

ROP warns against online fraud

Royal Oman Police (ROP) has cautioned against systemic frauds targeting individuals and commercial establishments. On its Twitter account, ROP said the Directorate-General of Inquiries and Criminal Investigation has detected fraudulent schemes with the fraudsters hacking accounts of commercial businesses and stealing data.



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OMAN OBSERVER

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RONALDO SIGNS FOR AL NASSR IN DEAL WORTH MORE THAN 200M EUROS

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IT IS SNOWING IN THE DESERT

MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO SUDAN AND CUBA

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to Lt Gen Abdel Fattah al Burhan, President of the Transitional Sovereign Council of the Republic of the Sudan, on the occasion of his country's Independence Anniversary. His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has also sent a cable of greetings to Miguel Diaz-Canel, President of the Council of State and Council of Ministers of the Republic of Cuba, on his country's National Day. His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes of good health, happiness and long life to both the presidents wishing their friendly people more progress and prosperity. — ONA

3 IPOS SLATED FOR LAUNCH IN 2023

A trio of Initial Public Offerings (IPO) linked to subsidiaries and affiliates of Oman Investment Authority (OIA) is expected to help energise the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) during 2023, according to leading Omani investment firm Ubhar Capital SAOC (U-Capital). IPO sizes are reckoned to be around \$500 million for Abraj and \$800 million for OQ Gas Networks, while Majis is yet to reveal the size of its planned offering, says U-Capital. SEE P13



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A NEW ACHIEVEMENT – OMANI ADVENTURER SCALES WORLD'S SEVEN HIGHEST SUMMITS



The Omani adventurer Sulaiman bin Hamood al Nabei was able to scale the highest peak of the Antarctica continent that rises approximately 5,000 metres above sea level reaching the South Pole during the same adventure. This has made him the first Omani national to scale all seven highest summits of the world and the South Pole. — ONA

UN vote on Israel's occupation 'a victory,' say Palestinians

RAMALLAH: The Palestinians on Saturday welcomed a vote by the United Nations General Assembly requesting that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) provide an opinion on the legal consequences of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories. The Hague-based ICJ, also known as the World Court, is the top UN court dealing with disputes between states. Its rulings are binding, though the ICJ has no power to enforce them.

The vote on Friday nonetheless presents a challenge for Israel's incoming Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who took office on Thursday at the head of a hard-right government that includes parties who advocate for occupied West Bank lands to be annexed. "The time has come for Israel to be a state subject to law, and to be held accountable for its ongoing crimes against our people," Nabil Abu Rudeineh, spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, said. Senior Palestinian official Hussein al Sheikh said on Twitter that the vote "reflects the victory of Palestinian diplomacy." — Reuters

App launched for electing municipal vice chairmen



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Interior has launched smartphone app Tanmia to enable the members of the municipal councils of the respective governorate to elect the vice-chairman.

The app also allows citizens to directly follow the results of the voting. The Ministry of Interior is improving the application by introducing a number of features that will be announced later.

The launch of the new smartphone app comes as the Ministry of Interior seeks to tap technology to improve its operations. The Ministry of Interior utilised technology at all stages of the elections for the municipal councils' third term from voter registration to the voting process through Intakhbih smartphone app which was approved by the ministry as the first online voting mechanism. — ONA

World rings in 2023 after a turbulent 2022

SYDNEY: The world's eight billion people have begun ushering in 2023 and bidding farewell to a turbulent 12 months marked by war in Europe, stinging price rises, Lionel Messi's World Cup glory and the deaths of Queen Elizabeth, Pele and former pope Benedict.

Many will be looking to cut loose this New Year's Eve after a few pandemic-dampened years, setting aside pinched budgets and a virus that is increasingly forgotten but not gone.

Sydney was among the first



Sydney was among the first major cities to ring in 2023, restaking its claim as the 'New Year's Eve capital of the world'. — AFP

major cities to ring in 2023, restaking its claim as the "New Year's Eve capital of the world" after two years of lockdowns and coronavirus-muted festivities.

Australia's borders have reopened and throngs of revellers gathered along Sydney's sparkling harbour to watch 100,000 pyrotechnics light up the southern sky.

A crowd that had been projected to hit more than one million watched as a spectacular 12-minute display showered the waterway and illuminated

the Sydney Harbour Bridge. "It's been a fairly good year for us; getting past Covid of course is great," David Hugh-Paterson said. "Looking forward to the future as well," the 52-year-old said. For some, 2022 was a year of Wordles, the Great Resignation, a new Taylor Swift album, an Oscar slap and billionaire meltdowns. It also saw the deaths of Queen Elizabeth II, Brazilian football icon Pele, Mikhail Gorbachev, Jiang Zemin, and Shinzo Abe. Former pope Benedict XVI also died on New Year's Eve.

