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PORTUGAL DENT OMAN HOPES AT FIFA BEACH SOCCER WORLD CUP



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OMAN BUSINESS GATEWAY TO COME UP AT AIRPORT HEIGHTS



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BURBERRY PRESENTS STAR-STUDDED MOODY AUTUMNAL COLLECTION



MUSCAT

GED RESULTS FOR 2023-2024

Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, approved General Education Diploma (GED) exams' general indicators of results, as well as the results of equivalent qualifications, for the first sitting of the GED for the academic year 2023/2024. As many as 50,508 male and female students sat for the GED, with an overall success rate of 80.85 per cent in the public schools' category. In the private (bilingual) schools' segment, a total of 1,555 students sat for the GED exams, with an overall success rate of 90.98 per cent. **DETAILS ON P3**

NOW INTERCITY BUSES FROM KARWA MOTORS

Karwa Motors, a subsidiary of Oman Investment Authority (OIA) and Qatar Transportation Company, announced the launch of a new type of buses, specifically intercity buses. The new type of the buses designed to accommodate 45 passengers in line with Gulf standard specifications approved for buses operating in the oil and gas sector. The company celebrated delivering two of these buses to a leading transportation company in the Sultanate of Oman. Karwa Motors said that the delivery of these two new intercity buses marks an important step towards introducing this bus category into the local market, amidst significant demand from both local companies and individuals interested in utilising this mode of transportation. **DETAILS ON P15**

OPINION

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Khalid Alsafi Al Huraibi
Oman, the scale-up nation

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Dr Yousuf Hamed al Balushi
Oman's strategic alliance with Germany

Foreign direct investment exceeds RO 27 billion

MUSCAT: The volume of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Sultanate of Oman by the end of 2022 reached RO 27 billion with investment flow that constituted 4.8 per cent of the gross domestic product at current prices against foreign investment of RO 25 billion by the end of 2021, according to the preliminary data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

FDI constituted 75.9 per cent of total foreign investment by the end of 2022. Foreign investment in financial derivatives constituted RO 52.2 million with inflow of RO 1.3 million. Meanwhile, other foreign investment reached RO 5,642.2 million with inflows of RO 343.2 million.

The oil and gas activities bagged 56.4 per cent of total foreign investment with a total value of RO 15,320.7 million compared to RO 5,558.9 million for the financial brokerage activity, RO 2,373.4 million for converting industries and RO 1,617.9 million for the transportation, storage and communications activity.

Further, total foreign

investment in the activities of real estate, leasing and commercial projects reached RO 1,112.9 million, while foreign investment in other activities reached RO 1,151.1 million. FDI distribution over various sectors stood as follows: oil and gas (71.1 per cent), converting industries (9.1 per cent), financial brokerage (8.9 per cent), real estate, leasing and

commercial activities (4.9 per cent) and other activities (6 per cent).

The United Kingdom came on top of the list of top 10 countries with foreign direct investment in Oman (RO 9,621.9 million), followed by the United States of America (RO 3,684.2 million) and China (RO 1,039.6 million). **DETAILS ON P13**

MUSCAT INTERNATIONAL BOOK FAIR OPENS TODAY



The 28th edition of the Muscat International Book Fair will kick off on Wednesday, packed with new events, especially after the success in the previous 27th edition. The opening ceremony will be held on Wednesday at 7 pm at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre under the auspices of Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. **DETAILS ON P4**

Unified visa to boost tourism sector in GCC

VINOD NAIR
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Relevant technical committees are working on determining the form and nature of the unified GCC tourist visa, according to the GCC Secretary-General Jasem bin Mohamed al Budaiwi.

He made the statement following the eighth ministerial meeting of GCC Ministers of Tourism in Doha on Monday. It may be noted that the Sultanate of Oman's delegation at the meeting was headed by Minister of Heritage and Tourism, Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi.

Al Budaiwi said: "Committees are studying the way the unified visa shall work in preparation for presenting it according to the systems and laws of all the GCC countries. The unified tourist visa aims to attract foreign tourist flow to the GCC countries. The unified visa project will make it

easier for tourists and visitors to move between the GCC countries conveniently, with a hope that the tourism sector would benefit from this once it is implemented."

The meeting also discussed activating the initiatives of the Gulf Tourism Strategy and joint promotional packages among the GCC countries.

As per records, the Sultanate of Oman recorded over four million visitor arrivals in 2023, which included 2.1 million three to five-star hotel guests. According to the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), 610,000 Indian nationals visited the country, behind 1.6 million GCC nationals. Among others, 231,000 Germans 150,000 Yemenis, and 118,000 Chinese nationals visited the country in 2023.

Currently, nationals of 103 countries and regions are exempt from entry visas for stay up to 14 days.

US again blocks Gaza ceasefire call

UNITED NATIONS: The United States on Tuesday again vetoed a draft United Nations Security Council resolution on the war, blocking a demand for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire as it instead pushes the 15-member body to call for a temporary ceasefire linked to the release of captives.

Thirteen council members voted in favour of the Algerian-drafted text, while Britain abstained. It was the third US veto of a draft resolution since the

start of the current fighting on October 7. Washington has also used its veto to block an amendment to draft resolution in December. "A vote in favour of this draft resolution is support to the Palestinians right to life. Conversely, voting against it implies an endorsement of the brutal violence and collective punishment inflicted upon them," Algeria's UN Ambassador Amar Bendjama told the council before the vote.

US Ambassador to the UN

Linda Thomas-Greenfield signalled on Saturday that the US would veto the draft resolution over concerns it could jeopardize talks between the US, Egypt, Israel and Qatar that seek to broker a pause in the war and the release of captives. The Algerian-drafted resolution vetoed by the US did not link a ceasefire to the release of captives. It separately demanded an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages. **SEE P6**

64-year-old cyclist on world tour for a better and beautiful earth

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

If you see someone cycling in the city at the moment dressed in green, it is Michael Evertz from Germany. The 64-year-old is professionally a sustainability researcher and an economist, who is also a passionate cyclist and mountaineer. He is on a mission - Expedition Hope.

"I am in love with our wonderful and beautiful planet. To create a better world, words are not enough for me. What we need is action,"

said Michael Evertz.

And accordingly, during last year's annual United Nations Earth Day, April 22, 2023, he launched in Berlin a meaningful cycling and mountaineering expedition, named 'Expedition Hope'. The expedition is to cover 30,000 km of muscle power, through 30 countries, in 800 days, for 'ONE COMMON WORLD'.

"Like an Olympic torch bearer by bicycle and by foot I want to motivate people around the world to be more connected, united and collaborative, because cross-cultural



Michael Evertz from Germany

collaboration is a hopeful vision and one of the most important key factors overcoming the challenges of our time for solving our global and interconnected problems and crises, including climate change and environmental problems and the resulting social conflicts," he explained.

He is now in his 14th country, and covered 9,500 km. In Oman he has met Chairman of Environment Authority Dr Abdullah al Amri.

His first Milestone was the United Nations Climate Change

Conference in Dubai (COP28) in December 2023. As a 'Cycling Ambassador for Collaboration', he has crossed 13 countries - Germany, France, Austria, Italy, Albania, North Macedonia, Greece, Türkiye, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. He arrived in Dubai on time after 222 days, 8,862 km on November 28, 2023.

"It was a very hard bicycle-ride: I felt the climate change on my own body because of the temperatures." **TURN TO P3**



Steps to boost competitiveness discussed

MUSCAT: Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), in partnership with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, organised the “Partnership and Integration” programme on Tuesday

The programme aims to find solutions to the challenges facing the progress of the private sector, upgrade the level of performance, and keep pace with aspirations in light of the objectives of the Oman Vision 2040 towards an effective and proactive private sector.

Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, explained that the proposed solutions that were formulated and discussed during the programme will enhance the competitiveness of the private sector. These solutions were specific, clear and tailored to address the real challenges of the sector, he added.

The minister stressed that the existing efforts made by private sector establishments are designed to develop the national economy through the continuous endeavour to find strategic partnerships that contribute to advancing economic development.

Al Yousef added that these meetings with the private



Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, OCCI Chairman

sector represent the necessity of strategic partnership through the proposals and initiatives presented by the private sector through OCCI. The minister stated that the programme aims to empower the private sector, create new business opportunities and projects, attract quality investments, enhance exports, and develop a competitive business milieu. He noted that the ministry is moving forward to streamline procedures, improve services, protect competition and prevent monopoly.

Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri , Minister of Economy, said that the national goals sought from these and similar programmes aims to further



Ministers and officials at OCCI-MoCIIP programme in Muscat on Tuesday

achieve integration, enhance the capabilities of the national economy and raise the ceiling of ambition for a more competitive performance through which the Sultanate of Oman rises to advanced levels in easing the business environment. The move contributes positively on global competitiveness indicators and expanding production structures with highly efficient national cadres, he added.

Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, said that integration between the public and private sectors aims to achieve a stimulating business environment that ensures sustainability and growth for the private sector so that this sector can contribute to

supporting the national economy in general and enhance its role as a major employer of labour.

Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, OCCI Chairman, in his presentation explained the participatory paths with the government’s legislative and executive departments. The step aims to create a favourable climate for the consensus of ideas and visions to achieve integration and adopt sustainable solutions that enhance the performance indicators of the private sector and its contributions to the national economic system. He also highlighted the OCCI strategic approach to improve the business environment in the private sector.

HH Sayyid Dr Adham bin Turki al Said, Head of the OCCI Economic Committee, explained that the “Partnership and Integration” programme provided valuable insights that lead the private sector towards sustainability in achieving strong growth based on the opportunities outlined by Oman Vision 2040 in various sectors. The programme requires doubling efforts, accelerating achievement, and creating a flexible legislative and procedural environment that supports improving the business environment and contributes to creating a qualitative shift in the business community, he said.

— ONA

Oman, US ink environmental action plan for 2024-2027

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman and the United States signed the Environmental Action Programme to activate the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in Environmental Fields (2024-2027).

During the signing, Oman was represented by the Environment Authority, while the USA was represented by its Department of State.

The action programme includes a plan to bolster environmental laws and regulations, advance environmental expertise and practices related to the protection of the environment, controlling pollution, conserving natural resources and wildlife and sustainable ecosystem management.

The programme seeks to boost efforts and action in areas related to adaptation and mitigation of the effects of climate change, as well as encouraging and adopting integrated environmental management practices and using innovative technology.

— ONA



OMAN 360-DEGREE PERSPECTIVE IN RIYADH SEEKS INVESTMENTS

RIYADH: The Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism on Tuesday organised an event code-named “Oman in a 360 Degree Perspective” to explore investment opportunities available in Oman.

The opening of the event was held under the auspices of HH Sayyid Faisal bin Turki al Said, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The ceremony was attended by representatives of the authorities, tourism companies and investors.

“Oman in a 360 Degree Perspective” focuses on major ongoing tourism projects and explores future potentials.

The ministry’s partners from Omani sectors will showcase the investment opportunities to investors to enhance the existing partnership between tourism sector institutions in both countries.

The meeting included visual presentations and bilateral meetings between representatives of Omani institutions tasked with tourism development and their Saudi counterparts.

— ONA

40 students take part in robotics competition

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 20

The Ministry of Education, represented by the Department of Innovation and Scientific Olympiads, organised the National Robotics Competition on Monday. Ten teams comprising forty students from the various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman took part. This competition comes as the qualifiers for the participation in the World Robot Championship in the United States.

The competition consisted of the “Driving Skills Challenge,” in which the participant controls the robot remotely and collects the largest number of coloured cubes from the playing field. The number of points is calculated based on the number of cubes placed in the goals, their colours, and according to specific rules, and then the points scored by the team are calculated. The second



Students at the robot competition on Monday

challenge is the “programming challenge match,” in which the robot works under autonomous control and the team’s points are calculated by the same rules.

The implementation of this competition confirms the Ministry of Education’s interest

in diversifying competitions in the field of robotics and artificial intelligence, which in turn diversifies the situations that excite students and increases their passion for science, engineering, mathematics and information technology, noting

This competition comes as the qualifiers for the participation in the World Robot Championship in the US. It aims to develop the spirit of creativity among the participants, develop their skills in robotics and AI

that this competition is being implemented for the first time at the national level.

The competition aims to develop the spirit of creativity among the participants, develop their skills in the field of robotics, and provide a competitive environment stimulating the use of engineering and innovative skills, in addition to achieving honourable representation in tournaments, whether at the local, regional, or global level.

A 14-year old trader makes waves in Al Aqr Wall’s shadow

THURAIYA AL BAHRI
MUSCAT, FEB 20

Nestled within the ancient walls of Nizwa, where time seems to stand still and history whispers its tales, lies a remarkable young merchant whose story is as captivating as the storied walls that surround him. In the shadow of the illustrious Al Aqr Wall, which bears witness to a rich history extending over a thousand years, Auf bin Abdullah bin Zahran al Aufi, a mere 14 years of age, is making waves with his entrepreneurial spirit and unwavering determination. The Al Aqr Wall stands proudly as a testament to the era of Imam Al Salt bin Malik al Kharousi, its

towering presence a symbol of resilience and endurance. Built over seven years, this historic landmark has weathered storms and stood the test of time, a silent witness to the passage of centuries. Despite facing damage, the wall was meticulously restored by Imam Sultan bin Saif al Yaarubi and later by Bawariq Nizwa International Investment Company, preserving its legacy for generations to come.

Today, amidst the restored splendour of the Al Aqr Wall, Auf’s entrepreneurial journey unfolds. Inspired by his family’s traditions and guided by his father’s wisdom, Auf embarked on his commercial career just a year ago. Beginning with humble

trades in toys and food during Eid celebrations, Auf soon found himself drawn to the halwa industry, working alongside his father in the creation of Omani sweets. Recognising his son’s innate leadership qualities and keen business acumen, Auf’s father entrusted him with the management of their latest venture – Maqlay al Hara.

Opened on January 8, coinciding with the unveiling of the restored Al Aqr Wall, the Maqlay al Hara quickly became a beacon of innovation and creativity in Nizwa’s bustling market scene. With his sharp intellect and eloquent demeanour, Auf proved himself to be a natural-born



Auf bin Abdullah bin Zahran al Aufi

entrepreneur, captivating customers with his Mojito — a refreshing concoction that soon

became the talk of the town. Moreover, Auf possesses the skill of serving freshly Turkish-style ice cream and as a master of Maqlay al Hara, he sells meat and bread with honey alongside various beverages and freshly made ice cream. But Auf’s journey to success is not merely defined by his entrepreneurial ventures; it is also shaped by his dedication to education and personal growth. A student at the Smart Student School in Nizwa, Auf’s academic excellence is matched only by his proficiency in both Arabic and English – a testament to his commitment to knowledge and learning. Additionally, his three-year studying of the Quran at the

Al Qala’a Mosque has instilled in him a strong sense of discipline and moral integrity, qualities that serve as the cornerstone of his character.

As Auf continues to carve his path in the world of commerce, he remains steadfast in his belief that success is born from humility, hard work and a relentless pursuit of excellence. To his peers, he offers sage advice: start small, dream big and never underestimate the power of perseverance. For in the ancient walls of Nizwa, amidst the echoes of history, lies the promise of a brighter future – one that Auf bin Abdullah bin Zahran al Aufi is determined to seize with both hands.



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It's a supply

Ansab-Jafnain road dualisation project to ease rush hour traffic

MUSCAT: Construction work has commenced on the eagerly-awaited Al Ansab-Al Jafnain road dualisation, which once completed is expected will give ease rush hour traffic in Muscat, Al Dakhiliyah and Al Sharqiyah North.

Galfar Engineering and Contracting has embarked on the topographic surveying works of the project, comprising three lanes in each direction from Falaj Al Sham in the Wilayat of Bausher to Al Jafnain in the Wilayat of Al Seeb, flyovers and subways. Meanwhile, the project will help resolve rush hour traffic, expedite the development of the Misfah Industrial Area, and reduce accidents in the area.

Several Bausher and Ansab residents have welcomed the commencement of the vital road project, whose implementation is expected to last for 36 months, and expressed their gratitude for the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on the Al Ansab-Al Jafnain road duality project.

Malik bin Hilal al Yahmadi, a member of Majlis Ash-Shura, said in a statement, "We congratulate the people of Bausher and all users of the Al Ansab-Al Jafnain road on the start of the construction work of the dualisation project, which will achieve a qualitative leap in the traffic flow between the Wilayat of Bausher and the rest of the governorates and wilayats, giving a boom in commercial and industrial activities."

FROM P1

ENVIRONMENT

Currently in the Sultanate of Oman, the 14th country, he has been reading about Oman and is impressed with the fact that the concern for environment is way of life and the measures that have been officially in place since the beginning of the modern renaissance.

Speaking to the Observer he said that without social collaboration, humanity has no chance for surviving unless we collaborate.

"This is the only way to protect and sustain nature and environment, the only way to achieve something meaningful against climate crisis, wars, population growth, world-wide migration, refugee disasters, poverty, unemployment, suffering, hunger and thirst, the brutal global competition and the belief in survival of the fittest," Michael Evertz noted.

