the boundaries that limit her existence. And all the images have a very earthy tone, apart from the colourful dresses she is wearing."

> Within my orderly life, I seek an unlimited and open dimension to create what I cannot experience – to capture what actually exists, yet set it free from its own reality
>
> REEM AL SHAIKH



Reem also added that she wasn't technically very sound in her craft, and that creativity scores high in her presentation, without having to technically manipulate her final results in every image. "The images I create are very thought-provoking and I wish they have a lasting impact on the mind of the viewer," she said.

As a message to budding photographers in Oman, Reem says, "Whenever you take a photograph, always question yourself as to 'why are you taking this picture?' It should not just be a click, there has to be a reason behind every click, only then will your picture be meaningful and the message behind it really strong."

What is slow shutter speed?

Shutter speed is the speed at which the shutter of the camera closes. A fast shutter speed creates a shorter exposure - the amount of light the camera takes in – while a slow shutter speed gives the photographer a longer exposure.

Shutter speed is used in photography to capture images with motion blur and to freeze movement. Most shutter speed examples include subjects which are moving, from wildlife photography to landscapes featuring motion - passing clouds or waterfalls.

Photo: Syed Fasiuddin

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INDIAN WELLS 2022

Sakkari ends Badosa's bid, set up title clash with Swiatek

Indian Wells, United States - Maria Sakkari ended Paula Badosa's bid for a repeat title at Indian Wells on Friday, beating the defending champion to set up a final clash with former French Open winner Iga Swiatek.

Greece's Sakkari triumphed 6-2, 4-6, 6-1 to end Badosa's bid to become the first woman since Martina Navratilova in 1990-91 to win back-to-back Indian Wells titles.

Poland's Swiatek beat two-time Grand Slam winner Simona Halep 7-6 (8/6), 6-4.

Ranked fourth in the world, Swiatek was already assured of rising to a career-high third in the world. Either she or sixth-ranked Sakkari can claim the No. 2 spot with a victory in Sunday's title match.

"Really it's over my expectations," said Swiatek, who said she came into the prestigious event in the California desert doubtful she could follow up her fourth career title in Doha with another deep tournament run.

But she rallied from a break down in each set and saved two set points in the first-set tiebreaker to notch a 10th straight WTA match win.

"It was really intense," Swiatek said, "really physical. I think we had the longest rallies I played here."

The 20-year-old evened her head-to-head record against Halep at two wins apiece, but she admitted it required a change in mindset taking on a player who was once ranked so much higher than herself.

Iga Swiatek of Poland and Maria Sakkari of Greece celebrate winning a point during their semifinal games of the BNP Paribas Open in Indian Wells, California (AFP)

"I had to fight to the end and be mentally stronger," she said. "Simona is a really strong player mentally and she's not giving up so I wanted to do that better."

Halep, who was hindered in 2021 by calf and knee injuries, gained a 5-4 lead with her second break of the opening set, but she couldn't close it out in the next game and they went to the tiebreaker.

The Romanian again had the upper hand in the tiebreaker, but at 6-4 she fired a backhand long and Swiatek won the next three points -- saving a set point with a deep backhand volley then clinching the set with a blistering return of a Halep second serve.

A frustrated Halep was warned after thumping her racquet down in disgust and Swiatek, her confidence bolstered, broke Halep for a 2-1 lead in the second.

Rublev to clash with Fritz in semifinal

In-form seventh seed Andrey Rublev powered into the Indian Wells ATP Masters semi-finals on Friday with a 7-5, 6-2 victory over Bulgarian veteran Grigor Dimitrov.

The 24-year-old, ranked seventh in the world, notched his 13th straight match win since Valentine's Day -- a hot streak that included back-to-back titles at Marseille and Dubai.

He'll try to keep the streak alive against American Taylor Fritz, who advanced to the last four for the second straight year with a 7-6 (7/5), 3-6, 6-1 victory over Serbia's Miomir Kecmanovic.

Rublev has reached the last four without dropping a set, but the 30-year Dimitrov, ranked 35th in the world, didn't go down without a fight.

Trailing by a break in the first set Dimitrov broke Rublev to level the score at 5-5, sliding a backhand down the line past Rublev to break him at love.

Rublev acknowledged that big-match nerves may have contributed to the break.

"Some moments you can feel tight, you can feel a bit nervous, maybe your opponent can play good couple of points. These moments is important to be calm," he said.