WEATHER

MUSCAT: Max 26°C Min 18°C SALALAH: Max 29°C Min 22°C NIZWA: Max 29°C Min 16°C

PRAYER TIMINGS

SUNRISE: 06:49 FAJR: 05:28 DHUHR: 12:15 ASR: 15:16 MAGHRIB: 17:36 ISHA: 18:52



Saudi National Guard delegation visit CSC, NDC



MUSCAT: A delegation from the Ministry of National Guard of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), headed by Maj Gen Ghazi Sanat Al Otaibi, last week visited the Joint Command and Staff College (CSC) at the Academy for Strategic and Defence Studies in Bait Al Falaj.

Upon the guests' arrival, they were greeted by Air Commodore Ahmed bin Mohammed al Mashaikhi, Commandant of the CSC. Members of the visiting delegation toured the college's facilities and they were briefed on the activities at CSC.

VISITS NDC: A delegation from the Ministry of National Guard of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), headed by Maj Gen Ghazi Sanat Al Otaibi, also visited the National Defence College (NDC).

Upon the arrival of the guests

at the headquarters of the NDC at Bait Al Falaj Garrison, they were greeted by Rear Admiral Ali Abdullah Al Shidi, Commandant of the NDC.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed several matters of mutual interest.

Members of the visiting delegation were briefed on the college's facilities and equipment, as well as its various departments and halls designed according to the latest specifications and equipped with the best educational systems, training aids and multi-purpose electronic network systems.

The meeting was attended by Brigadier Nasser Rashid Al Kalbani, Deputy Commandant of the NDC and Dr Salim Said Al Kindi, Academic Representative of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) at the NDC. — ONA

Budget to be unveiled today

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

While the General Budget for 2023 will be unveiled today, there are several other laws that are keenly awaited in the new year.

According to the pre-budget briefing last week, the budget 2022 recorded a surplus of 1.146 million in 2022 based on higher crude prices.

Amid optimism, there are warnings of economic recession.

According to the Economic Outlook Report 2022 of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the prolonged Covid-19-related lockdown in China and the Ukraine-Russia conflict are expected to impact the global economy adversely in the coming year due to disruptions in global supply chains, energy and food prices.

The International Monetary Fund has predicted global inflation will hit 6.5 per cent next year, down from 8.8 per cent in 2022. Developing economies are expected to have less relief, with inflation projected to only ease to 8.1 per cent in 2023. The IMF has estimated that the global economy will grow just 2.7 per cent in 2023, down from 3.2 per cent in 2022.

The OECD has projected a less lofty performance this year of 2.2 per cent growth, compared with 3.1 per cent in 2022.



Increased economic integration and cooperation in the field of smart services via digital transformation and in the sectors of education and labour will help boost the overall economic development of the GCC — the combined economy is close to two trillion dollars, according to economic experts.

The Council of Oman is currently discussing a set of laws referred to it by the government, including the Labour Law, which will also include the government sector jobs apart from that of the private sector, the Higher Education Law, and the Social Protection Law that allows a government employee in the Sultanate of Oman to retire early with a pension.

Employees who have completed 20 years in service will be entitled to retire if the draft law gets clearance from the Council of Ministers. Now the minimum age for voluntary retirement is 30 years.

Real Estate Development Law and Small and Medium Enterprises Law are also being discussed.

Port of Khasab receives cruise ship



AHMED BIN KHALIFA AL SHUHI

The ship is carrying 137 tourists from France, Italy, Mexico, Spain, Canada, Germany and Australia. Upon their arrival, the tourists were acquainted with the various services and programmes provided by tourism companies to the tourists. They were also acquainted with the tourist potentials of Musandam Governorate.

BUKHA: The French-flagged cruise ship Le Bougainville anchored at the Port of Khasab en route from Dubai to Port of Fujairah in the brotherly United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The tourists visited several tourist landmarks of the wilayats of Khasab and Bukha such as the forts and castles. They also took tours at Khasab Souq and the beaches enjoying the nice winter weather and rainy conditions.

■ QUALIFYING ROUNDS AT SUHAR CAMEL FESTIVAL



SUHAR: The Royal Camel Corps (RCC) in cooperation with Oman Camel Racing Federation launched the first qualifying race for camels at the annual festival racing last week on Wednesday and Thursday with 45 rounds for different categories, as part of the 20th edition for the season 2022-23 at the Suhar camel racing track.

دليل النفط ش.م.م.
DALEEL PETROLEUM L.L.C.

AUCTION ANNOUNCEMENT

Daleel Petroleum Company announces its desire to place the auction, the details of which are shown below, provided that the bid is via electronic auction according to the following table:

Auction No	Material Type (Description)	Location	Visit Date	Bid Date	Bank Guarantee amount
PRCR-22-363	Furniture	Head Office – Azaibah	From 4 th January 2023 to 5 th January 2023	From 12:00 am 8 th January 2023 to 10:00 am 9 th January 2023	OMR 200
	Toyota LAND CRUISER – 2014	Head Office – Azaibah	From 4 th January 2023 5 th January 2023	From 12:00 am 8 th January 2023 to 10:00 am 9 th January 2023	OMR 500
	Toyota LAND CRUISER – 2012	Head Office – Azaibah	From 4 th January 2023 5 th January 2023	From 12:00 am 8 th January 2023 to 10:00 am 9 th January 2023	OMR 500
	GMC Ambulance 2006	Head Office – Azaibah	From 4 th January 2023 5 th January 2023	From 12:00 am 8 th January 2023 to 10:00 am 9 th January 2023	OMR 300
	TATA Prime Mover Truck 2017	Head Office – Azaibah	From 4 th January 2023 5 th January 2023	From 12:00 am 8 th January 2023 to 10:00 am 9 th January 2023	OMR 700