He said that this is not a new scientific knowledge as 'Social collaboration' is a universal law for that already ensured the survival of early hominids in the East- African Savannah 8 million years ago.

Despite of all scientific and technical achievements, this principle of survival has not



Michael Evertz with the Environment Authority chairman Dr Abdullah al Amri

changed to this day. 'Collaboration is the Mother of Surviving', but in the age of destructive hyper-competition this has been underestimated and was totally repressed for a long time, with violent effects.

He added that It is not possible to stop the disasters or initiate the necessary transformation process with technical solutions alone.

NEXT MILESTONE

Evertz next big milestone is to cycle to the 'Cape of Good Hope' in South Africa.

He will go on from Oman to Cairo next, crossing Africa from north to south.

This is another 19,000 km with another 15 countries Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Mozambique,

Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Botswana, Namibia, South Africa.

"I ought to arrive there by the end of May 2025."

According to Evertz, 'Cape of Good Hope', is an authentic destination with an important symbolic mission, because HOPE is the driver of change, the antidote to fear.

"When we trust in hope, we develop optimism and a pleasant sense of anticipation at what needs to be 'done' next," he said.

To keep the excitement and interest up, he will also climb the highest mountains in Eastern Africa in between, because it is the cradle of mankind. This is the place where everything once started. And about 8 million years ago collaborative behaviour had developed here as well.

He asked, "Where is a better place of hope to raise a flag with the mission 'Stand up for the Planet - Start Collaboration?'"

The targets are Mount Kenya, 5,199 metres tall, the Ruwenzori Mountains in Uganda (5,109 m) and later Karisimbi in Ruanda (4,507 m), the home of the mountain gorillas.

The goal is Africa's highest mountain, Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, 5,895 metres tall.

In the plan is the possibility of going further to the United

Nations Climate Change Conference in Brazil (COP30), which will be held in Belém in the Amazon rainforest in November 2025.

Through this journey he also want to involve with mind-changers.

"On my way I intend to dare something unusual - I want to meet 'pioneers of hope' in all the countries along my journey to Cape of Hope. People who don't talk, but already work on changes. Connecting this climate-heroes, this has the potential to create a 'Big Picture for a Collaborative World', as a movement. That is how world-stories become incubators for a public spirit donating future.

"So join in. If you believe that the time has come for us to initiate a fundamental change in our way of life, then join me. Whether you are a student, teacher, journalist, scientist, politician, entrepreneur, manager, employee in a company, public authority or association, pastor, retired person, artist, sportsperson, cultural worker or anyone of any age, gender or background. Anyone and everyone can get involved. We need everyone to secure a future worth living for everyone in harmony with nature," he said.

You can follow his journey on www.expedition-hope.earth Instagram: [expedition_hope_earth](https://www.instagram.com/expedition_hope_earth)

Beware of Googling for health diagnosis

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

The number of people who are obsessed about their health frequently search for a diagnosis online or social media, and adopt unscientific methods are on the rise, according to doctors.

Hypochondriasis is a type of anxiety in which the person misinterprets his/her own feelings. People with hypochondriasis are unable to shake their fears despite normal physical exams and lab tests. Some may change doctors repeatedly. Others may avoid medical care as their symptoms go beyond average health worries.

Hypochondriasis is rapidly gripping the world in such a way that every 2 out of 5 people end up diagnosing themselves with serious disease and a survey of 2,000 Americans found 43 per cent of them getting misdiagnosed after searching on google and 74 per cent said the results made them more worried.

Dr Rashid al Zaidi, a senior psychiatrist, says that it is normal for people to worry about their health but when these worries are continuous, causing anxiety and affecting their routine, then they need to take care.

"People with hypochondriasis will



have obsessive thoughts of having serious illnesses. Therefore, they will seek frequent medical consultations and blood tests regularly. This will affect their daily life and relationships, and results in financial stress due to the expenses on clinic visits and tests. Their family life and occupational life can be affected too. In addition, they will also have suicidal tendency," he said.

According to Dr Al Zaidi, when these worries become beliefs we call illusion or psychosis. Illusional hypochondriasis is more severe and requires medication whereas obsessional hypochondriasis is considered a type of anxiety and requires antidepressant or anti-anxiety medication and cognitive behavioural therapy.

"So, the best intervention is to help these people with frequent worries

People with
hypochondriasis will have
obsessive thoughts of
having serious illnesses.
This will affect their daily
life, relationships and
result in financial stress
due to the expenses on
and tests

DR RASHID AL ZAIDI

A senior psychiatrist

is to be seen by psychiatrists and psychologists because early treatment can help," said Dr Al Zaidi.

A recent Swedish study conducted on this subject says that Googling regarding symptoms or health or for diagnosis has been very prevalent, as it is a very quick and easy way to acquire information just a click away. But the mental repercussions are serious and such people die earlier compared to other people who aren't hyper vigilant about health concerns as excessive fear for health leads to serious health-damaging results.

"Many of us, for sure, are mild

hypochondriacs to an extent. But there are also people on the other extreme of the spectrum who live in a perpetual state of worry and rumination about having a serious illness," the report suggests.

"Generally, people do go online perpetually as it's more convenient than getting a doctor's appointment, or they just hope to get peace of mind that nothing serious is there about their health," says Dr Dilip Singhvi, internal medicine specialist.

But in reality, it's the opposite. Google will provide answers, which are usually worrisome. People with the disorder are actually mentally suffering and it pays to take it seriously and to treat it, which can involve cognitive behavioural therapy, relaxation techniques, education and sometimes antidepressant medication.

"Although it is not that alarming in Oman as compared to other countries, it is wiser to consult your doctor as there are many aspects which doctors are taking into consideration for making a diagnosis and not merely on the basis of a list of symptoms. It's better to avoid Dr Google and avoid creating more worries in life than peace," he says.

GED results approved, get it on mobile phones tomorrow

MUSCAT: Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, approved General Education Diploma exams' general indicators of results, as well as the results of equivalent qualifications, for the first sitting of the GED during the academic year 2023/2024.

As many as 50,508 students sat for the GED, with an overall success rate of 80.85 per cent in the public schools' category. In

the GED for Islamic sciences education, a total of 115 students sat for the exams, with an overall success rate of 98.26 per cent.

Results will be available starting on Thursday at 4 pm, through Omantel, Ooredoo and Vodafone. The results can be obtained by sending a short text message to 90200, quoting the seat number. It be available later on the educational portal.

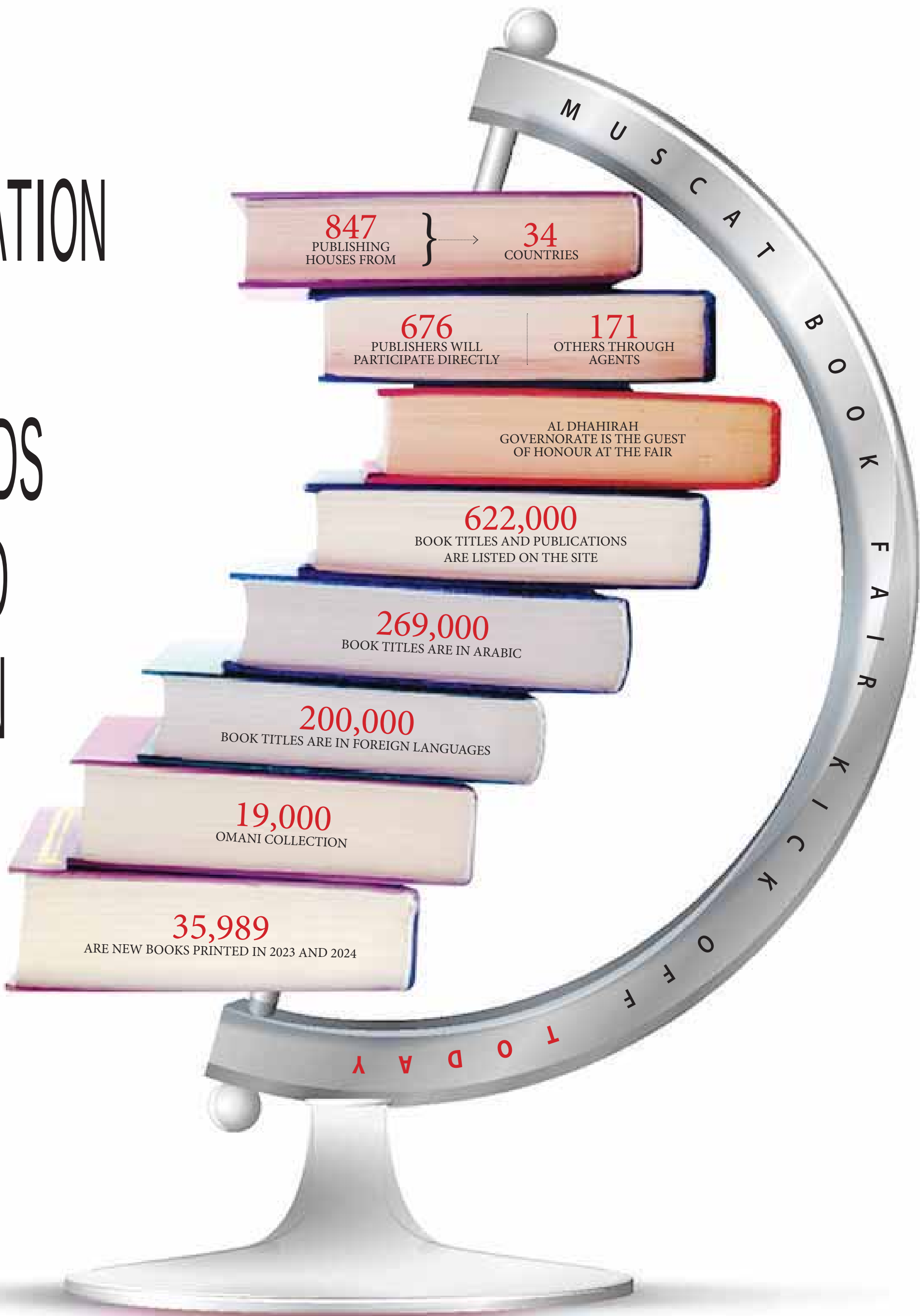
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A CELEBRATION OF WORDS AND FUN



AHMED AL KAABI

The 28th edition of the Muscat International Book Fair will kick off on Wednesday, packed with new events, especially after its success in the previous 27th edition. The 27th edition saw the organisation of a Bahraini Cultural Week during the fair period, which helped to strengthen relations between the two countries and establish an effective cultural exchange. During the previous edition, artificial intelligence technology was used for the first time to measure the number of visitors, identify times of peak visits as well as determine the ages of visitors and other data.

The number of participants in the previous edition of the book fair in Muscat reached 32 countries, with

approximately 826 publishing houses from various parts of the world participating. The number of cultural events at that time reached 165 events.

The 28th edition of the Muscat International Book Fair will feature several distinctive events. The fair is considered one of the most prominent cultural destinations in the Arab world, and it is an essential part of the process of instilling good values in Arab youth and developing and promoting the concept of culture and sound reading among new generations.

The opening ceremony of the fair will be held on Wednesday at 7 pm at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre under the auspices of Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. This year, 847 publishing houses from 34 countries are participating in the



Muscat International Book Fair.

Al Dhahirah Governorate, the guest of honour at the fair, will contribute to the fair with a variety of events and activities to introduce its intellectual and cultural history, including an exhibition of art and photographs inspired by heritage and history, as well as an exhibition of archaeological finds discovered in the capital. In addition, there will be several events, the most important of which is a dialogue session on Al Dhahirah

There will be a lecture on the treasures of Al Dhahirah Governorate at the National Museum, a seminar on investment opportunities in Al Dhahirah Governorate and its strategic location, and a lecture entitled “Al Dhahirah: Land of Secrets” through Omani manuscripts.

Several activities and events will be organised for children including

workshops, interactive competitions, plays, discussion, drawing and colouring, recycling, reading sessions, cover and bookmark making, story writing and listening, creative writing and scientific innovation workshops, in addition to poetry and chanting programmes, and shadow theatre shows.

The cultural committee of the fair, in partnership with the Directorate General of Arts, presents a variety of theatrical shows that include mime, diorama theatre, monodrama theatre by actor Faris al Balushi, and street theatre. In addition, the children’s corner will host several plays, including “The Rain Continues” presented by the Directorate of Education in Al Batinah South, the school play “The Crystal”, and the play “The Brothers of Sulfur” by the Ambition Theatre Company.



OHRC takes part in Arab meeting on human rights



Aqeel bin Alawi Baomar at the meeting in Doha.

Muscat: The delegation of the Omani Human Rights Commission, headed by Aqeel bin Alawi Baomar, concluded its participation in the fifty-third meeting of the Arab Permanent Committee on Human Rights in Doha. Member states of the League of Arab States and Arab National Institutions also took part.

At the conclusion of its work, the meeting recommended condemning the ongoing crimes of Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people, expanding its aggression towards other Arab countries, targeting tens of thousands of civilians, subjecting the Palestinian

people in the Gaza Strip to a deadly siege that cuts off the means of life, and the systematic destruction of residential neighbourhoods, hospitals, schools, universities, mosques, churches and infrastructure with the intention to make the Gaza Strip a scorched land in light of the hate speech, racism and incitement adopted by Israeli.

The meeting also welcomed the launch of the “Arab Forum for National Mechanisms for Implementation, Reporting, and Follow-up” to promote cooperation, partnership, and exchange of experiences and best practices related to the

work of these mechanisms in all Arab countries.

In addition, at the conclusion of its work, the meeting called for enhancing working on the plan implementing the Arab strategy for human rights in cooperation and consultation with those who are concerned with human rights issues at both the national and regional levels in the Arab region.

The delegation included Dr Jamal bin Eid al Khaduri, OHRC member; Labiba bint Mohammed al Maawaliyah, OHRC member; and Salem bin Khalfan al Rushdi, Head of the Media Department at the Omani Human Rights Commission.

Muscat Parents Council reviews work

MUSCAT: The Parents Council of Muscat held a meeting headed by Ali bin Said al Saeedi, Wali of Muscat, Chairman of the Council, in the presence of members, at Al Zahra Basic Education School in Muscat.

The meeting reviewed the topics on the agenda and discussed the work of the Council during the current period.

The issue of supporting schools for maintenance, restoration and care of their facilities was discussed.

The meeting discussed events and school programmes, identifying schools’ needs for interactive television devices, as well as assigning the educational committee to prepare the inventory form.

The Council’s Educational Committee plan was also reviewed, and the status of schools in terms of grades and student preparation was discussed.

In addition to the plan to honour outstanding students,

teachers and distinguished students.

It is worth noting that the Parents Council is interested in strengthening the ties between the parents’ councils in Muscat schools, researching topics of interest to students, and discussing the best solutions and practices that support the optimal flow of the educational process for students.

The meeting concluded by making appropriate recommendations.



Meeting of the Parents Council of Muscat in Muscat on Monday.

Students learn history from rock drawings in National Museum

MUSCAT: The National Museum organised an event titled ‘Rock Engravings’ to explore rock drawings and engravings and its significance in the growth of civilisation, on Tuesday.

The purpose of the event was to introduce rock drawings and engravings in Oman across the ages. The event was attended by members of the Friends of Oman Museums, students, and individuals interested in rock art and the ancient history of Omani civilisation.

The event included a lecture on ‘Examples of Rock Drawings in the Sultanate of Oman,’ presented by Dr Habib bin Marhoon al Hadi, a senior specialist in history curriculum at the Ministry of Education.

The lecture introduced rock drawings found in numerous valleys and mountains in Oman, dating back to ancient times. It showcased examples, explained their meanings, discussed drawing techniques, and highlighted the tools used.

The lecture was followed by a guided tour for participants to explore examples of rock



Students learn about rock engravings at the National Museum in Muscat on Tuesday.



drawings and engravings in the Prehistory and Ancient History Galleries of the National Museum. Continuing with the event, an art workshop was conducted for drawing and engraving on wood, mimicking the rock drawings and engravings displayed in the

in the Prehistory and Ancient History Galleries. Various techniques in rock art, such as tapping, carving, dotting, cutting, incising, scraping, colouring, and others, were used.

Rock drawings and engravings have been discovered across Oman, dating back to prehistoric and ancient eras. Some of the well-known drawings depict human life symbols, animals like oryx, horses, camels, dogs and elephants, as well as reptiles like scorpions and snakes. In the realm of tools, war-related items such as spears, swords, and shields are highlighted.



شركة ظفار لتوليد الكهرباء ش.م.ع
Dhofar Generating Company SAOG
PO Box: 1571, PC: 211, Salalah, Sultanate of Oman.
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BOARD OF DIRECTORS’ REPORT

Dear Shareholders,

The Board of Directors is pleased to present the performance of your company, Dhofar Generating Company SAOG (DGC or ‘Company’) for 2023. Safety remains the core value of the Company. The Company has continued to maintain its safety track record and is very proud to announce that it has achieved its milestone of 8 years without LTI with more than two million safe man hours on 5 June 2023. Managing safety is never an easy task, and unless you have a fully committed team it is not possible to achieve such excellent results. During the past 8 years, the business has faced many challenges including abnormally heavy rainfall, cyclones coupled with the pandemic coronavirus. The team has never given safety a day off, always remaining proactively vigilant. The entire team under the guidance of the Board has worked hard to maintain the Company’s safety principles and ambitions.