AFP

MotoGP champ Quartararo on pole as Marquez crashes twice

Mandalika, Indonesia - MotoGP world champion Fabio Quartararo will start Sunday's first race in Indonesia in 25 years from pole position after a dramatic qualifying session that saw Marc Marquez twice crash out.

After waiting so long for top-class racing to return, Indonesia's motorbike-mad fans were given a treat in incident-packed qualifying on the steamy island of Lombok on Saturday.

France's Quartararo, who went fastest in practice on Friday on the new Mandalika circuit, topped qualifying with a time of 1 min 31.067 sec on his Yamaha, with Spain's Jorge Martin second on the grid, 0.213 sec back.

Also on the front row, in third, was France's Johann Zarco. Like Martin, he rides a Ducati.

Italy's Enea Bastianini, who won the season-opening Qatar race earlier this month on his Ducati, qualified fifth.

"It was great to be back in (pole), it was a long time, super happy," said the 22-year-old Quartararo, whose last pole position was at the Catalunya Grand Prix in June last year.

France's Fabio Quartararo topped qualifying with a time of 1 min 31.067 sec on Friday

"We did not make so many mistakes in qualifying and that is thanks to the team because we never gave up."

Quartararo's title defence started in meek fashion in Qatar when he came a disappointing ninth. Spain's six-time world champion Marquez will start Sunday's race on Lombok 15th after a calamitous qualifying run.

He was involved in a high-speed crash on Friday in practice and took another tumble off his Honda at Turn 13 in the first round of qualifying.

He immediately sprinted off to grab his other bike in a frantic effort to record a competitive lap and get into the second session of qualifying. But, pushing too hard, the 29-year-old went flying off once more just minutes later, this time at Turn 12, and was clearly annoyed with himself.

Fellow Spaniard Joan Mir, the 2020 world champion, also crashed and is 18th on the grid.

AFP

Ukraine's Mahuchikh defies odds to win world indoor high jump gold

Belgrade, Serbia - Yaroslava Mahuchikh overcame the "total panic" of armed conflict in her native Ukraine to win gold in the high jump at the World Indoor Championships on Saturday.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Mahuchikh was forced to flee her home, hide out in a cellar and eventually make the 2,000km trip over three days to Belgrade to face what she dubbed her own front line.

The reigning European indoor high jump champion, who won Olympic bronze in Tokyo last summer and world outdoor silver in Doha in 2019, left her home in Dnipro just three weeks ago as the conflict escalated.

Training, needless to say, was low on her list of priorities.

But she did succeed in finding her way to Serbia after "hundreds of phone calls, many changes of direction, explosions, fires, and air raid sirens".

"This medal is for Ukraine, all my country, all my people, all the military," said Mahuchikh. "I must protect our country on the track.

"Before we went to the field, the only thought in my mind was about Ukraine because too many terrible things have happened there.

"I even doubted that I could jump at all, but my coach said I must go out and perform with the shape and fitness I had before the start of the Russian invasion."

Coming into the competition at 1.88m, Mahuchikh had a failure at 1.92 and two at 2.00 before making the latter height.

She sailed over 2.02 to ramp up the pressure on Eleanor Patterson. The Australian responded by passing, so the bar was raised to 2.04m.

But when Patterson failed at the new height, Mahuchikh was left celebrating in the Stark Arena, the crowd rising for a standing ovation with a handful of Ukrainian flags fluttering.

Painted nails in support

Patterson claimed silver with 2.00m, with Kazakhstan's Nadezhda Dubovitskaya taking bronze (1.98).

"To win a silver behind Yaroslava makes it even more special," said Patterson, who had painted her nails with a blue and yellow love heart in support of Ukraine.

AFP

OMAN NATIONAL HOCKEY TEAM QUALIFIES FOR HERO ASIA CUP 2022

Jakarta, Indonesia - Oman National Hockey Team qualified for the Men's AHF Cup Jakarta 2022 final after defeating Sri Lankan 2-1 in the semifinal of the tournament on Saturday. Oman will play Bangladesh in the final on Sunday. With the win, the national team also qualified for the Hero Asia Cup 2022 (the qualifier for the FIH Men's World Cup).

Azaan wins Muscat Open Golf Championship

Muscat- The 2022 Muscat Open Golf Championship was played at Ras Al Hamra Golf Club on March 11 and 12. There was a full field of 92 golfers from Oman and the GCC who competed for the longest running amateur golf competition in Oman and the GCC.