In accordance with the following terms & conditions:

- Bidders shall be required to submit a Bank Guarantee prior to have access for online bidding, where the date of online auction will be from 12:00 am 08th January 2023 to 10:00 am 09th January 2023. This is a refundable amount and shall be returned to the non-successful bidders after bid evaluation.
- Items offered for sale can be viewed as stated in the above table from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm and "As it is-where it is" basis (For any further details regarding the auction, please contact: Marwa Al Falahi 24394106) and it will be shown in the E-auction platform.
- Interested Bidders shall be required to register and submit their offer through: www.mazad.om
- The successful bidder shall pay 3% of the awarded amount to Mazad.om as an "Auction Fees".
- A VAT of 5% is added on the value of the item and auction service.
- The successful bidder shall pay full bid amount within five (5) working days from the date of notification of award. In the event that awarded bidder fails to pay the outstanding amounts within the specified period, the bidder shall be disqualified and the guarantee provided as part of the bid will be forfeited
- The successful bidder is responsible to follow Company's instruction & HSE procedure and to provide all the necessary arrangement for loading and transporting Vehicles.
- The winning bidder shall transfer the ownership of the sold materials and complete the transfer and registration procedures with the competent authorities within (10) ten working days as a maximum from the date of his notification. Otherwise, he will have to pay a delay fine of 50 Omani riyals for each day, making sure to remove the company's name from the vehicles before completing the transfer.
- The Ministry of Energy & Minerals and Daleel Petroleum L.L.C reserves the right to take any action it seems appropriate to this auction without giving any reason.

For more information regards to the online bidding registration, please contact info@mazad.om or Mobile number +968 79919983



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New paid parking lots added in Muscat

MUSCAT: As part of the efforts to curb the problem of random and permanent parking, new areas will be brought under the paid parking system in the capital from January 1, 2023.

The newly added areas are the parking lots located near the building of the Directorate-General of Labour Welfare at the Ministry of Labour in Ruwi, Al Khoud and the

new car parks at Al Khoud souq, and the one behind the Ooredoo store. It may be noted that these areas were included in the paid parking system last year, but withdrawn by the authorities following requests from the public.

The parking reservation methods include reservation via SMS to 90091 for 30 to 300 minutes.

The user will receive a text mes-

sage confirming the reservation, including the ticket number, vehicle number and code, and the time requested.

In the event that the user wishes to extend the time, all they have to do is send another message to the number 90091 and follow the same steps. Users can also apply via the Baladati application on smartphones to book parking

spaces for vehicles by hours, as well as to obtain a parking permit.

Muscat Municipality, meanwhile, had to tow away abandoned vehicles and take legal measures against the owners.

These vehicles may be misused by anti-socials and pose security and environmental risks, in addition to affecting the general appearance of the city.



■ TREE PLANTATION CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED IN AL AMERAT



AL AMERAT: The office of the Wali of Al Amerat, in collaboration with the Environment Authority, launched a campaign for distributing 3,000 saplings at the Sultan Center, Al Amerat, on Saturday. The campaign is part of a nationwide initiative that aims to grow 10 million trees. The Wali's office launched a tree plantation campaign in September in cooperation with public and private establishments and civil societies. Since then, a total of 3,190 were planted at various locations in the Wilayat of Al Amerat. The event was attended by Mohammed bin Humaid al Ghabshi, Wali of Al Amerat and members of specialists at the Environment Authority. — ONA

Villagers of Al Sheji cheer as rains overflow giving new lease of life



The recent rains in northern Oman have recharged the aquifer and have benefited the trees, cattle wealth and some standing crops.

Natural buffers limit the expansion of desertification. Trees and plants help expand green areas, which are to soften vital to the atmosphere and increasing oxygen in the atmosphere.

Al Sheji village, located amid the Hajar mountains in the Wilayat of Rustaq, had a good share of these rains.

Villagers enjoyed the rain and were happy to see good amount of water flow in the channels. Some

“
The rain is a good omen for all of us.
The rain is also vital for wildlife in this village

VILLAGERS
OF AL SHEJI

overflowed, while some dried for several months, got a new lease of life.

“This village has suffered from drought due to the lack of rainfall, but in recent years the amount of rain has increased. Today we are happy when we see the flow of water in the main water channel of the village. We are expecting good crop this year,” locals told the Observer.

Al Sheji is famous for various types of plants and trees, such as palm trees, mangoes, lemons, and other types of vegetables, such as garlic, onions, and tomatoes,

which are usually marketed at the local markets. The residents of this mountain village rely on rainwater to irrigate their farms.

“The rain is a good omen for all of us. The rain is also vital for wildlife in this village,” they added.