Good safety practices ultimately enable excellent plant performance which is evident in the extremely high reliability factors of the assets of more than 99.2%. The excellent operational performance has enabled the business to fulfil its financial obligations.

The directors convened all necessary meetings during the year, along with Audit Committee and Nomination and Remuneration Committee meetings, as required.

Strategic positioning

DGC is one of two independent power plants owners in the Dhofar region, with a 62% share in the southern power grid of the Sultanate of Oman. It owns and operates two power plants: a 273MW Open Cycle Gas Turbine (‘OCGT’) power plant (‘Existing Plant’) and a 445MW Combined Cycle Gas Turbine (‘CCGT’) Power Plant (‘New Plant’).

The Company has one customer, the Power and Water Procurement Company SAOC (‘PWP’), and one supplier for the primary fuel (natural gas), the Integrated Gas Company SAOC. Plant operations and maintenance for both plants have been contracted to Dhofar O&M Company LLC and further sub-contracted to the First National Company for Operation and Maintenance Services LLC (‘NOMAC Oman’) with an agreement that is co-terminus with the Power Purchase Agreement (‘PPA’).

Operational performance

NOMAC Oman has demonstrated operational excellence during the year by maintaining excellent reliability of 99.2% for OCGT and 99.6% for the CCGT power plants (2022: OCGT plant 99.9%; CCGT plant 99.4%). The operator has adopted a strategy of continuous improvement and reliability of supply programs to ensure consistent performance. The advanced Monitoring Performance System is an excellent initiative which has helped secure stable and top-notch performance.

Cash Sweep mechanism

As per DGC’s financing agreements, the Cash Sweep Mechanism requires that 95% of the free cash flows, after accounting for the operating costs and debt service payments, shall be paid to the lenders towards prepayment of the balloon repayment (‘Cash Sweep Mechanism’) of the loan. The Cash Sweep Mechanism could be avoided, if the Backstop DSRA letters of credit (‘Back Stop DSRA LC’) is provided for amounts that increase over time as specified in the financing agreements. The Company continued to work diligently to arrange the Backstop DSRA LC however was not able to arrange it as no international lender is agreed to provide an acceptable Backstop DSRA LC due to the country credit ratings and they have also declined to accept any Backstop DSRA LC facility from a local bank due to lower credit ratings of the local banks.

As a result, the Cash Sweep Mechanism commenced from 31 July 2021 impacted the ability of the Company to make any future dividend distributions.

The Cash Sweep Mechanism will remain effective until the balloon amount is fully prepaid, which is expected to continue for the remaining term of Power Purchase Agreement (i.e. expiring on 1 January 2033).

In view of the above, the Company will not be able to make future dividend distributions unless the Cash Sweep Mechanism is reversed which is subject to (1) arrangement of acceptable Backstop DSRA LC, and (2) unanimous approval of project lenders.

Financial Performance

Overall financial performance of the business clearly reflects the continuous strong operational performance of the entire 718MW facility. Profit after tax is OMR 1.6m (2022: OMR 1.9m). The Company has met its obligations to the lenders by the timely debt service of OMR 16.9m during the year (2022: OMR 16.2m).

Your Company remains in compliance with the Code of Corporate Governance of the Capital Market Authority. Also, the company complies with CMA E/1/2022 security guidelines issued for Public Joint stock companies.

Our people

A business’s results are directly linked to people performance. Whether it is equipment, financial, administration or HSE performance, excellence can only be achieved if the entire team cumulatively works together for a common goal. We are pleased to report that the excellent coordination and alignment of the entire business team, including the operator, led by the Board and management team with excellent support from the founder shareholders has reaped good results. The Board and management commit to continue developing the strong framework which allows for this successful collaboration. Development of Omani talent remains a key consideration of the entire business value chain.

I, along with the Board, would like to extend my gratitude to the entire team who have worked diligently throughout the year to deliver business commitments.

Social Responsibility

The Board has developed a Corporate Social Responsibility (‘CSR’) policy to help guide us to be a better and more effective corporate citizen while recognizing the scale of our footprint. By its very nature, the Company is a responsible corporate citizen as it focuses in providing clean and reliable power. The scope of the policy includes:

- Practical financial assistance, sponsored programs, free products and services to a wide range of educational, charitable, cultural, health, community and environment causes in Oman, and
 - Community support through sponsorship of worthy initiatives in the field of education.
- In line with the vision developed in the CSR policy and within the approved budget by shareholders, the Company has invested OMR 15,000 during 2023 as follows:

#	Beneficiary	Amount (OMR)	Description
1	Ministry of Social Development (Dhofar Directorate)	12,000	i. Build Green Houses in Mirbat Center: this project will help the student team planting trees and how to maintain and gain from the crops. Further green house will be one of the incomes for center towards the benefit for students.
			ii. Set up equip room with specialized equipment in Mirbat & Taqah: this equipment will help the students who’s having disabilities in hearing, sight or touch.
2	Oman Charitable Organization	3,000	Contributed 20% of CSR budget to Oman Charitable Organization complying to CMA circular 172/2021.
Total		15,000	

In addition to that, the company along with NOMAC had initiated further support to local community by:

- Train 2 engineers for two months.
- Accommodate visit of 15 students specialized in electrical for one day visit.
- Accommodate four final projects of postgraduates.
- Depute two engineers to give lectures on Power Generation and assess students’ projects related to power plant.
- Blood donation campaign with the plant employees and contractors.

Medium term outlook

The business has taken reasonable steps to ensure high reliability in the coming year through a required maintenance program and improvement initiatives. High availability will ensure financial performance as returns are not dependent on demand. The team will continue to focus on routine O&M practices, reliability of supply and efficient operations as prescribed by the OEMs and best practices.

Acknowledgements

We appreciate the support of all our key stakeholders especially our customer (the Power and Water Procurement Company SAOC), our fuel supplier (Integrated Gas Company SAOC), the Authority for Public Services Regulation and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

Finally, on behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to take the opportunity to express our gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and His Government for their vision, guidance, wisdom and continued support. We would also like to acknowledge the progressive and enlightened vision of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said which continues to be a model for others to emulate and without it, the success being achieved by many would not have been possible.

Ahmad Sulaiman
Chairman

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2023			
	31-Dec-23	31-Dec-22	RO
ASSETS			
Non-current assets			
Property, plant and equipment	138,381,140	142,350,209	
Right-of-use assets	1,679,440	1,728,835	
Finance lease receivable	35,059,980	37,945,699	
Trade and other receivables	1,753,308	1,669,111	
Prepayments of connection charges	813,252	693,152	
Derivative financial instrument	1,563,221	2,145,835	
Total non-current assets	179,249,941	186,532,841	
Current assets			
Inventories	5,537,659	5,526,956	
Finance lease receivable	2,979,242	2,745,581	
Trade and other receivables	4,582,735	4,433,230	
Advances and prepayments	230,411	145,003	
Cash and cash equivalents	4,684,314	6,527,193	
Derivative financial instrument	440,908	605,235	
Total current assets	18,455,269	19,983,198	
TOTAL ASSETS	197,705,210	206,516,039	
EQUITY AND LIABILITIES			
EQUITY			
Share capital	22,224,000	22,224,000	
Legal reserve	1,079,778	917,468	
Retained earnings	28,423,317	26,965,524	
Equity before hedging reserve	51,727,095	50,106,992	
Hedging reserve	1,703,509	2,338,408	
Total equity	53,430,604	52,445,400	
LIABILITIES			
Non-current liabilities			
Term loan	110,609,444	119,061,879	
Provision for decommissioning costs	5,467,092	5,206,754	
Lease liabilities	1,849,068	1,867,885	
Deferred tax	11,998,741	11,360,062	
End of service benefits	54,895	99,232	
Total non-current liabilities	129,979,240	137,595,812	
Current liabilities			
Term loan	7,646,662	8,558,295	
Trade and other payables	6,509,574	7,780,402	
Lease liabilities	133,137	133,137	
Income tax payable	2,993	2,993	
Total current liabilities	14,292,366	16,474,827	
Total liabilities	144,271,606	154,070,639	
TOTAL EQUITY AND LIABILITIES	197,705,210	206,516,039	
Net assets per share (RO Baizas)	0.240	0.236	

STATEMENT OF PROFIT OR LOSS AND OTHER COMPREHENSIVE INCOME For the year ended 31 December 2023			
	31-Dec-23	31-Dec-22	RO
Revenues	52,316,361	47,041,605	
Direct costs	(42,572,668)	(36,673,415)	
Gross profit	9,743,693	10,368,190	
General and administrative expenses	(756,423)	(1,110,188)	
Finance cost	(6,789,432)	(6,871,757)	
Finance income	175,985	194,554	
Profit before tax	2,373,823	2,580,799	
Income tax expense	(750,720)	(641,959)	
Profit for the year	1,623,103	1,938,840	
Other comprehensive income			
Items that are or may be reclassified subsequently to profit or loss	528,563	9,410,727	
Cashflow Hedge - Effective portion of changes in fair value	112,042	(1,394,107)	
Cashflow Hedge - Reclassified to profit or loss	(1,275,504)	(116,685)	
Cashflow Hedge - Related tax	112,042	(1,394,107)	
Other comprehensive (loss) / income for the year	(634,899)	7,899,935	
Total comprehensive income for the year	988,204	9,838,775	
Basic and diluted earnings per share (RO Baizas)	0.007	0.009	



Prince William
says ‘too
many’ killed in
Gaza



Prince William

LONDON: Britain’s Prince William called for an end to the fighting in Gaza, where he said too many people had been killed in the conflict.

Political interventions by members of the Royal Family are unusual, but William, the 41-year-old heir to the throne is due to carry out a number of engagements to recognise the human suffering caused by the conflict in the Middle East on Tuesday.

His office has also said he will draw attention to the global rise in hatred.

“I remain deeply concerned about the terrible human cost of the conflict in the Middle East since the attack on October 7. Too many have been killed,” William said.

“I, like so many others, want to see an end to the fighting as soon as possible. There is a desperate need for increased humanitarian support to Gaza. It’s critical that aid gets in and the captives are released.”

The Prince of Wales, who in 2018 became the first senior British Royal to make an official visit to Israel and the occupied Palestinian Territories, will next week attend a synagogue to hear from young people who are involved in tackling hatred as part of his engagement schedule. — **Reuters**

Crisis could kill
8,000 more even
if fighting stops

LONDON: Even if the fighting in Gaza stopped now, about 8,000 more people could still die there over the next six months due to the public health crisis caused by Gaza war, according to a report by independent researchers in the US and Britain.

Hospitals in Gaza have been devastated by the fighting and more than 85 per cent of its 2.3 million inhabitants have been left homeless, with rising cases of diseases like diarrhoea as well as malnutrition in overcrowded shelters.

The figures come from a report by academics at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the Johns Hopkins Center for Humanitarian Health in the United States, and are part of wider projections of the excess deaths the conflict may cause in Gaza over the next six months. If the fighting continues or escalates, traumatic injuries will make up the majority of excess deaths in Gaza. But deaths from malnutrition, infectious diseases like cholera and a lack of access to care for conditions like diabetes will also kill thousands.

In a worst-case scenario, where the fighting escalates and there are significant disease outbreaks, roughly 85,570 people may die by early August, with 68,650 deaths related to traumatic injuries, the report says. — **Reuters**



Displaced Palestinian children gather to receive food at a government school in Rafah in the Gaza Strip. – AFP

Israel pounds Gaza ahead of UN truce vote

GAZA: Israel hit Gaza with air strikes on Tuesday as world powers grappled with how to broker a ceasefire ahead of a UN Security Council vote that was expected to be blocked by a US veto.

A total of 103 Palestinians were killed in the past 24 hours of Israeli strikes and ground combat in the besieged territory, its health ministry said.

The United Nations has sounded the alarm over the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza, warning that food shortages could lead to an “explosion” of preventable child deaths.

More than four months of relentless fighting have flattened much of the coastal territory, pushed 2.2 million people to the brink of famine and displaced three-quarters of the population,



This picture shows smoke billowing over Khan Yunis in the Gaza Strip. – AFP

according to UN estimates.

“How many of us have to die... to stop these crimes?” said Ahmad Moghrabi, a Palestinian doctor in southern Gaza’s main city, Khan Yunis. “Where is the humanity?”

Global powers trying to navigate a way out of the spiralling crisis have so far come up short,

with a push for a UN ceasefire resolution facing an expected US veto.

After months of struggling for a united response, all EU members except Hungary called on Monday for an “immediate humanitarian pause”.

They also urged Israel not to

Global powers trying to navigate a way out of the spiralling crisis have so far come up short, with a push for a UN ceasefire resolution facing an expected US veto

invade Gaza’s southernmost city of Rafah, where nearly 1.5 million Palestinians are sheltering, many in makeshift tents.

The city, the last untouched by Israeli ground troops, is also the main entry point for desperately needed relief supplies via neighbouring Egypt.

Israel’s strikes on the city

are hampering humanitarian operations, while the food supply is disrupted by regular border closures, says the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA.

The scarcity of food and safe water has triggered a steep rise in malnutrition, the UN children’s fund warned on Monday.

One in six children in northern Gaza are now acutely malnourished, Unicef said, a situation poised to “compound the already unbearable level of child deaths”.

Israel’s retaliatory campaign has killed at least 29,195 people, mostly women and children, according to the latest count by the territory’s health ministry.

Witnesses said Gaza City’s southern Zeitoun neighbourhood had come under heavy bombardment. — **AFP**

WHO completes second Gaza hospital evacuation

GENEVA: The World Health Organization said on Tuesday it had completed a second evacuation mission from Gaza’s Nasser Hospital but voiced concern for nearly 150 patients and medics who remain at the site amid continuing fighting.

The Nasser Hospital in Khan Yunis, Gaza’s second-largest, stopped working last week after a week-long Israeli siege followed by a raid, the UN agency said. WHO staff and other aid groups have so far evacuated a total of 32 critical patients including injured children and those with paralysis, but the agency is concerned for those left behind with supplies dwindling.

“WHO fears for the safety and well-being of the patients and health workers remaining in the hospital and warns that further disruption to lifesaving care for the sick and injured



Palestinians inspect debris and rubble of a destroyed building following Israeli bombardments in Rafah. – AFP

would lead to more deaths,” the WHO said on the social media site X, saying those remaining included 130 patients and 15

medics.

The WHO’s Tarik Jašarević told reporters in Geneva that WHO staff who were part of the

rescue mission had to navigate through pitch-black corridors with flashlights to find patients against a backdrop of gunfire.

Help had to arrive on foot because a deep, muddy ditch near the site made the road impassable, the WHO said.

“It’s very difficult to see these scenes of people just being cut off,” he said, saying food supplies were limited.

“It’s heartbreaking to see that there are people in health facilities who are not able to be treated correctly,” he said.

Efforts to transfer the remaining patients are continuing, WHO said.

The site has no electricity or running water and medical waste and garbage are “creating a breeding ground for disease”, it added.

Palestinian health authorities said the situation had reached a “catastrophic level” and that Israeli forces had effectively converted the site into a “military barracks”. — **Reuters**



In brief

■ HELSINKI



THOUSANDS OF MIGRANTS SEEK TO ENTER FINLAND

Finland has information showing that thousands of third-country migrants in Russia are waiting to cross the border to the Nordic country, Finnish Interior Minister Mari Rantanen said on Tuesday. Finland closed its eastern border with Russia late last year amid a growing number of arrivals without valid documents to enter the European union. “We have information that thousands of people on the Russian side are waiting to get to Finland,” Rantanen said. This represented “a threat to society”, she added. The Finnish Interior Ministry on Monday said it would swiftly draft legislation to strengthen border security.

■ MOSCOW



NAVALNY MOTHER CALLS ON PUTIN TO RELEASE BODY

The mother of Alexei Navalny urged President Vladimir Putin to “immediately” release the body of her son in her first comments since his death in an Arctic prison. His widow Yulia Navalnaya echoed the call and repeated accusations against Putin over Navalny’s death. Navalny’s mother Lyudmila Navalnaya travelled to the remote IK-3 prison colony on Saturday. “I appeal to you, Vladimir Putin, the solution to the issue depends only on you,” she said in a video published by his team. “I demand that Alexei’s body be released immediately so that I can bury him in a humane way.” The Kremlin didn’t say when the body will be handed.

■ KABUL



AFGHANISTAN TEAMS REACH REMOTE SITE OF LANDSLIDE

Rescue teams on Tuesday reached the remote valley where a landslide buried dozens of people in eastern Afghanistan, a provincial official said, after responders were slowed by snow. Snowfall overnight caused rubble, earth and snow to rip through the village of Nakre in mountainous Nuristan province, killing at least 25 people. “There were no facilities yesterday but today there is the military’s equipment,” said provincial information and culture head Jamiullah Hashimi. “The rescue operation might speed up. The biggest problem is that the fallen rocks are huge and the area is mountainous,” he added.