The champion golfer for the Muscat Open Golf Championship for 2022 was local favourite Azaan al Rumhy. Azaan shot a new course record of 69 (-2 under par) on day 1, and then repeated this score on day 2, giving him a total score of 138 (-4 under par) and a victory by 10 shots from 2nd placed Nasser Yaqoob (Awali Golf Club). Another local favourite Badr Alaamri sealed third place with a score of 150. The leading junior in the gross category was Darsh Pawani with a score of 157.

It was a proud moment as Azaan was presented with the trophy by H E Dr. Mohammed Bin Hamad al Rumhy, Minister of Energy and Minerals.

This was the 6th time Azaan won the tournament. He said, "This tournament is the most prestigious golf event in Oman, if I can pick one tournament to win in Oman then it would be the Muscat Open. I wish to thank the sponsors, the organizing committee and my family for all of their support".

Azaan al Rumhy gets the trophy from H E Dr Mohammed al Rumhy

The net prize this year went to Tore Solberg (134) who was closely followed by junior Ras Al Hamra golfer Juan Moreno (136) and Salim al Harthy (138).

Ras Al Hamra Golf Club Captain, Simon Walker commented, "The course is in superb condition due to the tireless work from our team. We were delighted to welcome such a high caliber of golfers to the club; golf is thriving in Oman and visitors are always welcome to our club, which is the only floodlit course in the country."

President of the Muscat Open Committee Jas Dhanju thanked HSBC, Hydro, Masirah Oil Ltd., CMS, Ramada Encore, Seven Seas Petroleum LLC and Milly O'Brien's for their sponsorship.

Pankaj Khimji (2nd left) sitting with with Jay Shah, president, ACC

Pankaj Khimji appointed VP of Asian Cricket Council

Colombo, Sri Lanka - In a ceremony held at the Taj Samudra Hotel in Colombo, Sri Lanka on April 19, Pankaj Khimji, Chairman of Oman Cricket, was officially appointed as the Vice-President of the Asian Cricket Council (ACC) from 2022-23.

Founded in 1983, the Asian Cricket Council has always aimed to organise, develop and promote the game of cricket in Asia. Over the years, it has taken cricket into new territories, in an attempt to expand and truly globalise the gentlemen's game.

Pankaj Khimji served as Chairman of the organization's Development Committee before moving into his current role.

Speaking on the occasion, he said, "I'm truly honoured and humbled to have been appointed the Vice-President of the ACC for 2022-23. It is a great privilege and also an honour for Oman Cricket and Oman as a country to have been given this recognition for all our achievements and all the infrastructure developments that have happened in the country over the years.

"It is a testimony as well to the Oman Cricket team who have been true flag bearers and I think this has been a joint effort on behalf of everyone involved. My appreciation and gratefulness also go out to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik whose support has always extended to Oman Cricket and its members for all these years.

"We have an exciting 18 months to two years ahead, to come up with lots of plans for the development and growth of Asian Cricket. Hopefully, in the next few months we will try to re-energise and reinvigorate it. I look forward to working with Jay Shah and the administration team to help make Asian Cricket into a global force in the game."

Oman to host rebooted GCC Women's T20i Cup after hiatus of six years from March 20

Muscat - Oman will be hosting the GCC Women's T20i Championship Cup from March 20. All the fixtures will be held at the Oman Cricket Academy Ground.

The teams involved will be from Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. A round-robin format will be employed, with all the matches contributing towards ICC WT20i ranking points.

Speaking on the announcement, Vaishali Jesrani, captain of the Oman Women's Team said, "On behalf of Oman Cricket, it's an absolute privilege to welcome the women's cricket teams from six countries. What a moment for these young cricketers to represent the game at the highest level.

"A special round of applause for Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, who are playing for the very first time. We Welcome you all to the GCC Women's T20i Championship 2022 in Oman. Let's have a great tournament - Cheers!"

> *A special round of applause for Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, who are playing for the very first time.*
> *We Welcome you all to the 2022 championship in Oman*
> VAISHALI JESRAN

This is the fourth edition of the tournament - one that was conceived in Oman, which played host to its very first iteration in 2014. The nations competing have, as the name suggests traditionally been GCC nations only, other than the 2016 version where Malaysia, Uganda and Kenya took part.

The event was held every year from 2014 till 2016, and has now been rebooted after a six-year hiatus.