Environmental specialists agree that this village, like other mountainous villages, is characterised by unique topographical characteristics.

“Among the wild animals seen here are foxes, lynxes, and Arabian tahr. The mountains and plains of this village host migratory birds,” say the locals.

Omani adventurer scales world's seven highest summits

SANTIAGO: The Omani adventurer Sulaiman bin Hamood al Nabei was able to scale the highest peak of the Antarctica continent that rises approximately 5,000 metres above sea level reaching the South Pole during the same adventure.

This has made him the first Omani national to scale all seven highest summits of the world and the South Pole.

Commenting to ONA, Al Nabei said: “I began my adventure on December 2. First, I reached the South Pole, the centre of the Earth, on December 16 after covering a distance of 120 km skiing over eight days. Then, I headed to Mount Vinson and climbed it in stages. I reached the summit of Mount Vinson, the highest peak of the Antarctica, on December 24.

The adventure is part of the Grand Slam Explorer programme aimed at reaching the

Seven World Summits on each continent and the North and South Poles.

Al Nabei explained that the trip was characterised by environmental and climatic conditions that are among the harshest natural factors on the face of the earth.

He summited Aconcagua in Argentina, with a height of 6,962 metres, and the highest mountain peak in the continent of Europe, which is Mount Elbrus in Russia, with a height of 5,642 metres, and the ascent to the highest mountain peak in Australia, which is the summit of Mount Kosciuszko with a height of 2,228 metres, in addition to climbing the highest peak mountain in North America, which is the summit of Mount Denali, with a height of 6,190 metres, and Mount Moun Blanc in France with a height of 4,810 metres. — ONA





MONEY MATTERS FOR TRAVELLERS



The key elements of tourism are, by and large, a friendly ambience, advanced infrastructure, better options for boarding, good means of transportation, and last but not least, economic and fitting to the diverse budgets, an important feature for the majority of tourists including backpackers.

While the Sultanate of Oman takes pride in having hospitable people, transport and communication means, and natural tourism destinations, there is a question over hotel rates and entertainment avenues.

According to some tourists who visited the country and reports published by some of the foreign travellers in their home countries, hotel rates, prices of antiques and curios, and other charges levied on tourists are sometimes the major deciding factor in their holiday plans.

On the other hand, Having affordable rates at tourist destinations can support Oman Vision 2040, bringing in more tourists from all continents, and



HAVING AFFORDABLE RATES AT TOURIST DESTINATIONS CAN HELP BRING IN MORE TOURISTS FROM ALL CONTINENTS, AND TAKE OMAN'S TOURISM TO A GREAT LEVEL

take Oman's tourism to a great level, according to tourism experts.

"Yes, the cost of hotel and other tourist logistics are high in Oman compared to some of GCC countries due to which mass tourism has not reached its full potential," said Sunil D'Souza, CEO of Travel City Group.

If rates of hotels and prices charged by tourist spots are a tad more competitive, tourists will find it more attractive to explore the inbound tourism to Oman and tourism marketing will have infinite potential, they opine.

"A budget hotel charges a minimum of RO 20 whereas I was able to stay in another GCC country for half of the price," Zainab al Zadjali, an Omani traveller, says.

Tourists who visited Ras al Jinz turtle-watching venue feel the charges of RO 8 per head are taxing. A family of 5 will end up paying a big sum, given they had budgeted their travel plans.

"The fee for turtle watching for one person is RO 8 at the moment, instead of the previous RO 5 and RO 3, which they used

to charge until few years ago. If they maintain the old ticket, I feel more visitors will be attracted to this unique experience," said a member of two tourist families comprising of 11 members. They claimed to have called off their plans at the last moment.

According to Ayman Assa'abi, a tourist guide at the Ras Al Jinz turtle watch, there has been a decline in the number of tourists.

"I think, just as the World Cup got over and visitors are opting for budget travel which is reflected in their choices and preferences," says Assa'abi. Experts have suggested some measures to improve the scenario, such as reducing the formation charges and licence fees, designing hotel packages for all types of travellers, and building capacity, more hotel rooms and five and 4-star hotels.

"Also, taxis must be metred like the rest of the GCC regions, and more taxis need to be added for tourists to move around. Likewise, more family attractions should be created to make Oman attractive to tourists," added D'Souza.



Xi: Covid control is entering new phase as cases surge



A health worker administering a dose of CanSino Biologics inhalable Covid-19 coronavirus vaccine in Bijie, in China's southwestern Guizhou province. – AFP

WUHAN/BEIJING: Chinese President Xi Jinping called on Saturday for more effort and unity as the country enters a “new phase” in its approach to combating the pandemic, in his first comments to the public on Covid-19 since his government changed course three weeks ago and relaxed its rigorous policy of lockdowns and mass testing.

China’s abrupt switch earlier this month from the “zero-Covid” policy that it had maintained for nearly three years has led to infections sweeping across the country unchecked. It has also caused a further drop in economic activity and international concern, with Britain and France becoming the latest countries to impose curbs on travellers from China.