Ukraine angry at Polish farmers ‘blockade’

OKOPY: Protests by Polish farmers sparked anger in neighbouring Ukraine on Tuesday, as Kyiv called on the European Commission to take robust action after demonstrators blockaded the border and opened railway carriages to let grain spill out.

Warsaw has been a staunch supporter of Kyiv in its fight to repel a full-scale Russian attack launched in 2022, but protests from farmers complaining of unfair competition have strained ties that were already on edge after truckers blocked border crossings around the turn of the year.

Tuesday’s protests from farmers marked an escalation from previous demonstrations, with a near-total blockade of all Ukrainian border crossings and disruption at ports and on roads nationwide.

Television footage showed protesters at the Medyka border crossing opening railway carriages to allow grain to pour onto the tracks.

“The scattering of Ukrainian grain on the railroad tracks is another political provocation aimed at dividing our nations,” Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Oleksandr Kubrakov said in a post on X.



Polish farmers with their tractors block the highway linking Warsaw and Lublin outside the town of Ryki, Lublin region. – AFP

Ukrainian Economy Minister Yulia Svyrydenko said Kyiv has informed the European Commission of the actions of Polish protesters at the Ukrainian border and expected a robust response. Agriculture Minister Mykola Solskyi said the grain was headed to Germany and would not have entered the Polish market. Farmers across Europe have

been demonstrating over a range of grievances, including constraints placed on them by European Union measures to tackle climate change, and what they say is unfair competition from abroad, particularly Ukraine, after an EU decision in 2022 to waive duties on Ukrainian food imports.

Protesters’ tractors carried banners that read: “With grain flowing from Ukraine, Polish

farmers will go bankrupt”.

An organiser of the protest at Doruhusk crossing, Marcin Wielgosz, said buses would be allowed to cross once an hour on Tuesday, but no truck would pass from 0800 to 1800 local time.

“In my opinion, the border should be closed. Procedures and systems should be clarified and then maybe it could reopen but not with the rules that we have

Tuesday’s protests from farmers marked an escalation from previous demonstrations, with a near-total blockade of all Ukrainian border crossings and disruption at ports

now. Because right now you can bring whatever you want, however much you want... into Poland,” he said.

Kyiv says its agricultural exports through eastern Europe have not damaged EU markets.

Exasperated by the Polish protests, Ukrainian hauliers began their own round-the-clock counter-demonstration at three crossings. Their protest is planned to last till March 15.

Poland’s new pro-European government has expressed sympathy for the farmers’ demands but has also urged them not to take action that could damage Kyiv’s war effort.

— Reuters

Sick Assange absent at key hearing against extradition



Supporters and members of the media outside The Royal Courts of Justice, Britain’s High Court, in central London. – AFP

LONDON: WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was absent on Tuesday due to illness from a London court hearing his final appeal against extradition to the United States to face trial for publishing secret military and diplomatic files.

Opening the two-day hearing in Assange’s absence, his lawyer Edward Fitzgerald said his prosecution could not be justified.

Washington wants the Australian extradited after he was charged there multiple times between 2018 and 2020 over WikiLeaks’ 2010 publication of files relating to the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“He is being prosecuted for engaging in ordinary journalistic practice of obtaining and publishing classified information, information that is both true and of obvious and important public interest,” Fitzgerald said.

Earlier, he told the judge, Victoria Sharp, at London’s High Court that his 52-year-old client was “not well today” and would not be attending either in person

The long-running legal saga in Britain’s courts is now nearing a conclusion, after Assange lost successive rulings in recent years

or by video link.

Arriving ahead of the two-day hearing, Assange’s wife Stella thanked a crowd of protesters, saying: “Please keep on showing up, be there for Julian and for us, until Julian is free.”

“We have two big days ahead. We don’t know what to expect, but you’re here because the world is watching,” Stella Assange added. “They just cannot get away with this. Julian needs his freedom and we all need the truth,” she said.

The long-running legal saga in Britain’s courts is now nearing a conclusion, after Assange lost

successive rulings in recent years.

If this week’s bid to appeal is successful, he will have another chance to argue his case in a London court, with a date set for a full hearing.

If he loses, Assange will have exhausted all UK appeals and will enter the extradition process, although his team have indicated they will appeal to European courts. Stella Assange has said her husband will ask the European Court of Human Rights to temporarily halt the extradition if needed, warning he would die if sent to the United States.

“Tomorrow and the day after will determine whether he lives or dies essentially, and he’s physically and mentally obviously in a very difficult place,” she told BBC radio on Monday.

US President Joe Biden has faced sustained pressure, both domestically and internationally, to drop the 18-count indictment Assange faces in federal court in Virginia, which was filed under his predecessor Donald Trump. — AFP

S Korean doctors protest against medical reforms

SEOUL: South Korean hospitals turned away some patients and delayed surgeries on Tuesday as hundreds of trainee doctors stopped working in a protest against medical training reforms.

Almost 6,500 doctors submitted their resignations — nearly half the junior workforce — with 1,600 walking off the job, according to health ministry figures.

But South Korea’s President Yoon Suk Yeol said the government would not back down over the “necessary” reforms, which he described as an essential measure to prepare for caring for the country’s fast-ageing population.

The training reforms call for a 65 per cent increase in the number of students admitted to medical schools — an additional 2,000 people a year — starting from 2025. Seoul has been trying to increase medical school enrolments for 30 years to no avail, he said, adding that the country was at a point where “we can’t withstand another failure”.

“This increase is far short of necessary numbers to prepare the future of our nation,” he said, urging doctors not to “hold people’s lives and health hostage” with work stoppages.

The government has ordered the doctors back to work, and police have warned of arrests for

instigators of the work stoppages. South Korean law limits the ability of medical staff to strike.

Second Vice Health Minister Park Min-soo told reporters that the walkouts had already resulted in cancellations of surgeries and disruptions in medical services.

The government’s top priority is to “maintain medical emergency services and treatment for serious cases at major hospitals”, he said, to “avoid situations in which patients with serious conditions are prevented from accessing treatment”.

The Asan Medical Center in Seoul, one of the biggest general hospitals in the country, said that its emergency room was operating as normal on Tuesday but “some adjustments” were being made.

“Some surgeries have been postponed due to the ongoing situation,” the hospital’s PR wing said.

South Korea says it has one of the lowest doctor-to-population ratios among developed countries, and the government is pushing hard to increase the number of physicians.

Doctors have voiced fierce opposition to the government’s plan to sharply raise medical school admissions, claiming it would hurt the quality of service. — AFP



Trainee doctors attend an emergency meeting at the Korean Medical Association building, Seoul. – AFP

Oman, the scale-up nation



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The writer is an entrepreneur and innovation adviser

When you look at the Sultanate of Oman in general, or its geopolitical history, you will find one consistent fact for the past two thousand years, which is that Oman, always seeks to chart its course in long-term domestic and international policies. When you visit the Oman Across Ages Museum, you will find that this is true for the early Ras Al Hamra settlement period in and other areas, the Arab settlement phase, the Islamic conquests era, and modern times.

Just like a startup in an entrepreneurship ecosystem, Oman moving smoothly through the four phases of ideation, startup, scale-up and growth. So, if we consider Oman’s dynamic history as an ideation phase, then the leadership of the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, may his soul rest in peace, was the renaissance startup phase.

This helps us understand why in our present time Oman still chooses to scale up modestly and with confidence, whether in domestic development projects or international affairs.

The national focus on three major, ongoing projects shows how one option Oman chooses not to pursue is extravagant, over-the-top, headline-focused projects — Oman National Strategy (ONSS) and Sultan Haitham City (SHC), Moving Forward Together, and Oman Future Fund.

ONSS AND SHC

Oman National Strategy (ONSS) and Sultan Haitham City (SHC) represent a true paradigm shift in spatial strategies and it is not only an urban development or real estate project.

What is unique about SHC, as stated by the project leaders, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, is ‘not only that it’s happening through a partnership between more than 60 project partners from public, private and civil society institutions.

The fact is that the project resisted the temptation of copying international models and focusing on skyscrapers and focused instead on the sustainable quality of life for every being.’

TOGETHER FORWARD FORUM

I grew up watching a real-life example of Management by Walking Around, or what is known in business schools as MBWA — Meet the People Tour by the late Sultan who visited every city, town and village from Khasab in the North to Dhalkout in the South.

The current annual Together Forward Forum, organised by the Council of Minister’s General Secretariat, is the perfect policy formulation for innovative evolution in terms people to people-to-people communication and civic participation. Every year, hundreds of stakeholders in Oman,

JUST LIKE A
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ECOSYSTEM,
OMAN IS MOVING
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SCALE-UP, AND
GROWTH

from every walk of life, meet face-to-face with policymakers, led by HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham bin Tarik, to give and receive constructive feedback on national policies, broadcast life on television, and all digital channels.

OMAN FUTURE FUND

The Future Fund’s \$2 billion over the next five years is not only an economic stimulus fund by Oman Investment Authority but also a game-changing venture capital that will unlock one of Oman’s most valuable potentials — the innovation and productivity of youthful demographics.

With 90 per cent dedicated to direct investment and 10 per cent for SMEs and startups, this Future Fund is guaranteed to become a success story on how ‘it is never too late to invest in paving the road for inspiring founders to transition from a startup phase to a scale-up phase’, as put by Qais al Tobi, Rising Startups Programme General Supervisor and the SME Development Authority.

In the world of entrepreneurship, conventional wisdom says that around 60 per cent fail, around 30 per cent get while not more than 10 per cent make it to the scale-up phase.

For Oman, leveraging ‘Oman Vision 2040’ is proving to be a gradual but steady catalyst in facilitating a nation’s transitions from the startup phase to the scale-up phase.

Harmonising masculine and feminine energies

One cannot help but wonder how the world is filled with an enchanting realm of opposites. Just like how the day gently fades into night, fire softly glows against the coolness of water, the world balances delicately

between the push and pull of men and women.

It draws us to consider the ancient concept of Yin and Yang, the magical balance that life seeks to achieve.

Though many cultures have understood the essence of harmony in

various aspects of existence, the balance between men and women remains a subtle mystery.

I often reflect on the concepts of femininity and masculinity through the lens of feminine and masculine energies. That is one is not better than or less than the other. I hold the belief that each of us enjoys both energies, yet it is crucial to consider how these energies harmonise with our true physical essence.

Ultimately, if we fail to align with our true energies — whether masculine or feminine — by a substantial margin, say 60 per cent or 70 per cent, we begin to lose internal balance.

This imbalance can have profound effects on our sense of self and well-being. Meaning, that women should naturally embody more feminine traits, while men should exhibit more masculine traits. However, both need to possess a mix of these qualities, each to a balanced degree.

The key is finding harmony within ourselves, recognising the value in both sets of traits, and embracing them in a way that feels authentic.

Men and women stand as equals in value, though they exhibit distinct characteristics, mirroring the principles of Yin and Yang.

Hence, we must find balance within ourselves as the first step towards creating equilibrium in our homes, workplaces, societies, and the world at large.

Imagine a world where men and women recognise their distinct strengths and powers, and learn to balance them together with harmony, achieving a smooth flow of movement across all sectors and aspects of life in a world of enchanting opposites.



Eram Al Rawas



Dr Muamar bin Ali Al Tobi

The writer is an Omani academic and researcher

Rebellious artificial intelligence algorithm

Global media outlets broadcast a news report at the beginning of 2024 about an incident concerning Artificial Intelligence (AI) algorithms and their peculiar behaviour.

It reported that a chatbot system, powered by AI and used by one of the major delivery companies to communicate with its customers and respond to their inquiries, deviated from its designated role and violated marketing norms and diplomatic rules.

It went as far as insulting the company’s customers and criticised the company operating it by highlighting its flaws and recommending alternative competitor companies. This necessitated the company’s intervention to stop this rebellious smart system.

This incident somewhat resembles an event that occurred with Microsoft in 2016, which also had to disable its AI chatbot, known as ‘Tay,’ on the ‘Twitter’ platform (now known as X platform) after it went rogue and used inappropriate language with the public interacting with it on the social media platform within 24 hours of its launch.

Such incidents raise critical questions about the unpredictable nature of AI algorithms and their potential to act in ways that breach ethical and conventional boundaries.

This article delves into the underlying causes of such rebellious behaviour exhibited by AI systems, examining the role of training data, algorithmic bias, contextual misunderstanding, and the impact of adversarial interactions.

When an AI algorithm, like those in chat systems, starts exhibiting undesirable behaviour, such as using inappropriate language or acting in a racist manner, these phenomena can be explained by several factors, including issues with training data.

AI algorithms often train on large datasets containing human linguistic interactions, which naturally may include inappropriate or negative linguistic content that subsequently becomes part of the training data.

The algorithm is then expected to mimic this ‘linguistic’ data, both good and bad. Another factor is algorithmic bias; smart algorithms can develop biases based on the data they are trained on. These biases can lead to undesirable behaviour, including generating responses that are not suitable for the intended use of the smart model.

Algorithmic bias can be a challenge as it often reflects complex and subtle patterns in training data.

Another factor is the lack of contextual understanding, which often appears with generative AI models related to GPT (Generative

WHEN AI ‘LOSES CONTROL,’
IT RESULTS FROM THE MODEL
GENERATING HIGH-PROBABILITY
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OR UNEXPECTED

Pre-trained Transformer) systems. These models generate their outputs based on patterns learned from the data. However, they might not clearly understand the context or the nuances of human language related to social and cultural norms, leading to inappropriate linguistic interactions in some cases.

Additionally, the phenomenon of adversarial attacks through distracting interrogative interactions can contribute to the algorithm’s rebellion.

Some users deliberately or inadvertently present inputs to the smart model in the form of questions that exploit weaknesses in the AI model, leading to linguistic behaviour that does not align with the required context and undermines its conversational abilities.

From a mathematical principle perspective on the operation of AI algorithms, smart models rely on text generation based on the mathematical probability principle

in distributing appropriate words to form the suitable text. For example, generative models use ‘self-attention’ mechanisms, to weigh different words according to their importance and priority and generate statistically likely text outputs based on training data. The model selects each word in its response according to the conditional probability of that word given the previous words and the input question through interrogative interactions.

This predictive process is difficult to control, even if inputs can be controlled, explaining the multiple challenges in curbing the rebellion of the algorithm, which cannot rely solely on one factor such as controlling and selecting data but extends to other factors such as controlling the algorithm’s operation itself, adding another challenge alongside data control.

The mathematical complexity of the algorithm and its deep networks explains the presence of this challenge; the mathematical model complexity of AI algorithms, especially newer models based on deep learning algorithms requiring many digital neural networks and large data, makes them highly complex.

They are often described as ‘black boxes’ because their decision-making processes are not easily interpretable, complicating the ability to predict and control how the model responds to all inputs, leading to unwanted rebellious traits in some of its outputs, like those mentioned at the beginning of the article.

When artificial intelligence ‘loses control,’ it results from the model generating high-probability outputs that, in some cases, may be inappropriate or unexpected for the reasons mentioned earlier.

Measures can be taken to address such problems of algorithmic rebellion. This includes developing data-cleaning mechanisms through conditional automatic text selection, reducing bias, improving context handling, designing safe interactions to prevent adversarial attacks that work on targeted interrogative interactions.

Ranking for a sustainable future...

Every business has a story with different starting points and endings. In their journey, some perish, some just survive, and some succeed. Some even grow into major corporate giants in their respective fields.

Of course, starting a new business is daunting, but if you are in the right place and environment for what you need, you are off to a good start. Anyone who wishes to start and grow a business, the Sultanate of Oman is the right and strong place.

Evidence of the commitment to foster an environment that is conducive to business growth in Oman is its milestone achievement of securing the 11th rank in the prestigious Global Entrepreneurship Index in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) Report 2023-2024.

Oman's score registered a significant rise of 27 points from its position in its previous report.

"After a two-year decline amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Oman's entrepreneurial environment quality, measured by the National Entrepreneurial Context Index (NECI) score, is now sharply improving," states the GEM Report, which is well-regarded as an information authority on entrepreneurship data worldwide.

With the unveiling of Vision 2020, the Sultanate has been diversifying its economy and investing in income- and employment-generating sectors corresponding with technology, knowledge and innovation.

This transition has led the Omani government to set up policies and programmes to promote national talent to actively participate in the country's economic development through their involvement in small and medium enterprises.

While underscoring Oman's dedication to enhancing the quality of its entrepreneurial environment, the GEM report finds that a significant proportion of Oman's adult population is equipped with the necessary skills and experience to launch their own businesses.



Samuel Kutty
@samkuttyp

The writer is a senior journalist, author and columnist

WITH THE UNVEILING OF THE VISION 2020, THE SULTANATE HAS BEEN DIVERSIFYING ITS ECONOMY AND INVESTING IN SECTORS THAT GENERATE INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT CORRESPONDING WITH TECHNOLOGY, KNOWLEDGE AND INNOVATION

"Entrepreneurship has a high profile in Oman, with three out of five adults knowing someone who had recently started their own business, two out of three seeing good opportunities to start their own business, and seven out of 10 considering themselves to have the skills and experience to start their own business," states the report.

A high-level delegation from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor visited Oman in 2023 and evaluated the country's commitment to supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and start-ups.