OMAN'S FIXTURES

March 20	Oman v Bahrain
March 21	Oman v Saudi Arabia
March 22	Oman v UAE
March 24	Oman v Kuwait
March 26	Oman v Qatar

Of the sides competing, Kuwait and UAE have recent international exposure, owing to their participation in the ICC WT20 Asia Qualifiers, held in Dubai in November 2021.

This marks the Oman National Women's team's second outing as a group since the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the last one coming in January of this year against the Wanstead Cricket Club (UK) at the Oman Cricket Academy.

The matches will be live-streamed for the first time - another milestone marking the rapid rise of Women's Cricket in the sultanate, and more broadly, the Gulf.

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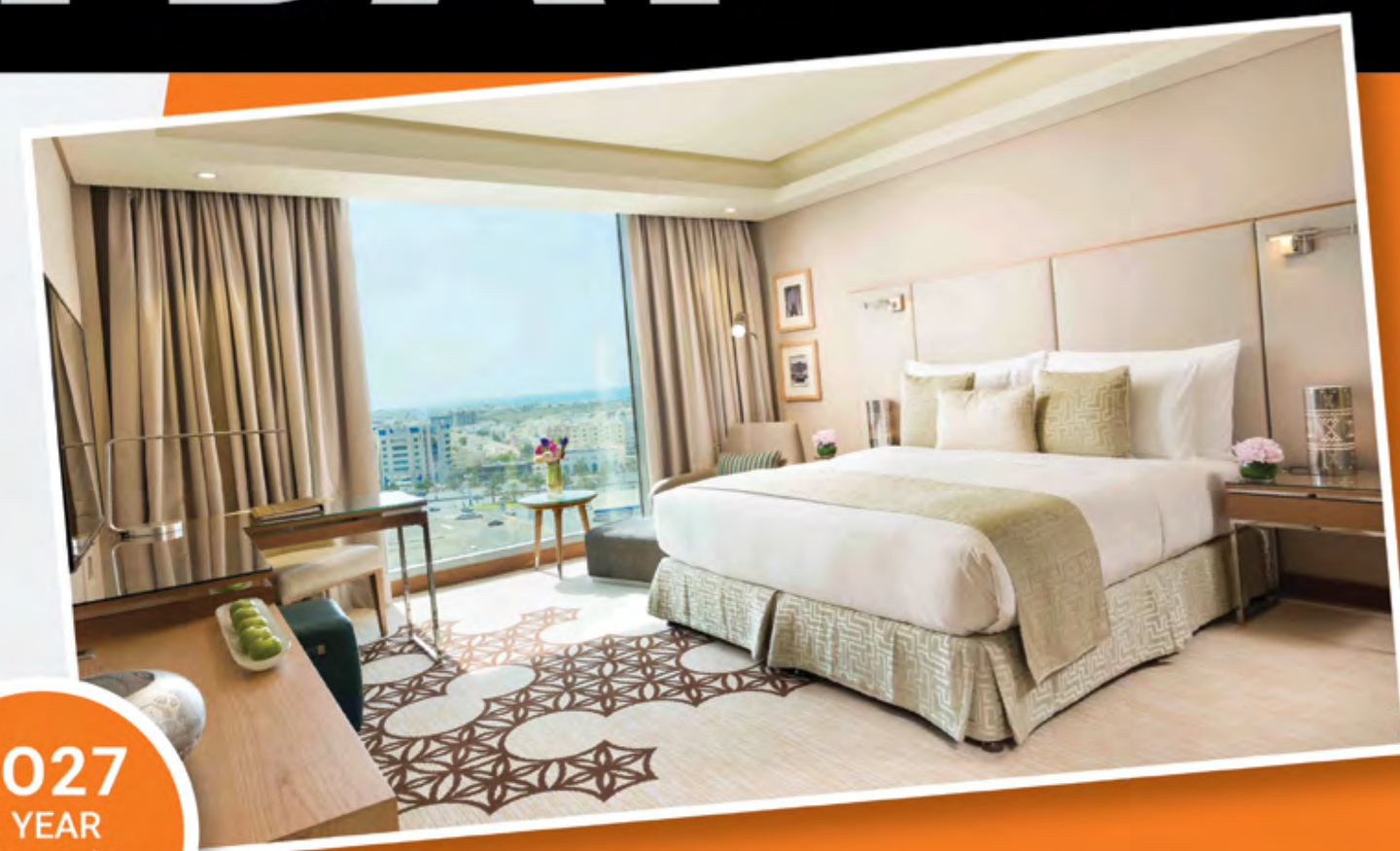

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