The switch by China followed unprecedented protests over the policy championed by Xi, marking the strongest show of public defiance in his decade-old presidency and coinciding with grim growth figures for the country’s \$17 trillion economy.

In a televised speech to mark the New Year, Xi said China

had overcome unprecedented difficulties and challenges in the battle against Covid, and that its policies were “optimised” when the situation and time so required.

“Since the outbreak of the epidemic... the majority of cadres and masses, especially medical personnel, grassroots workers braved hardships and courageously persevered,” Xi said.

“At present, the epidemic prevention and control is entering a new phase, it is still a time of struggle, everyone is persevering and working hard, and the dawn is ahead. Let’s work harder, persistence means victory, and unity means victory.”

New Year’s Eve prompted reflection online and by residents of Wuhan, the epicentre of the Covid outbreak nearly three years ago, about the zero-Covid policy and the impact of its reversal. People in the central city of Wuhan expressed hope that normal life would return in 2023 despite a surge in cases since pandemic curbs were lifted.

— Reuters

N Korea fires ballistic missiles capping record year of tests

SEOUL: North Korea fired three short-range ballistic missiles on Saturday, Seoul’s military said, adding a final salvo to Pyongyang’s record-breaking blitz of launches this year.

Military tensions on the Korean peninsula have risen sharply in 2022 as the North has conducted sanctions-busting weapons tests nearly every month, including firing its most advanced intercontinental ballistic missile ever.

Saturday’s launch comes a day after South Korea successfully tested a solid-fuel space launch vehicle, and follows the incursion of five North Korean drones into the South’s airspace earlier in the week.

South Korea’s military said it had detected “three short-range ballistic missiles launched by North Korea into the East Sea from the area of Chunghwa County, North Hwanghae Province, at around 8”, referring to the body of water also known as the Sea of Japan.

The missiles flew about 350 kilometres before splashing down, it added.

“Our military maintains a full readiness posture while closely cooperating with the US and strengthening surveillance and vigilance,” the Joint Chiefs of Staff said.

Monday’s North Korean drone incursion was the first such incident in five years and prompted an apology from Seoul’s defence minister after the military failed to shoot down a single drone despite scrambling jets for a five-hour operation.

South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol called the incident “intolerable” and added



A man walks past a television screen showing a news broadcast with file footage of a North Korean missile test, at a railway station in Seoul after North Korea fired three short-range ballistic missiles. – AFP

that the South should ensure that Pyongyang realised that “provocations are always met with harsh consequences”.

Seoul’s military staged drills on Thursday that the country’s top brass said would improve its defences against any future drone provocations.

And on Friday, South Korea successfully tested a new space launch vehicle as part of its drive to strengthen space-based reconnaissance and surveillance capabilities, the defence ministry said.

Pyongyang earlier this month said it conducted an “important final-stage” test for the development of a reconnaissance satellite, claiming it had developed advanced technologies to take images from space.

“The purpose of North

South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol called the incident ‘intolerable’ adding that the South should ensure that Pyongyang realised that ‘provocations are always met with harsh consequences’

Korea’s missile launch today is to respond to Seoul’s solid-fuelled space launch vehicle. Pyongyang seems to be thinking of this as a competition,” Yang Moo-jin, a professor at the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, said.

North Korea is currently holding a major party meeting in

Pyongyang at which Kim and other senior party officials are outlining their policy goals for 2023 in key areas including diplomacy, security and the economy.

Earlier this year, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said he wanted his country to have the world’s most powerful nuclear force and declared the North an “irreversible” nuclear state.

On Wednesday, Kim set out “new key goals” for the country’s military, state media reported, without giving any specifics.

North Korea’s end-of-year plenary meetings are typically used by the regime to unveil the country’s domestic and foreign policy priorities for the year ahead.

Full details of the current session are expected to be announced after it concludes.

— AFP

Syria records lowest annual death toll since war began: monitor

BEIRUT: At least 3,825 people have died in Syria’s war in 2022, the lowest yearly toll since the start of the conflict more than a decade ago, a war monitor said on Saturday.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights had last year put the death toll at 3,746 throughout 2021, before revising it up to 3,882.

After years of deadly battle and bombardments following the brutal suppression of 2011 anti-government protests, the conflict has largely abated in the last three years.

Sporadic fighting at times breaks out and fighter attacks continue, mainly in the east of the country.

Among those killed in 2022 were 1,627 civilians, including 321 children, according to the figures from the Observatory, which relies on a wide network of sources on the ground in Syria.

Of the civilians killed, 209 people — about half of them children — were killed by mines or other explosive devices.

In addition, 627 government security force personnel were killed along with 217



Demonstrators rally against a potential rapprochement between Ankara and the Syrian regime, in the opposition-held city of Al Bab, on the border with Turkey, in Syria’s northern Aleppo province. – AFP

other fighters loyal to the regime of Bashar al Assad, the Observatory said.

Some 387 members of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and their allies were also among the dead, as well as more than 500 fighters. The director of the Observatory, Rami Abdel Rahman, said a large number of the deaths occurred due to security chaos, dozens of strikes launched by Israel, and attacks by the IS group in the Syrian

desert.