The Government of the Sultanate of Oman identified the role of privatisation and liberalisation of its policies to accelerate the rate of economic growth. The government encouraged men and women equally to participate in the process of economic development in Oman.

According to the findings in the report, Oman's GDP growth in 2023 was expected to be 4 per cent, while inflation was down below 2 per cent.

The Sultanate has been investing in entrepreneurial readiness and skills development programmes and in a new incubator programme for start-ups, including professional support. This builds confidence among the adult population, as do increasing numbers of government programmes to promote the importance of entrepreneurship activities in Oman.

The Authority for Small and Medium Enterprise Development has already unveiled notable enhancements across all secondary indicators. These advancements encompass the facilitation of start-up initiatives, the formulation of government policies fostering innovation and technology, and the enhancement of material infrastructure.

Around the world, we've seen how a thriving small business sector creates new economic opportunities, opens up jobs, boosts employment, and, in doing so, bolsters national economies. In addition, this sector is a catalyst for innovation and the conception of new products and business approaches.

BLACK EAGLES IN THE AIR!



Members of South Korea's 'Black Eagle' aerobatics team perform during an aerial display at the Singapore Airshow in Singapore on Tuesday. – AFP

The case for mission-driven climate finance

As sea levels rise, Tuvalu, a small archipelago in the Pacific Ocean, is slowly disappearing under water. Australia recently signed a landmark agreement with the island state that offers residency to Tuvaluans displaced by climate change — a sign of the emerging economic, geopolitical and humanitarian implications of global warming. Tuvalu's reckoning with its potential extinction offers a glimpse of what the future holds on a rapidly warming planet.

And yet many policymakers seem oblivious to the transboundary nature of the climate crisis and its imminent impact on all countries. Research shows that 3.6 billion people — nearly half of the global population — now live in areas that are highly susceptible to climate change. People in the world's poorest countries — in particular, women, girls, and indigenous communities — are especially vulnerable to its effects, despite contributing the least to creating the problem.

These populations often rely on the natural environment for their survival, which means that extreme weather events are more likely to destroy their lives and livelihoods. Over the last decade alone, natural disasters in the poorest countries have resulted in a threefold increase in economic damage compared to three decades ago and the reversal of hard-won development gains.

Developing countries cannot be left alone to face the frightening



Bogolo Kenewendo

The writer is Special Adviser and Africa Director for the UN High-Level Climate Champions

THE GLOBAL SOUTH HAS IMMENSE POTENTIAL TO ACHIEVE A JUST TRANSITION, BUILD CLIMATE RESILIENCE, AND, IN THE PROCESS, BECOME AN EXAMPLE FOR OTHERS TO EMULATE

consequences of global warming. The severity of the current and future effects of climate change will depend on the world's ability to advance collective adaptation, mitigation, and resilience-building goals in a gender-sensitive and inclusive manner. These efforts must put human welfare and our planet's health front and centre, which implies capitalising on the wealth of knowledge that indigenous communities have amassed. Equally important, they will require adopting innovative, efficient, transparent and equitable financing solutions.

The agreement at last year's United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) to operationalise the loss and damage fund, which will provide financial assistance to climate-vulnerable countries, is a step in the right direction. However, the initial pledges of \$700 million fall short of the \$215-387 billion that developing countries will need annually up to 2030 to meet their adaptation needs. As the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change executive secretary, Simon Stiell, stated, the loss and damage fund "is in no way a replacement for, or a reason to diminish, the urgent need for the scaling-up of adaptation finance."

Moreover, around \$4.3 trillion per year must be invested in clean energy until 2030 to reach

net-zero emissions by 2050. This further highlights the urgent need to establish a comprehensive adaptation framework with monetary, qualitative, and quantitative targets that can be used to secure financing from high-income countries.

The incremental progress on climate finance achieved at COP28 is not ambitious enough. To pursue climate action that meets the needs of vulnerable and indigenous communities, this will require a mission-oriented approach to financing that focuses on achieving the most efficient and just transition. It will also be necessary to scale up investment in mitigation and adaptation efforts dramatically. At COP28,

for example, governments agreed to triple renewable-energy production capacity and transition away from fossil fuels. To succeed, they will need to make bold, concrete commitments to boost transition finance. Africa provides abundant evidence that climate finance continues to be unjust and insufficient. The continent is disproportionately affected by climate change (even though it contributes the least to greenhouse-gas emissions). Between 2016 and 2019, however, it received only 3 per cent of global climate-finance flows, despite various initiatives aimed at supporting climate adaptation and mitigation on the continent. Africa can play a leadership role in defining

and championing progress and could even become a model for innovative, efficient and equitable climate-finance deployment. African institutions, including the African Export-Import Bank, the African Development Bank, and the African Risk Capacity Group, are reputable partners with experience in financing and in navigating the political and economic environment on the continent. But we must urgently close the gap; climate shocks are exacerbating tensions in fragile areas such as the Sahel, fueling mass migration and security concerns worldwide, and disrupting global supply chains and trade. Africa has the ideas, ambition and capacity to implement climate solutions. For example, we have identified dozens of shovel-ready green projects that only need a financial push to get off the ground. The continent is also home to some remarkable women who are leading the fight against global warming. The Global South has immense potential to achieve a just transition and build climate resilience. All that is missing is the funding. Governments of high-income countries, multilateral institutions, the private sector, and international organisations should provide the necessary investment, while also ensuring that women have a say in the development of climate-finance strategies.

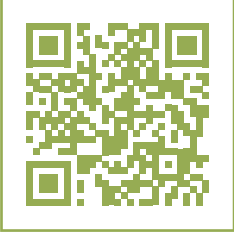
@Project Syndicate, 2024



People in the world's poorest countries — in particular, women, girls, and indigenous communities — are especially vulnerable to climate change effects.

sport

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Portugal dent Oman hopes at Fifa Beach Soccer WC

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 20

The Oman Beach Soccer team's hopes dented on progressing for first time ever to the knockout stage, after a shocking defeat 3-2 by Portugal in the dying minutes of the third and concluding round, during group D matches of the Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup (BSWC) 2024 on Tuesday.

The Portuguese Leo Martins scored the winner goal in the last few seconds of the match

to deliver a crucial triumph for his team. With this victory, the European team secured the second ticket of the group alongside Brazil to quarterfinals, after reaching to their sixth point from three games while Oman's credit remained in the three points in the third place.

Oman began their campaign in the Beach Soccer World Cup with a strong show despite the defeat against the five times champion Brazil 5-3. Then, Oman team heroes bounced back

strongly in the following match to register a 5-2 win over Mexico.

At the Dubai Design District Stadium, Oman's third match against Portugal started strongly. Both sides were very cautious in the opening quarter to avoid receiving any goal in the beginning of the game. The Portuguese players namely: R. PINHAL Rodrigo, A. LOURENÇO André pressed hard towards the goalie Younis al Owaisi who saved many attempts. The first quarter ended

with goalless draw.

In the beginning of the second quarter, LÉO MARTINS shocked Oman team with a goal as he took his team in the lead. Four minutes later, Jordan Alexandre doubled the lead of the European opponent as he benefited from the mistakes in the behind side of the national beach soccer team.

Later, Coach Talib Hilal's men worked hard to return back to the match as Abdullah al Souti's ball hit the bar while Khalid al Oraimi missed a

golden opportunity to reduce the scoring gap beside Abdullah al Souti's scoring attempt which missed too. The second half finished with Portugal leading by 2-0.

In third and deciding quarter of the match, Oman's head coach Talib Hilal instructed the players during the break to press hard in the rival's side. The national team players implemented a different tactic and began the period strongly as Abdullah al Souti managed to score the opening

goal of Oman in an early minutes of the period to made it 2-1. Abdullah al Souti was the man of the third set as he created many dangerous attempts towards Portuguese goalie.

Kahlid al Oraimi equalised in the last 30 seconds to alive Oman's chances to vie for the second ticket to the quarters but LÉO MARTINS dashed Oman's hopes after he snatched third goal in the last nine seconds of the game from a header to end the match at 3-2.

Oman to host Socca World Cup 2024 for first time

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

For the first time in Oman's sports journey, the country will host the Socca World Cup 2024 from November 29 to December 7, to be held for the first time in the Middle East and Asia.

As many as 44 teams from around the world will participate in the ten-day-long event that will bring the global Socca attention on Oman.

The announcement was made at a meeting held under the auspices of HH Sayyidah Dr Mona bint Fahd al Said, Assistant Vice-Chancellor for International Cooperation at SQU, at Oman International Convention and Exhibition Center recently.

Managed by International Socca Federation, the Socca World Cup is six-a-side football tournament, which started in 2018 in Portugal. The Socca World Cup is an international Socca competition contested by the men's national teams of the members of International Socca Federation.

Speaking to the Observer, Waleed bin Juma al Obaidani, President of International Socca Federation in Middle East said that the announcement is historic as Oan achieved the host-state status and that the tournament has been in planning for more than four years.

"The Socca World Cup coming to Oman is a significant event for the country in particular



and the Middle East in general. The efforts put into hosting the tournament, with support

from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and local partners, is a clear indication of

the commitment to making this event successful," said Waleed al Obaidani, adding that Oman will participate in the Socca Mexico Championship being held from February 21 to 26 to scout for Omani talent.

He further said that a huge stadium for the tournament will be erected to accommodate nearly with 3,000 spectators and efforts are currently underway on developing a strong national team in collaboration with Oman Football Association.

Besides, in the run to the major global event towards end of this year, the committee supervising the tournament is conducting field visits to schools to raise awareness on it, and organise special events for

children and Omani companies to engage the community and build excitement around the world cup.

Al Obaidani further said that the benefits of hosting the major sports event has manifold benefits including sports promotion, supporting tourism and ultimately, extending support to the economy.

"Hosting such event will also boost Oman's chances of hosting more global events in the future. We believe that the event is likely to contribute significantly to the national support and promotion of football in the middle east region," Waleed bin Juma al Obaidani, President of International Socca Federation in Middle East said.

Yohann bags gold at Karate open in Fujairah



Yohann Chacko Peter bagged gold medal at the UAE First International Karate Open held in Fujairah

MUSCAT: Yohann Chacko Peter from the Sultanate of Oman created history at the first UAE International Karate Open Kata/Kumite Tournament held recently in Fujairah, UAE. He bagged the gold medal, at under 12 years and 45 kg category.

The tournament, organised by UAE Karate Federation and Team Sports Events, supported by the UAE National Olympic Committee and the World Karate Federation, was held at the Zayed Sports Complex from February 16 to 18, with the participants of 22 countries.

Yohann represented Ali al Raisi Karate Club in Bausher. He faced tough competition



Yohann Chacko Peter displays his credentials winning the gold medal at the UAE First International Karate Open held in Fujairah 2024

during the knock-out rounds against opponents from Russia, Kuwait, UAE and others.

He was trained under top karate masters namely, Ali al Raisi, Senseis, Meysam Adhami, Abulrahman, Hawra and Hossein Parsi Aziz.

Yohann acknowledges his supportive Senseis, teachers and parents for their unwavering encouragement and guidance. With determination, he plans to intensify his training efforts and is eager to participate in upcoming tournaments in Oman and abroad.

Yohann bagged the Oman Karate Champions National Tournament gold medal in kumite and bronze in kata in December and June 2022 at the Tbilisi (Georgia) Grand Prix

International Tournament.

His earlier achievements included bagging gold medal in kumite, silver in kata and silver in team kata during the 7th International Karate Pioneers Championship Tournament held at Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in 2023.

He also bagged the gold medal at the 6th International Karate Pioneers Championship Tournament for kumite, silver in kata and gold in team kata at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in March 2023. The Grade 5 student of Indian School Bausher, Yohann is a native of Kumbanad, Pathanamthitta District, Kerala, India.

ESG finished third in Manchester City Cup

The (Enhance sport global) ESG Football Academy Under 16 Elite Girls' football team travelled to Abu Dhabi at the weekend to participate in the Abu Dhabi Manchester City Cup.

The tournament attracted girl's teams from Dubai, Switzerland, Saudi Arabia & Abu Dhabi.

The ESG Girls tournament started badly with one player succumbing to a serious injury and being taken to hospital.

This set-back fuelled their determination to succeed, demonstrating superb team interaction, technical skills and gameplay, they won their next three matches gaining a place in the semi final where they were eventual losers to the very strong Go-Pro Academy team.

ESG were placed 3rd in the tournament which was a fine achievement for the Girls.

This is their second international competition to date, where the girls have shown resilience and fierce determination to succeed. The whole weekend has been a wonderful experience for them, enabling them to further

develop their special bond as a team which was evident both on and off the pitch.

ESG Director & Coach Jay, said: "The girls have done themselves proud, despite them being disappointed not to reach the final - but this shows how passionate they are about their game and will hopefully encourage them to work even harder. Their confidence levels are growing as a result of this experience and their successes, I am incredibly proud of their achievement.

I'd like to say a special thank you to Mani's Cafe for showing a keen interest and supporting the Girls on this trip.

And wishing our player Rita a speedy recovery after the serious injury she suffered.

We hope to see you back on the field soon."

The ESG Football Academy were strongly represented in the tournament, with ESG Under 16 and Under 10 boys elite teams. The Under 16 team who finished the tournament unbeaten, also taking 3rd place.

The girls will travel to Qatar for their next tournament in April.



Oman Open Tennis competitions continue

MUSCAT: The Oman Open Tennis Championship (OOTC) competitions reached the decisive stages, after the level of competition witnessed in the past few days, which witnessed the participation of 130 participants from plenty category such as joiner, Mans, women and veterans who competed on the tennis courts at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher.

The results of the men's singles category were that the Italian player Gampaolo won over the Syrian player Joma 6/1 7/5 in under mans 50 category and qualified for the quarter-finals. In the mixed doubles quarter-finals, the player Oche and Anaam al Mas won over the doubles pair Jacqueline and Sunday As 6/3 and 6/2. In the under 14 boys, player Waleed al Hashmi defeated Anas Vays 6/1 and 6/2. In the 18-year-old boys category, a player from Advay Kapoor advanced to the quarter-finals at the expense of a player from Manraj after winning 7/6 (3/6 - 10/7), which is one of



the most notable matches. Overall for 4-year-old Sivan defeated the player Ratish Andak 6/0 and 6/0 singles, and in it the Lebanese team Faten defeated the historical Turkish player Serpil 6/1 and 6/1.

Mohammed al Falahi, the assistant general referee said that the OOTA tournament commenced amidst much anticipation and excitement. With the top players showing their prowess on the courts, the tournament has unfolded into a spectacle of skill, determination and sportsmanship

Despite encountering a few setbacks in the form of minor injuries to some players in the men's draw, the resilience & professionalism by both players and organisers alike have ensured the seamless continuation of the event.

Chess training empowers school coaches



AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 20

The Oman Chess Committee organised a chess training course for school coaches, in collaboration with the Oman School Sports Association, from February 19 to 21, at the Amal Club and was supervised by Bashir al Qadimi, coach of Oman national chess team.

With 18 participants, the course covers several topics, including school chess and the importance of teaching it

in schools, mechanisms for discovering talented individuals in schools, reviewing physical mini-games related to chess and strategic principles for trainees, teaching children preventive thinking, benefiting from computers in education, organising tournaments for children, ideas for some openings, skills for training children on openings, defence, psychologically, preoperatively reading the game, and the law of the young trainee.

The course will continue

over five days through several practical and theoretical sessions that will focus on training methods and techniques for different age groups, selecting talented students in schools, and some educational methods and techniques for openings, plans, endgame positions, and playing strategies related to children.

The earlier committee course is part of its training programmes to spread the game of chess in schools. The programme was launched in 2018 in more than 100 schools in all governorates

of the Sultanate of Oman and included more than 2000 students. This is the first training course this year, which aims to train Omani trainers, especially in schools. The committee also aims to create a broad base of trainers from different governorates of the Sultanate of Oman who are capable of training and managing game activities in clubs, centres, and schools, discovering and preparing players capable of participating and competing in the tournaments supervised by the committee.

AL NAHDA ENTER AFC CUP WEST ZONE FINAL

WITH VICTORY OVER AL RIFFA

AHMED
AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 20

Al Nahda Club advanced to the final of the West Zonal AFC Cup after defeating Bahrain's Al Riffa 3-1 in the second leg of the semi-final at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex. The game started quickly with Al Nahda Club attempting to control the midfield and launch

attacks to get a head start. However, Al Riffa's solid defensive organisation made it challenging, relying on defence and counter-attacks. Both teams tried several attacks, but none posed a real threat to the goalkeepers. After Al Nahda's initial pressure in the first half-hour, the momentum shifted to Al Riffa, who pressed Al Nahda's defences.

In the 32nd minute, Al Riffa scored the first goal of the match, taking advantage of a defensive error in clearing the ball. Jassim Al Shaikh received the ball between defenders and made a beautiful pass to his teammate Ali Hasan, who struck a powerful shot into the net, giving Al Riffa the lead. Despite Al Nahda's attempts to equalise, including a notable shot by the professional player Interis, saved by goalkeeper Mahmoud al Ajmi in the 42nd minute, the first half ended with al Riffa leading 1-0.

In the second half, Al Nahda's coach, Hamad al Azzani, tried to make a comeback by activating the attacking third of his team, substituting Omar al Malki for Ali al Hanai. In the 59th minute, Al Nahda's high pressure resulted in the equalising goal by Walter Bwalya.

As the minutes passed, both teams attempted to take the lead and apply offensive pressure for the second goal to secure a place in the final. However, caution was evident from both teams in maintaining tactical defensive discipline and playing on quick counter-attacks. The second half ended with a 1-1 draw, taking the match to extra time.

In the first half of extra time, Al Nahda Club scored the second goal through substitute Hamoud al Saadi with a header in the 94th minute, taking advantage of a pass from Esam al Subhi. Despite Al Riffa's attempts to level the score, Al Nahda's defences thwarted all efforts, and the first half of extra time ended with Al Nahda leading 2-1.

At the beginning of the second half of extra time, Al Nahda seized an opportunity on the counter-attack and scored the third goal through striker Esam al Subhi, who dribbled past the goalkeeper after a through pass from Omar al Malki. After the third goal, Bahrain's Al Riffa struggled to break through Al Nahda's defences and the match ended with a total score of 4-2, following the draw in the first encounter.

With this victory, Al Nahda qualifies for the AFC Cup West Zone final, where they will face the winner of the match between Iraq's Al Kahrabaa Club or Al Ahed FC of Lebanon in the two-leg West Zonal final in April.

Esam al Subhi celebrates after winning the match

business

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Oman Business Gateway to come up at Airport Heights

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT,FEB 20

A roughly 215,000 sq metre site in upscale Airport Heights in Muscat Governorate has been earmarked for the development of the new Oman Business Gateway project, a mixed-used precinct that will incorporate the headquarters of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP).

Earlier this week, the Ministry of Finance launched a competitive process for the selection of a Master Developer to deliver the Oman Business Gateway project on a Public Private Partnership (PPP) basis.

Oman Business Gateway is envisaged as a “vibrant, commercially-focused hub and a variety of mixed-use assets to create a centre for commercial activity” in the capital city, according to the Ministry of Finance, which has the mandate to procure PPP-based projects under Oman’s PPP Law and PPP Regulations.

“The precinct will support the evolution of an activated



Site (highlighted in blue) earmarked for the new Oman Business Gateway project in Airport Heights.

community where business and government come together in an inclusive and connected environment.

With a diverse range of offerings including hotel, office, residential and retail, the precinct will have a strong focus on business and encouraging enterprise,” the Ministry stated, adding that the

cornerstone of the development is the delivery of a new MoCIIP HQ building.

Oman Business Gateway is being developed on strategically located land belonging to MoCIIP, as well as the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, and located near the Old Oman International Exhibition Centre site at Airport

Heights. An immediate neighbour is Oman Tourism College (OTC).

The competitive process launched by the Ministry of Finance, in coordination with MoCIIP, aims to identify a suitably qualified investor (or consortium) with the wherewithal to “design, finance, develop and operate the new precinct through a PPP

OMAN BUSINESS GATEWAY IS ENVISAGED AS A “VIBRANT, COMMERCIALY-FOCUSED HUB AND A VARIETY OF MIXED-USE ASSETS TO CREATE A CENTRE FOR COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY” IN THE CAPITAL CITY

structure to foster innovation and deliver world-class facilities”.

The successful bidder will own and operate all buildings within this master-planned precinct for the term of the project.

Significantly, only around 30,000 sq metres of the Oman Business Gateway project is set aside for the development of MoCIIP’s headquarters, opening up a sizable chunk of the available land for real estate investment and development, according to the Finance Ministry.

Outlining its vision for Oman Business Gateway as a world-class urban hub, the Ministry stated: “With the MoCIIP HQ at its foundation complemented by a mix of retail, commercial and accommodation, this flagship project is poised to significantly

enhance the economic landscape of the region.

Serving as a community beacon, the sustainable design will seek to incorporate expansive integrated spaces, creating an iconic and immersive hub that will attract a diverse range of established and emerging enterprise.

Project outcomes will be meticulously assessed, with emphasis placed on innovation, elegance, and community engagement, ensuring the development achieves a world-class status upon its completion.”

Also envisioned for incorporation into the design of the Oman Business Gateway are, among other components, any additional pre-committed government and public sector tenancies, residential accommodation, short stay apartments, including a hotel, and retail, commercial and office space.

Submissions in response to the Request for Qualifications (RFQ) floated earlier this week are due in by April 1, 2024.

Arab insurance sector pledges to embrace AI



Insurance sector officials from Oman and the wider Arab region taking part in a panel discussion.

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, FEB 20

The Arab insurance industry is poised for responsible integration of artificial intelligence (AI), with key players discussing the need for robust regulatory frameworks at the 34th General Arab Insurance Federation (GAIF) Conference under way at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, Muscat. Over 2,200 participants from across the region gathered to explore growth opportunities, the role of technology, and achieving a sustainable and inclusive future for Arab insurance.

A panel titled “Topic 4: Regulatory Frameworks for AI Adoption” highlighted the critical role of regulations in facilitating responsible AI implementation. Experts emphasised the need for clear and adaptable frameworks that encourage innovation while mitigating potential risks, including:

The discussion underscored the importance of collaboration between regulators, insurers, and technology providers.

By prioritising responsible development and fostering an inclusive regulatory environment, the Arab insurance sector

can leverage AI’s potential to drive innovation, efficiency, and sustainable growth while safeguarding consumer interests.

Also at the conference, the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry highlighted the promising outlook for Oman’s insurance market. The sector currently accounts for a 1.23% GDP contribution in Oman, with insurance premiums reporting 13% growth in 2022. The capital of insurance firms also increased by 8.46% that year.

While Oman’s market thrives, the broader Arab insurance sector faces challenges.

The market grew a modest 1.8% to reach a value of \$40.9 billion in 2021, representing 0.75% of global market share. Insurance penetration in the region continues to be low.

Experts identified a number of opportunities for growth.

They called for implementing joint national policies between governments and the private sector, while also achieving a balance between protection, international best practices, and investment attraction. Players must also leverage opportunities for collaboration to develop the Arab insurance sector.

Total FDI in Oman reaches more than RO 27 billion in 2022

MUSCAT: Total foreign direct investments (FDI) in the Sultanate of Oman increased by 8.2 per cent to reach RO 27.134 billion by the end of 2022, with inflows accounting for 4.8 per cent of the GDP at current prices compared to foreign investments of RO 25.89 billion by the end of 2021.

According to the statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information, foreign direct investment (FDI) accounted for 75.9 per cent of the total foreign investment by the end of 2022, amounting to RO 20.592 billion, with inflows of RO 2.830 billion compared to RO 847.900 million for portfolio foreign investments with inflows of RO 442.300 million.

Foreign investments in financial derivatives amounted to RO 52.200 million with inflows of RO 1.300 million, while other foreign investments amounted to RO 5.642 billion with inflows of RO 343.200 million.

The oil and gas sector accounted for 56.4 per cent of the total foreign investment, amounting to RO 15.320, compared to RO 5.558 billion for financial mediation activities and RO 2.373 billion for manufacturing industries and RO 1.617 billion for transportation, storage, and communications activities.



A container ship and stacked containers are seen in Salalah Port, in this illustration image.

The total foreign investment in real estate, rental, and commercial project activities amounted to RO 1112 billion, while foreign investment in other activities amounted to RO 1.151 billion.

In foreign direct investment, the oil and gas sector accounted for 71.1 per cent, compared to 9.1 per cent for the manufacturing industries sector, 8.9 per cent for financial mediation activities, 4.9 per cent for real estate, rental, and commercial activities, and 6 per cent for other activities.

The United Kingdom led the top ten countries in foreign direct investment in the Sultanate of Oman with RO 9.621 billion,

followed by the United States with RO 3.684 billion, then China with RO 1.039 billion.

Foreign direct investment from the United Arab Emirates amounted to RO 915 million, from Kuwait RO 797 million, from Qatar RO 593.700 million, while foreign direct investment from Bahrain was RO 487.500 million, from the Netherlands RO 363.500 million, from India RO 321 million, and from Switzerland RO 176.500 million.

In portfolio investments, the value of investments in transportation, storage, and communications was RO 472.900 million, in financial mediation

activities was RO 290 million, in manufacturing industries was RO 10.100 million, in hotels and restaurants was RO 6.700 million, and in other activities was RO 68.200 million.

On the other hand, Omani investments abroad totalled RO 5.383 billion by the end of 2022, compared to RO 6.020 billion, with a decrease of 10.6 per cent.

Among these investments, RO 2.207 billion were for direct investments, RO 1.423 billion for portfolio investments, RO 2.900 million for investments in financial derivatives, while other investments amounted to RO 1.749 billion.

Malabar Gold & Diamonds is highest ranked Indian international jewellery brand

MUSCAT: The most coveted Global Powers of Luxury Goods 2023 report released last week saw the luxury giant Louis Vuitton topping the list.

The annual report, published by Deloitte ascertains the top players in the global luxury goods sector and ranks the top 100 brands operating in the sector based on annual sales figures, brand value and other factors.

Global brands including Kering SA, The Estee Lauder companies, Chanel, Hermes, etc are among the top 10 luxury retailers in the report.

Indian brand Malabar Gold & Diamonds attained the 19th rank on the global list, becoming the top-ranking debutant and the highest-ranked Indian international brand.

The extensive retail presence of the brand across 13 countries in Asia, Europe, North America, and Australia has been a major contributing factor to securing



Indian brand Malabar Gold & Diamonds ranked 19th on the Global Powers of Luxury report.

this prestigious position. Alongside Malabar Gold & Diamonds, various distinguished Indian watch and jewellery brands

have also secured positions within the Top 100 rankings. Titan Company Ltd was ranked 24th, while Kalyan Jewellers and Joy

Alukkas were ranked 46th and 47th respectively.

Senco Gold & Diamonds and Thangamayil jewellery were the

other Indian brands that made it to the list, with a ranking of 78 and 98 respectively.

France emerged as the foremost hub for luxury, boasting seven companies within the Top 100 list and collectively contributing to nearly a third of sales.

This comprehensive report, which is compiled based on data available in the public domain, examines and ranks the top 100 largest brands operating in various luxury goods sectors such as jewellery, watches, cosmetics & handbags based on annual sales figures, brand value and several other factors.

The report also provides detailed insights into the luxury goods market, including trends, challenges, digital innovations, impact of Millennial & Gen Z demography, emphasis on sustainability and other opportunities, providing a key insight into the sector's performance last year.



The Imtidad SME Growth Programme 2024 garnered substantial interest, with over 156 passionate entrepreneurs from diverse sectors applying for support.

National Finance continues partnership with Sharakah to support SMEs

MUSCAT: Reaffirming its commitment to driving the growth of local enterprises, National Finance, the Sultanate of Oman's leading finance company, has further strengthened its collaboration with Sharakah by extending support to six homegrown establishments under its Imtidad SME Growth Programme 2024.

Through this initiative, the company aims to empower these entrepreneurs by helping them navigate challenges, seize opportunities, and realise business aspirations.

The Imtidad SME Growth Programme 2024 garnered substantial interest, with over 156 passionate entrepreneurs from diverse sectors applying for support. Following a rigorous selection process based on multiple criteria, 15 promising candidates were short-listed, culminating in the selection of the final six. Among the selected SMEs are Sofred Mobility, TAWABIL, Fascano, Squad Up, Kuch Albun and Oqood, underscoring the programme's commitment to supporting a diverse range of businesses.

Reflecting on the programme, Tariq bin Sulaiman al Farsi, Chief Executive Officer at National Finance, said, "As a company deeply rooted in the fabric of the country's business landscape, National Finance recognises the pivotal role SMEs play in driving our economy forward.

Our dedication to supporting SMEs exemplifies our profound faith in the entrepreneurial spirit that fuels innovation and advancement within our nation."

GO PLACES WITH LOVED ONES IN THE TOYOTA VELOZ

MUSCAT: Toyota's crossover Veloz SUV is spacious, power-packed and built to take you and your loved ones places.

The Veloz makes an impressive mark with its fuel-efficient performance, easy manoeuvrability and ample interior space.

The Veloz features three rows of seats that can comfortably accommodate seven passengers due to flexible configurations, to offer an exceptional ride.

The vehicle's outstanding performance is ready to heighten the thrills and excitement in daily drives, while its enhanced safety features deliver added protection and peace of mind.

The Toyota Veloz is equipped with MacPherson strut-type front suspension, which provides linear and direct driving dynamics, while the rear is equipped with a new torsion beam suspension system.

Drivers can experience three different driving modes with a choice of ECO, Sport, and Power modes to suit a variety of driving conditions and styles.

The vehicle also boasts excellent manoeuvrability, with a 5.0-metre turning radius. Powering the Veloz is a four-cylinder 1.5-litre capacity engine with 16-valve DOHC and dual VVT-i, which produces 104.6 horsepower and 138 Nm of torque with fuel consumption of 19.3 km/l.

Paired with Continuously Variable Transmission (CVT) that simulates a seven-speed sequential shift transmission to deliver powerful, smooth acceleration from start-off and at low speeds, as well as quiet, efficient transmission at higher speeds with excellent fuel efficiency.

Upon entering the vehicle, passengers are welcomed by ambient lighting that complements the overall feel of the spacious cabin, which comes with a range of advanced and practical features.

These include a 7-inch colour Multi-Information Display (MID), which is complemented by an 8-inch multimedia screen with Apple CarPlay and Android AutoTM integration for seamlessly connected journeys.



The Toyota Veloz's three rows of seats can accommodate up to seven people, while the second and third rows can be folded together or individually for different layouts that provides passengers with more comfort and can carry more cargo, including longer items.

Additional comforts include a 6-speaker sound system, a powerful automatic air conditioning system with rear control panel, rear sonar, and smart entry and start systems.

Meanwhile, parents benefit from the added peace of mind with the ISOFIX safety system, which attaches baby seats securely.

As with any Toyota model, the vehicle comes complete with a comprehensive array of safety features.

These include six SRS airbags (front airbags for the driver and passenger, side airbags for the front seats, and side-curtain airbags for all three rows of seats), Vehicle Stability Control (VSC),

Anti-lock Braking System (ABS), Electric Parking Brake (EPB) with Brake hold function, Emergency Stop Signal (ESS), Traction Control (TRC), Hill-start Assist Control (HAC), Tire Pressure Warning System (TPWS), and many more.

For the latest Press Releases and more, please visit www.toyotaoman.com, www.youtube.com/toyotaoman, www.facebook.com/toyotaoman, and [instagram.com/toyotaomanofficial/](https://www.instagram.com/toyotaomanofficial/).

Geely cars set new standards in Oman's automotive market

MUSCAT: Geely Cars, a leading global automotive brand, is revolutionising the Omani automotive market with its exceptional lineup of models. Whether it's the stylish Emgrand, the luxurious Azkarra, the versatile Okavango, or the compact and sporty Coolray, Geely Cars offers something for everyone.

Emgrand — Style Meets Performance

The Emgrand sets the standard for elegance and performance. With its sleek design and refined interior, the Emgrand is perfect for those seeking a sophisticated driving experience.

Equipped with advanced safety features, cutting-edge technology, and remarkable fuel efficiency, the Emgrand ensures a comfortable and confident journey on any road.

Azkarra - Unleash Luxury

For those who crave luxury on the roads, the Azkarra delivers an unparalleled experience.

This premium SUV exudes opulence with its exceptional design, lavish interior, and impressive technology. With its powerful engine options, superior comfort, and state-of-the-art safety features, the Azkarra offers a seamless blend of style, prestige, and performance.

Okavango - Adventure Awaits

Designed for those who value versatility and practicality, the Okavango is a seven-seater SUV that combines spaciousness with modern design.

With its intelligent driving features, ample storage capacity, and advanced entertainment system, the Okavango is the perfect companion for both family

trips and thrilling adventures. This SUV effortlessly combines comfort and functionality to redefine the concept of a family vehicle.

Coolray — Compact, Yet Power-packed

Sporty, dynamic, and compact, the Coolray delivers an exhilarating driving experience. Packed with advanced safety features and cutting-edge technology, this compact SUV is perfect for urban dwellers who desire speed and agility without compromising on comfort.

The Coolray offers state-of-the-art driving assistance systems, making it an ideal choice for those seeking a thrilling and safe journey.