The war has killed nearly half a million people since it broke out over a decade ago, displacing almost half of Syria’s pre-war population.

Assad has retaken most of the territory initially lost to rebel groups, though the SDF — which the regime maintains a degree of cooperation with — continues to control areas in the north and northeast.

Turkey, a key player in the

war, has repeatedly threatened to launch a ground offensive against the Syrian Kurds in recent months, having already pursued three such offensives previously.

In addition, about half of the northwestern province of Idlib and areas bordering the neighbouring provinces of Hama, Aleppo and Latakia are dominated by the fighter group Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and other rebel factions. — AFP



MUSCAT MUNICIPALITY
Advertisement No. (1/2023)

Companies specialized in the field and registered with **Tender Board**, may obtain tender documents for the website through the following link: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) against non-refundable fees as mentioned below starting from the date of this announcement and until the end of deadline stipulated below.

Tender No.	E- Tender No.	Description of Tender	Tender Fee	Last Date to Collect the Tender	Tender Return Date	Grade
PRE/22/109	2022/MM/QS-90	Design and Construction of Storm Water Diversion Channel in Al Jiffnain, Seeb	25	21/01/2023	09/02/2023	First
PRE/22/178	2022/MM/QS-91	Requesting Licenses for Muscat Municipality Backup Solution	25	21/01/2023	09/02/2023	Excellent & First
PRE/22/179	2022/MM/QS-92	Consultancy Services for Supervision of the Construction of Link Road between Al Amerat Road to Al Joud Road (Phase-1)	25	21/01/2023	09/02/2023	First
PRE/22/180	2022/MM/QS-93	Consultancy Services for Supervision of the Construction of Dualization of Halban Street (Phase-1)	25	21/01/2023	09/02/2023	First
PRE/22/181	2022/MM/QS-94	Post-Contract Quantity Surveying Services for Construction of Dualization of Halban Street (Phase-1)	25	21/01/2023	09/02/2023	First

Tender Conditions :-

- Bidders shall submit their offers electronically accompanied with an electronic copy of a bond issued by any local bank in Oman addressed to Muscat municipality. The bond shall be (1 %) of the tender value valid for ninety (90) days starting from the date of bids submission. Any tenders which do not meet the required bond shall not be accepted.
- Tender Bonds shall be E-Bond and to be submitted through E-Tendering system, addressed to Muscat Municipality.
- For any inquiries regarding tenders, please visit e-tendering website: (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) .
- For technical support of e-tendering system please send an email to (etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om) or call (+968 24402200).
- For technical support of E-Bond through e-tendering system please send an email to (esnad@gstb.gov.om) or call (+968 24402200/24402330).



Venezuelan opposition dissolves Guaido’s ‘interim government’



Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido waves a national flag during a demonstration in October 2022. – AFP

CARACAS: The Venezuelan opposition on Friday dissolved the “interim government” led by Juan Guaido, once the popular and internationally recognised face of a failed drive to oust leftist leader Nicolas Maduro.

The vote came in an online session of the opposition-controlled National Assembly, a body elected in 2015 and now largely symbolic as it was replaced by a legislature loyal to Maduro.

The tally was 72 in favour of dissolving the interim government, 29 against and eight abstentions.

Almost four years ago, in January 2019, Guaido won the recognition of more than 50 nations including the United States as the legitimate albeit acting leader of Venezuela, after widely disputed presidential elections that kept Maduro in power.

But while the opposition holds the purse strings to some of Venezuela’s assets abroad, Guaido’s failure to find a winning strategy to oust Maduro has caused his public support to plummet.

Maduro is blamed for overseeing and running Venezuela’s economy into chaos and poverty. And Guaido’s international backers, led by the United States, have adopted a more nuanced approach. Backing for him abroad has dwindled over time as he failed to dislodge Maduro.

While there was no immediate comment from Washington on Friday, a senior US official said this week that Washington would continue to support Venezuela’s democratic opposition and the interim government, regardless of what form it takes.

At the same time, President Joe Biden’s administration rewarded the Maduro government’s decision to return to talks with the opposition, with a slight easing of sanctions on the Venezuelan oil industry.

Meanwhile, some Latin American countries — including Brazil, Colombia and Argentina — have recently elected leftist leaders.

Three of four major parties in the Venezuelan opposition voted on Friday to end the interim government led by Guaido.

“The interim government is no longer useful,” these parties said in a joint statement, “and is of no interest to citizens.”

Guaido denounced the vote as “a jump into a vacuum.”

“Today there was capitulation. Seventy-two lawmakers capitulated from a tool for fighting, which is the acting presidency,”

But Tomas Guanipa, a lawmaker from the Justice First party, which backed ending the interim government, insisted the opposition is not giving up.

“We are being realistic,” Guanipa said.

The National Assembly controlled by the opposition has insisted on remaining intact even though it has no power, saying that by doing so it maintains a thread of constitutionality. It insists that legislative elections won by Maduro loyalists were also fraudulent.