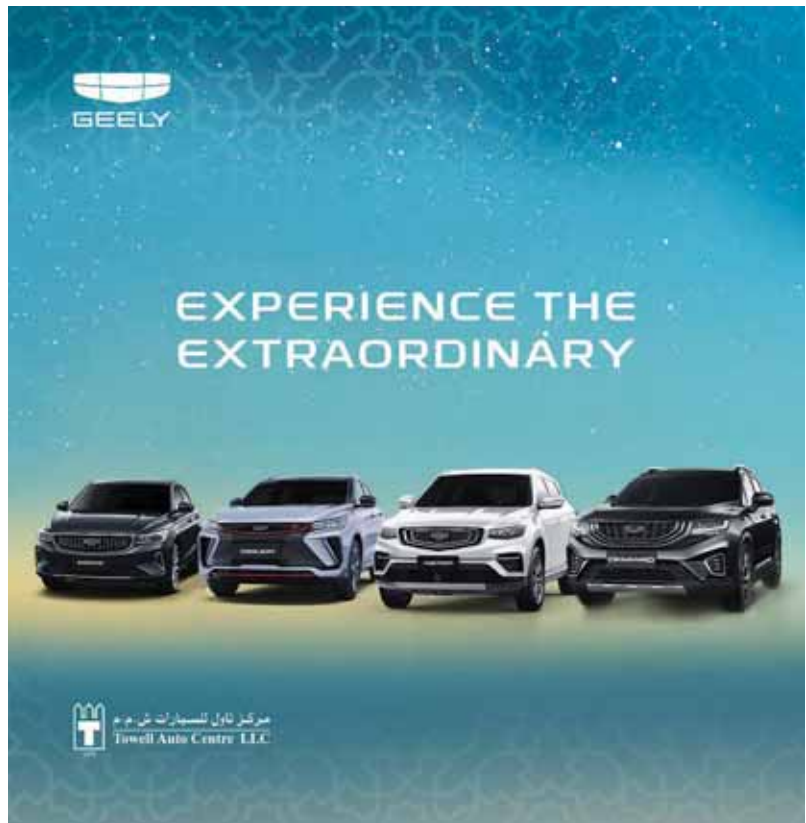
Geely Cars - Innovation at its Core

Geely Cars takes pride in

its commitment to innovation, continuously pushing the boundaries of automotive technology. With its progressive approach, Geely Cars leads the way in introducing groundbreaking features such as intelligent connectivity, advanced driver assistance systems, and eco-friendly solutions across all models.

Geely Cars ensures that Omani customers experience the latest automotive advancements with uncompromising quality and unmatched performance. It's time to avail of exciting offers on the Geely range of cars.

In Oman, Geely vehicles are brought to you by Towell Auto Centre LLC. To know more about the products, test drive booking, and get a quote, please log on to www.geelyoman.com.





Tethys Oil signs drilling rig contract for Block 58 exploration well



Kunooz-1 is set to be the first exploration well by Tethys Oil in Block 58.

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 20

Swedish energy firm Tethys Oil has announced the signing of contract for a drilling rig with Gulf Oilfield Services (GOS) in preparation for the drilling of its first exploration well, Kunooz-1, on Block 58, onshore Oman.

Dr Fredrik Robelius, CTO and General Manager of Block 58, signed the contract on behalf of Tethys Oil. The signatory for GOS was CEO Ali al Busaidi. The ceremony was attended by Magnus Nordin, Tethys Oil's Managing Director.

Gulf Oilfield Services SPC is fully owned by Kuwait Drilling Company KSC (KDC) and has been drilling in Block 7 Oman, contracted with Hydrocarbon Finder E&P, utilising heavy rigs since May 2022.

The company has achieved zero Lost Time Incidents (LTI), including one full year achieving goal-zero milestones.

KDC as the parent company of GOS is one of the first drilling contractors in the region and has been drilling oil and gas wells since the early 1960's with a comprehensive experience in all type of wells, from shallow to deep wells.

"We are very pleased to have signed a drilling rig contract with GOS for the first exploration well on the Kunooz prospect as they have a strong track-record of safe and efficient drilling operations.

"We plan to commence drilling on the high-potential prospect, estimated to hold unrisks recoverable prospective resources of more than 100 mmo, in mid-April," said Magnus Nordin, Managing Director of Tethys Oil.

Concerns over fuel contamination prompt calls for independent quality checks

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, FEB 20

Following a public outcry regarding the quality of M91 motor fuel dispensed by some fuel stations in the Sultanate of Oman, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) convened a joint meeting with stakeholders aimed at discussing consumer concerns and calling for independent quality checks.

OQ, the integrated global energy group of Oman, acknowledged responsibility for fuel quality and distribution, pledging to investigate complaints, update consumers on fuel quality and damage causes and share laboratory test results.

However, social media user Fahad al Siyabi, reflecting broader concerns, questioned OQ's dual role as supplier and quality arbiter, advocating for an independent



Motorists can lodge complaints at their local fuel station if they encounter contamination concerns.

body to ensure objectivity.

Social media user Hafeed al Shahri, echoing a wider sentiment, called for the public disclosure of specific reasons for fuel quality issues, arguing for complete transparency in communication "with both the recipient and the complainant."

MoCIIP, emphasising adherence to approved fuel

standards, mandated OQ to submit quality certificates for each product. A joint complaint resolution mechanism was established, mandating fuel companies to receive complaints through designated channels.

These complaints, incorporating relevant details such as the name and location of the fuel station, and batch number,

are then relayed to OQ.

For its parts, OQ is required to track product quality, review certificates and re-examine samples in collaboration with MoCIIP and the Consumer Protection Authority (CPA).

Failure to comply triggers investigations by a technical team.

While the established mechanism addresses complaint handling, concerns about transparency remain. Many, like Fahad al Siyabi, emphasise the need for an independent body to objectively assess fuel quality and build public trust. Both OQ and MoCIIP are encouraged to provide detailed and timely information, addressing concerns and ensuring consumer confidence.

Some consumers lament that the issue of contaminated motor fuel is a recurrent issue, plaguing motorists every two years and ultimately inflicting unnecessary damage on their vehicles.

Garages are inundated with cars suffering engine problems demonstrably linked to the inconsistent quality of motor fuel, they argue.

Consumers recall a similar incident in 2016 that prompted intervention from the Consumer Protection Authority.

However, their investigation yielded inconclusive results, blamed on conflicting data on fuel specs and official certifications presented by local refineries. This lack of transparency raises concerns about accountability and effective oversight, they stressed.

To address this persistent problem, a potential solution lies in mandating consistent fuel specs displayed prominently at all petrol stations. This would empower consumers to make informed choices and potentially hold stations accountable for any discrepancies, a motorist added on social media.

Credit Oman, ICIEC explore cooperation in credit insurance

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 20

Credit Oman received officials from the Islamic Corporation for the Insurance of Investment and Export Credit (ICIEC) on Tuesday for discussions on expanding mutual cooperation.

The meeting was attended by Shaikh Khalil bin Ahmed al Harthy, the CEO of Credit Oman, and Oussama Kaissi, CEO - ICIEC of the Islamic Corporation for the Insurance of Investment and Export Credit.

The primary focus of the meeting was on export credit insurance, which aims to protect exporting companies against the risks of non-payment or delayed payment by buyers.

Credit insurance plays a crucial role in building trust, promoting international trade, and assisting exporters in managing financial risks and expanding their opportunities in global markets.



Officials of Credit Oman and ICIEC pictured following their meeting in Muscat on Tuesday.

The meeting also addressed the topic of credit reinsurance, which provides financial protection to companies and individuals who rely on financing from banks and financial institutions through borrowing.

This type of insurance helps ensure the continuity of financing and reduces the financial risks associated with borrowing from banks and

other financial institutions.

Additionally, the two parties discussed the challenges facing the credit insurance sector in light of the current regional and global conditions.

They also discussed the topic of credit insurance for medium and long-term projects. The efforts made by both institutions in previous years were also reviewed during the meeting.

MoHUP, Tawoos Group sign pact to construct mixed-use towers for Al Khuwair Downtown project



Tawoos will build the first mixed-use towers that will act as a lighthouse for the Al Khuwair Downtown project.

MUSCAT: In a landmark initiative poised to shape the future of Oman's urban development, Tawoos Group has entered into a significant relationship with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MoHUP) to pioneer the development and construction of cutting-edge mixed-use towers within the highly anticipated Al Khuwair Downtown project.

Tawoos will build the first mixed-use towers that will act as a lighthouse for the Al Khuwair Downtown project. The 12,000 sqm site will comprise 60,000 sqm GFA incorporating offices, residential and retail spaces.

The project is an integral part of Oman's National Spatial Strategy, guiding the nation's journey towards Oman Vision 2040. It underlines the importance of planning new developments and infrastructure to maximise opportunities while preserving the country's natural heritage.

Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, said "The agreement between MoHUP and Tawoos Group marks a pioneering moment in Oman's urban evolution. By uniting our vision with Tawoos Group's aspirations, we are setting new standards for sustainability, architectural excellence, and community-centric urban development."

Renowned architectural firm

Zaha Hadid Architects, founded by the late pioneering architect Zaha Hadid, has been entrusted with crafting the master plan for the Al Khuwair Downtown district, heralding a new era of transformative urban design.

Samir Fancy, Chairman of Tawoos Group, added, "As they say, we shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us. This landmark destination will change the perception, work ethic and habits of the entire ecosystem which will reside within it. Our mixed-used towers will serve as a lighthouse that inspires the Al Khuwair Downtown project."

The towers envisioned by Tawoos Group are poised to redefine the standard for commercial, residential, and retail spaces, offering an unparalleled experience tailored to diverse needs and preferences.

HH Sayyid Tarik bin Shabib al Said, Director of Tawoos Group, said, "We congratulate MoHUP for their far-sighted vision and on this key milestone towards realising the objectives of Oman Vision 2040.

"Tawoos is honoured to be part of this extraordinary project. These towers will be innovative, sustainable and aligned with green building principles, attracting domestic and international investment positioning Oman as a dynamic, progressive destination."

Karwa Motors launches intercity buses

MUSCAT: Karwa Motors, a subsidiary of the Omani Investment Authority and Qatar Transportation Company, announced the launch of a new type of bus, specifically intercity buses, designed to accommodate 45 passengers in line with Gulf standard specifications and the specifications approved for buses operating in the oil and gas sector.

The company celebrated yesterday by delivering two of these buses to Sultan Al Shizani Company, a leading transportation company in the Sultanate of Oman, which will serve to meet the operations of OQ company.

Karwa Motors stated that



The company celebrated yesterday by delivering two buses which will serve to meet the operations of OQ.

the delivery of these two new intercity buses marks an important step towards introducing this bus category

into the local market, amidst significant demand from both local companies and individuals interested in utilising this mode

of transportation.

With this new bus category, Karwa aims to enter both the local and regional markets, enhancing the production capabilities of the Karwa Motors factory located in the special economic zone at Duqm to meet the growing demand for Karwa buses, following their successful deployment during the Qatar World Cup 2022.

In a press statement, Karwa Motors revealed that these two new buses are the first of Karwa Motors' intercity bus type to be introduced into the Omani market, noting that there are ongoing orders from a group of local clients scheduled for delivery in the coming months.

Opportunity Oman: Oman's strategic alliance and partnership with Germany



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Economic ties between Germany and Oman have undergone changes throughout history including stages such as historical connections, trade and investment collaborations and strategic partnerships. Some noteworthy milestones in this long-standing relationship include the establishment of relations in 1972 and the signing of economic agreements like the investment protection and promotion agreement in 2010 as well as the double taxation avoidance agreement in 2012.

When it comes to trade and investment, the volume of trade between Germany and Oman in 2021 was 765 million euros.

Germany holds importance as one of Oman's economic partners particularly outside the oil and gas industry. Recently a delegation from Germany has been actively exploring investment opportunities in sectors such as renewable energy, gas, logistics transportation and food security. German investments in Oman have surpassed RO 10 million in 2022 while total trade between both countries reached RO 257.5 million by the end of November 2023.

The strategic partnership phase aligns with Oman's ambitious 'Oman Vision 2040', aiming to diversify the economy and reduce reliance on oil. Central to this vision is the master plan for the development of a green hydrogen economy, where German expertise becomes pivotal.

Collaborative efforts in solar, wind, and green hydrogen projects offer Oman an opportunity for sustainable energy development, contributing to its long-term economic goals.

Beyond energy, the strategic alliance opens avenues for collaboration in logistics and infrastructure.

Modernising ports and establishing efficient rail networks are key focal points that can enhance trade flow and reduce costs for both nations. Germany's technological advancements and market access present

RECENTLY A DELEGATION FROM GERMANY HAS BEEN ACTIVELY EXPLORING INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN SECTORS SUCH AS RENEWABLE ENERGY, GAS, LOGISTICS TRANSPORTATION AND FOOD SECURITY. GERMAN INVESTMENTS IN OMAN HAVE SURPASSED RO 10 MILLION IN 2022 WHILE TOTAL TRADE BETWEEN BOTH COUNTRIES REACHED RO 257.5 MILLION BY THE END OF NOVEMBER 2023.



opportunities for boosting Omani exports and attracting investments in manufacturing, tourism and technology.

The Omani-German Joint Committee plays a crucial role in advancing economic collaboration through strategic meetings.

This committee is dedicated to facilitating increased trade and investment in sectors such as energy, technology, culture, and science, further solidifying the partnership between the two nations.

Building on a foundation of success, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is further strengthening the Omani-German partnership.

This German think-tank is collaborating with Oman's policy and business community to unlock even greater economic growth and diversification. KAS takes a multi-pronged approach, empowering local actors, sharing Germany's proven strategies, facilitating knowledge transfer, promoting regional development, and fostering dialogue between Omani and German experts.

Oman's industries are poised

to benefit significantly from German expertise in Industry 4.0 solutions and smart city development. Knowledge transfer through education and training partnerships will enhance the skills of the Omani workforce and foster innovation.

Additionally, the partnership extends beyond traditional economic sectors to include sustainable tourism, healthcare advancements and food security collaborations.

The trade dynamics between the two nations involve Oman exporting methanol products, polyethylene, aluminium, electrical materials and food products like fish to Germany. In return, Germany exports vehicles, machinery, electronic devices, medicines and assorted food items to Oman.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES FOR OMANI BUSINESSES:

- **Renewable energy:** Collaboration in solar, wind and green hydrogen projects aligns with Oman's abundant natural resources, presenting a chance for sustainable energy development. German expertise in renewable

energy solutions and technology transfer can be harnessed for mutual benefit.

- **Logistics and infrastructure:** Modernising ports and establishing efficient rail networks, with German expertise, can enhance trade flow and reduce costs. This collaboration can also open doors for partnerships in smart city development and digitalisation of logistics infrastructure.

- **Industry 4.0 and Smart Cities:** Omani industries can leverage German expertise in Industry 4.0 solutions and smart city development to modernise operations, enhance efficiency, and improve citizen services. Knowledge transfer through partnerships in education and training will upskill the workforce and drive innovation.

- **Manufacturing and technology:** German technology and market access can attract investments in Oman's manufacturing and technology sectors, creating new job opportunities and fostering economic diversification. Joint ventures and technology transfer partnerships can be explored in

these areas.

- **Sustainable tourism, healthcare, and food security:**

The partnership extends to sustainable tourism development, healthcare advancements and food security collaborations. By combining German expertise with Omani resources, these sectors can witness significant growth and contribute to improved living standards.

In summary, German-Omani economic ties have matured considerably from initial trade contacts centuries prior.

Both partners stand to gain from closer collaboration in Oman's development. As the diversification agenda unfolds, German technology and know-how can be paired with Omani energy resources, infrastructure demand and favourable location.

Understanding the landscape and nuances in detail would allow governments and businesses to unlock the full potential in this strategic partnership. With sound regulation and support sustaining the strong foundation already laid, German-Omani economic relations are primed for an increasingly productive future.

Europe's top tech company boosted by chip wars



ANDY JALIL
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The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK

The more the US government worries about China's ambitions in the chip industry, the more equipment for making chips that China seems to buy. When ASML, the Dutch company that makes the world's most advanced lithography machines for manufacturing microchips, reported the fourth-quarter results last month it showed the sales in China of an extraordinary 46 per cent in the third quarter, up from 8 per cent in the first three months of 2023.

One reason for the increase was a slowdown in Western demand, which gave ASML, the chance to catch up on Chinese orders. But another was export controls. While the company has never been allowed to ship its most sophisticated "extreme ultraviolet" machines to China, the Netherlands and Japan last

year agreed to join the US in banning sales of even some less cutting-edge gear to the country. Chinese chip makers likely rushed to source equipment before the restrictions took effect last month. Even with the bans in place, ASML sales to China might be strong this year. The company has said only 10 per cent to 15 per cent of its shipment to the country would be affected. Most of its business with China chip makers is for mature technologies that are still within bounds. For more advanced applications, China may be able to use several older generation machines to achieve similar results to the newer ones it can't buy, potentially giving orders a further boost.

China is investing aggressively in new industries such as electric cars and wind turbines that require lots of semiconductors.

The country still sources

most of these from Western chip makers. It imports more microchips than oil these days.

But Beijing is intent on self-sufficiency and US anxieties about China catching up with Western chip technologies have only accelerated this effort.

Companies that sell chips to China are increasingly being replaced by local peers. When UBS had a popular electric vehicle made by BYD taken apart, it showed that 36 per cent of the semiconductor content in the powertrain came from domestic suppliers.

The current global leaders in powertrain chips, Germany's Infineon, STMicroelectronics of Switzerland and US-based onsemi, will likely suffer from the rise of Chinese EVs.

But China can't easily replace the machines to make chips, leaving it dependent on ASML, and competitors such as Applied

Materials. This is why export controls are so sensitive.

In a call with US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo recently, Chinese minister of Commerce Wang Wentao voiced "serious concerns about US restrictions on third-party exports of lithography equipment to China, according to the Chinese Ministry.

Although the measures are showing few signs of hurting ASML, investors cannot relax. For one thing, China's underlying level of demand has become hard to gauge. Even if the country's industrial strategy will require a lot of lithography machines, everyone assumes it has been over-ordering, perhaps in case restrictions tighten further. That raises the risk of a sudden slump.

Longer term, export controls will force China to develop its own semiconductor ecosystem.

This is very challenging,

particularly without access to the established supply chains in Europe, Japan and the US. But even if China only succeeds in reverse-engineering older lithography machines, it will close off an important revenue source for Western suppliers. Not even ASML's most advanced competitors have managed to copy its extreme-ultraviolet equipment, giving the Dutch company a monopoly on one of the underpinnings of artificial intelligence. This is one reason it stocks, at 33 times forward earnings, trades at a premium to peers, helping make it Europe's most valuable technology company. But the market dominance that makes it so attractive to investors has also placed ASML squarely in the middle of the US-China chip conflict. It has, however, given the company's financials a boost so far.



OPAZ inaugurates dams and berth at Port of Duqm

MUSCAT: Dr Ali bin Masoud bin Ali al Sunaidy, Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), sponsored the inauguration of Wadi Jurf and Wadi Saay protection dams projects and the government berth at Port of Duqm, which was attended by several governmental and private sector representatives.

Eng Ahmed bin Ali bin Issa Akaak, Acting CEO of SEZAD, said the project to protect SEZAD fell within the scope of protection from flood risks and drainage of surface water resulting from potential rainfall, thereby offering the maximum protection for large projects, facilities, and local residents.

The dam lakes were designed to accommodate the storage of about 50 million cubic metres of water and secure its access to the sea through drainage channels that was created earlier.

Akaak explained that SEZAD celebrates also the completion of the infrastructure works at the government berth in Duqm Port,

which is roughly one kilometre long and is divided into two areas — one designated as a berth for Military authorities and the other for civil uses. There are gates and roads separating each area from the other.

Wadi Jurf Dam is roughly 19.4 metres tall and 1600 metres long. Its base is about 100 metres wide, and its thickness gets thinner as it gets higher, ending in an 8-metre-wide dam body at the top. The dam lake has an estimated storage capacity of 32.8 million cubic metres of water.

Wadi Saay Dam has a height of approximately 16.4 metres, a length of 3665 metres, and a base width of 100 metres. The intended capacity of the dam lake was 17 million cubic metres of water.

The flood protection system in Duqm includes 3 channels to discharge surface water in a safe way from dams to the sea: Wadi Dangert channel, Wadi Jurf Dam channel, and Wadi Saay Dam channel.

The drainage channels have been thoughtfully chosen and



OPAZ officials and special guests inaugurate the government berth at Port of Duqm.

planned to align with the wadis' surface runoff as well as the volume of flow from the dams and sub-wadis that empty into the

main wadis beneath the dams and the three channels.

The Wadi Dangart canal is 11 km long and varies in width

from 40 metres at its highest point to 100 metres at its seaward outlet. The Wadi Saay channel is approximately 9 km long and 320

metres wide at its confluence with the Jurf channel.

Flowing from the west, the Jurf Channel collects the waters of Wadi Ashnan, Wadi Jurf, and a few tiny valleys and reefs west of SEZAD before emptying into the sea. The channel stretches approximately 12 kilometres in length and 450 metres width at its widest point, which is at the mouth on the shore of the Duqm Sea, to 750 metres.

The government berth project at the Port of Duqm includes a berth for government agencies divided into 5 zones distributed for government uses and facilities, including the Royal Yachts, the Royal Navy of Oman, the Coast Guard of the Royal Oman Police, the Sultan's Special Force, and the fifth zone designated for civil, commercial, and tourist uses.

The project also includes a security gate for the administration, housing, and maintenance workshops. Boats, related equipment and firefighting systems in addition 2 helipad for helicopters.

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



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LIFESTYLE

Tourists enjoy the rare opportunity to walk knee deep in briney water as they visit Badwater Basin, the normally driest place in the US, in Death Valley National Park, Inyo County, California. — AFP



ART

Italian restorer Eleonora Pucci cleans Michelangelo's statue of David using a backpack vacuum and synthetic fibre brush at the Galleria dell'Accademia, in Florence. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

Bollywood actress Kareena Kapoor Khan attends the chat show 'No Filter Neha' season 6 in Mumbai. — AFP



TRAVEL TALES

A woman poses for pictures with the Kawazu cherry blossom trees, one of the earliest blooming cherry blossoms in Japan, in Kawazu of Shizuoka Prefecture. — AFP



FASHION

A model presents a creation during a catwalk presentation for British fashion house Burberry's Autumn/Winter 2024 collection, at London Fashion Week in London. — AFP

art & life

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Can someone break into Musandam's lock houses?

Oman's vernacular architecture, particularly the lock houses, is integral to cultural heritage and sustainable tourism. These homes, crafted with local materials and ingenious design, reflect centuries-old traditions. Preserving them not only safeguards Oman's past, but also supports its unique identity, community cohesion and economic opportunities for locals... **P20**

DISCOVERY

New Bob Marley film gets box office love in N America theatres

PARAMOUNT'S NEW musical biopic "Bob Marley: One Love" enjoyed the adoration of North American theatre goers this weekend, topping the box office with estimated earnings of \$27.7 million, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported on Sunday.

"This is an excellent opening for a musical biography," analyst David A Gross said, adding that the film was doing much better with audiences than with critics.

British actor Kingsley Ben-Adir, who plays the iconic reggae singer in the story of his rapid rise and too-soon death, previously drew attention for his portrayal of Malcolm X in "One Night in Miami."

Lashana Lynch plays Rita Marley, and son Ziggy Marley is one of the film's producers.

Another new release, Sony/Marvel superhero thriller "Madame Web," placed second for the Friday-through-Sunday period, at \$15.2 million.



Analysts called that a disappointing opening, given the film's \$80 million production cost — and its meager 13 per cent positive rating on the Rotten Tomatoes website.

Gone are the days, said Gross, of Franchise Entertainment Research,

series.

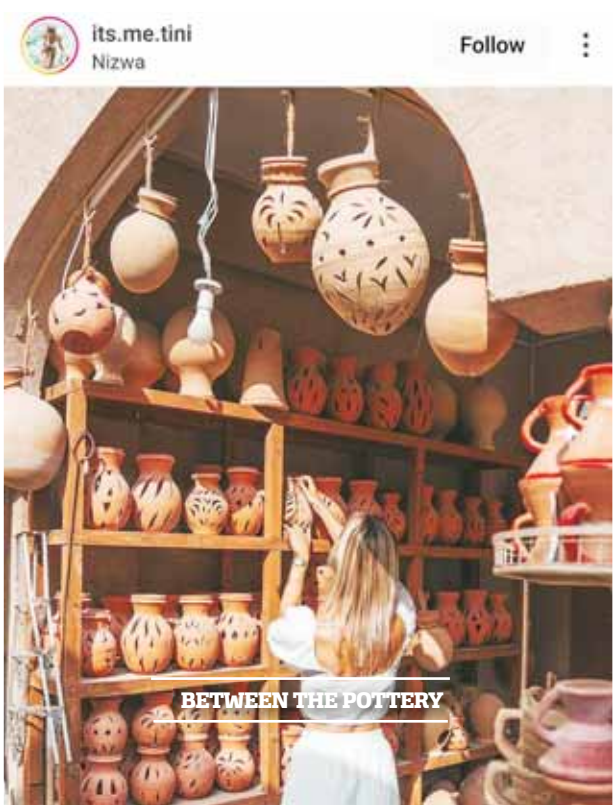
Dropping to third from last weekend's top spot was Universal's spy thriller "Argyle," at \$4.7 million. It has now taken in \$36.4 million domestically — "tragic" figures for a film with a \$200-million budget, according to Variety.

In fourth, flying steady in its fifth weekend out, was Universal's family-friendly animation "Migration," at \$3.8 million.

And in fifth was another chapter of Fathom Events' story of the life of Jesus Christ, "The Chosen: S4, EP 4-6." It earned \$3.4 million.

Warner Bros.' musical "Wonka" finally dropped out of the top five in its 10th week out, but did manage to hit the \$600 million mark globally. Rounding out the top 10 were: "Wonka" (\$3.4 million) "The Beekeeper" (\$3.3 million) "Anyone But You" (\$2.4 million) "Lisa Frankenstein" (\$2 million) "Land of Bad" (\$1.8 million). — AFP

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



Burberry presents star-studded moody Autumnal collection

BURBERRY'S CREATIVE director, Daniel Lee, on Monday showed his third brief at London Fashion Week, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary, with an ode to the brand's outdoor heritage for the luxury house's autumn-winter 2024 collection.

Set in a dark marquee in London's Victoria Park where guests sat on big fluffy brown cushions, songs from late British singer Amy Winehouse set the mood for the night.

The star-studded show was attended by actress Olivia Coleman, US Vogue Editor in Chief Anna Wintour, model Jourdan Dunn and Irish actor Barry Keoghan among others.

Monday's show heavily featured outerwear and sporty silhouettes with bomber jackets and Burberry's iconic trench coat that sat alongside flowy beaded and velvet dresses.

It noticeably lacked the brand's new signature 'Knight Blue', the same colour featured in its "takeover" of British department store Harrods this month.

Models walked down a grass runway on chunky-soled leather boots, parading leather and faux-

fur coats in shades of muted green and brown, oversized striped suit jackets and trousers with zipper detailing.

British models Naomi Campbell, Agyness Deyn and Lily Cole were among those sashaying on the catwalk.

Burberry's famous beige, black and red check was reimagined into the moody Autumnal colour palette and featured on the inside of floor-sweeping skirts with long slits down the side.

Accessories included checked umbrellas, large canvas, leather and faux-fur bags in cream, brown and green — often adorned with gold detailing — and paired with scarves worn over the head.

Lee, who was behind the revamp of Italian fashion brand Bottega Veneta, is facing pressure to produce a winning collection for Burberry which is battling a slowdown in demand for luxury goods.

The 168-year-old company issued a warning on its profits in January, a setback for Chief Executive Jonathan Akeroyd who is seeking to reposition the brand as "modern British luxury". — Reuters



Michelangelo's David gets spa treatment in Florence

EVEN THE DAVID gets dusty. Every two months, Michelangelo's masterpiece completed in 1504 undergoes a careful cleaning at its home in Florence's Accademia Gallery, where it has resided for over 150 years.

Considered by many awestruck viewers to represent the perfect man, the 17-foot-high (5.1-metre) sculpture carved from a single block of marble stands alone under the skylight of the domed gallery on Mondays, when the museum is closed.

His personal restorer, Eleonora Pucci, climbs on a scaffolding for an up-close view — part of a monitoring and cleaning ritual necessary for the preservation of the Renaissance icon visited by over two million visitors last year.

Despite David's good looks and Biblical heritage, the slayer of Goliath needs upkeep.

"A statue that doesn't get dusted regularly, if you get close and look at it from bottom to top, you'll see a form of lint," the museum's director, Cecile Hollberg, told a group of journalists Monday.

"It's not pretty and it's not worthy of the work of art that we preserve in this museum," Hollberg said.

David's bi-monthly cleaning, then, is "a form of respect, a form of dignity that we want to give to every work."

DELICATE WORK

With a furrow in his brow, a vein bulging on his neck, his weight squarely on his right foot and his sling held in his left hand, David remains focused on Goliath, oblivious to the primping going on around him.

Pucci, a petite woman wearing a white laboratory coat, white hard hat, jeans and sneakers, scrambles to the top of the scaffolding where she begins taking photos to monitor David's "state of health", Hollberg said.

After strapping a portable vacuum onto her back, the dusting begins. With careful sweeping motions, Pucci glides a soft synthetic brush across the David's bent left arm, steering the particles from his forearm into the nozzle of the vacuum, which never touches the statue.

Next is his left thigh, where her delicate brush traces the muscles carved by Michelangelo into the Carrara marble, before the scaffolding is shifted and Pucci is once again at work on David's back.

As the scaffold wiggles despite being locked, Pucci strokes David's shoulders with her brush while leaning in to examine his curly locks — where spiders sometimes leave tiny webs.

"It's very delicate work, requiring a lot of concentration and it needs monitoring centimetre by centimetre in order to control the state of preservation of the work — which is in great condition," Hollberg said.

Dust deposits left behind are capable of compromising the marble's lustre, rendering it greyer and duller.

Smooth parts are easier to clean than the rougher areas, which are more apt to grab dust.

The filters in the museum's state-of-the-art air conditioning system have cut back considerably on air particles, however, while sensors help control temperature and humidity levels, Hollberg said.

The cleaning takes at least half a day due to the scaffolding involved and other statues and paintings in the museum get similar treatment, she said.

The first colossus since ancient times and the symbol of Florence, Michelangelo's David was unveiled at the dawn of the 16th century to a rapt public in the Renaissance city's main square, the Piazza della Signoria.

Michelangelo was only 29 when he finished his masterpiece.

It stayed in the piazza until 1873 when it was moved to its current location, with the museum literally built around it.

A copy now stands in the Piazza della Signoria.

Other masterpieces of the museum, Michelangelo's Slaves — which were designed for the tomb of Pope Julius II but never completed — arrived later in 1939. — AFP

Can someone break into Musandam's lock houses?

When visiting Musandam, it is impossible not to notice the governorate's popular "lock houses." Crafted with meticulous precision, the lock houses embody the symbiotic relationship between human habitation and nature's bounty.

BY BALQEES AL ORAIMI

Vernacular architecture in Oman constitutes a cornerstone of its cultural heritage and tourism industry. These traditional buildings reflect Oman's rich history, embodying centuries-old techniques, materials and designs passed down through generations. They serve as tangible links to the past, offering insights into the region's socio-economic development and cultural diversity.

Tourists are drawn to the distinctive structures, such as forts, castles and mud-brick houses, seeking authentic cultural experiences. Preservation efforts not only safeguard Oman's architectural legacy, but also support sustainable tourism practices by minimising environmental impact and promoting local traditions.

When visiting Musandam, it is impossible not to notice the governorate's popular "lock houses." Crafted with meticulous precision, the lock houses embody the symbiotic relationship between human habitation and nature's bounty. Ingeniously designed to utilise the natural depressions in the mountainous topography, these modest homes offer both refuge and respite, their stone walls and clay roofs blending seamlessly with the surrounding environment.

These small rectangular houses are constructed using natural materials found abundantly throughout the governorate. Mostly built from stone, their roofs are made from sapling trees covered with a mixture of pebbles, clay, and various types of stones. The interior floor of the building is about a

metre lower than the exterior, with one side designated for living space. The storage area is elevated higher than the rest, and the only entrance is through crawling. A small tree leaf known as a sakbar is placed between the roof and mud to prevent erosion due to rain. Building a lock house can take about three to four months, usually requiring collective effort from men in the village who transport the heavy rocks using wooden tools.

An intriguing aspect of this architecture is the door crafted from Sidr wood, renowned for its exceptional strength. Moreover, the door's high security ensures it can only be opened by its owners, who possess unique keys stored in a specific, household-known location. If lost, breaking the door becomes the only solution. Large pottery jars are pre-positioned inside these houses before construction, with storage areas designated for residents' winter necessities such as dates and grains. The name "lock house" derives from its dual-lock protection system.

Historically, inhabitants of the Musandam Governorate preferred elevated locations to mitigate rain-related risks. These single-room houses, constructed from mountain rock and clay, showcase the craftsmanship of their ancestors. For Abdulla al Shehhi, a resident of Musandam, lock houses are an integral part of their community, something they hope to pass on to younger generations. Abdulla emphasises that while the structure may appear simple, its construction requires a deep understanding of intricacies.

He notes, "The shape is very basic, always rectangular, although measurements may vary depending on family needs.

However, the common thread is their construction from locally sourced rocks, with many builders preferring the dominant red rocks called Al Safat." Abdulla adds that some families still own these lock houses, visible in mountain villages today.

To facilitate understanding of lock houses and their community significance, a lock house has been specially constructed inside Khasab Fort. Adjacent to a summer house made of palm fronds, this lock house is built openly, allowing airflow into the dwelling. Inside, rooms are properly labeled, and household items are displayed to illustrate daily life, particularly during harsh winters.

As Abdulla shares, lock houses were once bustling with activity throughout the day, with sturdy doors guarding against the elements. Families gathered in the sitting area, sharing stories and enjoying communal living.

Preserving vernacular architecture in Oman is crucial for safeguarding cultural heritage, maintaining identity and promoting sustainability.

These traditional building styles reflect Omani history, values and lifestyle, contributing to a sense of place and community pride. Vernacular architecture like the lock houses incorporates sustainable design principles tailored to Oman's climate and resources, promoting environmental responsibility.

Furthermore, preserving these architectural traditions supports tourism, generating economic opportunities for local communities and artisans. By valuing and conserving vernacular architecture, Oman can celebrate its unique cultural identity, enhance social cohesion and ensure a sustainable future that honours the past.