— AFP

Former pope Benedict XVI dies aged 95, leaders pay tribute

VATICAN CITY: Former Pope Benedict, who in 2013 became the first pontiff in 600 years to resign, died on Saturday aged 95 in a secluded monastery in the Vatican where he had lived since stepping down.

Bells tolled across the Vatican City as news of his death, which followed a rapid decline in his health over Christmas, spread to the faithful on an unusually warm winter’s day.

The Vatican said his body would lie in state from Monday in St Peter’s Basilica and his funeral will be held on the morning of January 5. Pope Francis will preside over the ceremony, which will take place in the huge square in front of the basilica.

“With sorrow I inform you that the Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, passed away today at 9:34 in the Mater Ecclesiae Monastery in the Vatican,” Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said.

The Vatican has painstakingly elaborate rituals for what happens after a reigning pope dies but no publicly known ones for a former pope — one of the many complications thrown up by Benedict’s shock resignation in 2013.

Earlier this week, Pope Francis disclosed that his predecessor was “very sick”. Bruni said Benedict had received his last rites, called “the anointing of the sick”, on Wednesday.

Leaders were swift in sending their condolences for Benedict, who was the first German pope in 1,000 years.

“We mourn the death of our Bavarian Pope,” said Markus Soeder, premier of Benedict’s home state. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said on Twitter that the world had lost “a formative figure of the Catholic Church”.



Catholics and tourists visiting St Peter’s Square on Saturday expressed sadness and admiration for former Pope Benedict XVI, following news of his death. – AFP

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni hailed Benedict as “a great man who history will not forget”, while Polish President Andrzej Duda called him “one of the greatest theologians of the 20th and 21st centuries”.

French President Emmanuel Macron said Benedict had “worked with all his soul and intelligence for a more fraternal world”.

UN chief Antonio Guterres praised the former pontiff for his “tenacious commitment to non-violence and peace”.

Russia’s President Vladimir Putin said he was “an eminent religious and state figure, a convinced defender of traditional Christian values”.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said he would be remembered for “his efforts for global peace and the centrality of human beings’ dignity” in his ideas.

For nearly 25 years, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict was the powerful head of the Vatican’s doctrinal office, then known as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF).

He was elected pope on April 19, 2005 to succeed the widely popular Pope John Paul II, who reigned for 27 years. Cardinals chose him from among their number seeking continuity and what one called “a safe pair of hands”.

But Benedict himself acknowledged that he was a weak administrator, saying he showed a “lack of resolve in governing and decision taking” during his eight-year papacy which was marked by missteps and a leaks scandal.

He announced he was resigning in Latin at a routine meeting of cardinals. Many had no idea what he had said and it took time before the news sank in. He himself said he was no longer strong enough to lead the Church due to his “advanced age”.

After his resignation he installed himself in a converted convent on the Vatican grounds and chose the title “pope emeritus”.

Although he rarely appeared in public, Catholic conservatives looked to the former pope as their standard bearer and some ultra-traditionalists even refused to acknowledge Francis as a legitimate pontiff.

They have criticised Francis for his more welcoming approach to members of the LGBTQ+ community and to Catholics who divorced and remarried outside the Church, saying both were undermining traditional values.

Despite the difficulties that emerged from having two men wearing white in the Vatican, Francis developed a warm relationship with Benedict, and said it was like having a grandfather living in the house. — Reuters

‘Moral, historical rightness is on our side’: Putin

MOSCOW: President Vladimir Putin said in his New Year’s address on Saturday that “moral, historical rightness” is on Russia’s side as his country faces international condemnation for its offensive in Ukraine.

As Russian regions in the Far East rung in the New Year, the Russian leader delivered his traditional midnight address standing among soldiers who fought in Ukraine, according to Russian news agencies.

Putin said in remarks carried by news agencies that this year was marked by “truly pivotal, fateful events” which became “the frontier that lays the foundation for our common future, for our true independence”.

“Today we are fighting for this, protecting our people in our own historical territories, in the new constituent entities of the Russian Federation,” he added, referring to Ukrainian regions that Russia claimed to have annexed.



President Vladimir Putin said in his New Year’s address that ‘moral, historical rightness’ is on Russia’s side as his country faces international condemnation for its offensive in Ukraine. – AFP

“Moral, historical rightness is on our side,” he said.

The Russian leader also said that “a real sanctions war was declared on us” after the West slapped Moscow with a barrage of sanctions in response to military action in Ukraine.

“Those who started it expected the total destruction of our industry, finances, transport. That didn’t happen,” he added.

According to Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, Putin delivered his New Year’s speech from the headquarters of Russia’s southern military district, where he was on a visit earlier on Saturday and presented awards to servicemen. — AFP

With 80,000 startups, India is home to world’s largest startup ecosystem

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
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With more than 80,000 startups, India is emerging as an entrepreneurial hub of the world. The success rate of startups is equally high in India, as claimed by the government and its ministers.

The country currently has 84,012 startups (November 2022 figure) compared to 452 in 2016.

“There is a very high probability of failure of startups. Though I must say, the success rate of startups in India is relatively higher than the rest of the world....,” said Piyush Goyal, Union Minister for Commerce in India’s lower house (Lok Sabha) during Question Hour recently.

S Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister, substantiated Goyal’s views and statistics on the status of startups in India. “Due to reform measures taken by the government during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, India witnessed the highest FDI flows in the country’s history that resulted in the creation of the largest startup ecosystem in the world,” media reports quoted him saying at a business event in Cyprus on Friday.

He drew the attention of the business gathering’s attention

towards India’s Productive Linked Incentive (PLI), which is designed to increase production in India. The scheme, according to him, is bearing fruits, and the country’s volume of export and foreign direct investment is increasing.

“In 2021-22, our exports surpassed \$400 billion for the first time, and for this year, we have set a target of \$470 billion... The reforms implemented at the

height of the Covid pandemic are beginning to bear fruit... We are receiving the highest FDI flows ever in our history. Last year we received \$81 billion in FDI. We have become home to one of the world’s largest startup ecosystems. We are now home to almost 100 unicorns,” he said.

Jaishankar highlighted India’s ambition to emerge a major manufacturing hub and become a

\$5 trillion economy by 2025.

The startups, according to him, are playing a vital role in directing the country towards both goals.

“One of the big initiatives we are working on right now is advocating for a lifestyle change. We want to use the G20 presidency to drive this forward. PM Modi believes that this will make a big difference for the environment,” news agency ANI quoted him as saying.

In battered Ukrainian city, the latest battle is against winter

NATALIA YERMAK AND THOMAS GIBBONS-NEFF

In winter, during wartime, any number of obstacles can make life difficult for firefighters in Lyman. Cell service is so bad in this eastern Ukrainian city that there's a good chance an emergency call won't go through at all. Water is sparse, leaving the city's only aging firetruck with barely enough to fight a blaze. Some streets on its outskirts are impassable because of mines and unexploded munitions.

And then there are the windows.

After the war moved through Lyman like a months long destructive wave, damaging and destroying neighbourhoods with explosive shells, it left thousands of blown-out windows. So the workers at Emergency Service Department No. 21, Lyman's single working fire station, are often diverted to an arduous but important task: covering up destroyed windows and damaged roofs as winter sets in.

"It had all started in the winter, and it has come to the winter again," said Andriy Liakh, 33, an emergency official from a neighbouring town who is now working in Lyman. No more than 25-30 per cent of the buildings in Lyman are totally beyond repair, he estimated, meaning there is a lot of work to be done to preserve the rest.

On the heels of intense bombardment early in the war, Russian occupation in the spring and summer, and Ukrainian liberation in the fall, the emergency department's staff is slowly getting reacquainted with a radically different city. There are fewer resources and workers, and temperatures continue to plummet, making conditions extremely challenging.

Journalists from *The New York Times* spent a day with the firefighters from Station 21 as they repaired buildings and responded to a house fire in Lyman, offering a brief window into a Ukrainian city that sits between its destruction and, hopefully, reconstruction. The sound of shelling at the front line was not far off.

"We are adults; we understand our service, what's required," said Liakh, clean-shaven and tired.

As the war moves into the coldest months, winter has become a weapon of its own. Russia's relentless strikes on Ukraine's infrastructure have left thousands without power, freezing in basements and huddled around wood stoves. On Thursday, Moscow launched one of its largest attacks yet with a flurry of drones and cruise missiles that targeted the country's energy grid in Kyiv and other major cities.

Near the front lines, in towns and cities that have been mostly without power for months, freezing temperatures are a part of life. Residents survive by hoarding wood, rationing generator fuel and bundling up. In the battlefield trenches, Ukrainian and Russian soldiers contend with frostbite, hypothermia and weeks of cold meals — constantly exposed to slick mud and knee-deep puddles on warmer days, and hard, frozen ground during the colder nights.

The afternoon call for Station 21's small crew this month came shortly before the cook finished preparing a hearty lunch of noodles and meat in an aging, Soviet-era field kitchen out back. A house was on fire in the city's north.



Firefighters from Emergency Service Department Number 21, the single working fire station in Lyman, Ukraine, work to cover up blown-out windows as cold weather grips the country.

Lunch would have to wait.

It was miraculous that the station had received the emergency call at all. At around 11 that morning, the city's cell towers were shut down as maintenance workers began their daily repair on Lyman's power grid. The fire, which began around 1 pm, was seen by a neighbour who had a few bars of cell signal.

But instead of reaching Lyman's emergency dispatch number, the person contacted a nearby city's dispatch, which then reached Station 21 by Starlink, a satellite Internet service in wide use across Ukraine, especially in combat areas. The crew's aging, red-and-white Soviet-model firetruck rumbled to the scene.

When they arrived at the modest home, the fire was manageable. Clad in body armour — a reminder that the threat of shelling in Lyman remained — the firefighters moved to extinguish the blaze. The fire was small, so they didn't run out of water this time.

"The house is abandoned; the owner went somewhere; and some homeless person stayed here overnight, heating the stove," said Serhiy, 43, a tall and weathered safety inspector. "The stove was ruined, but he was trying to get

warm anyway," he said, standing in the yard as his colleagues descended from the roof and rolled back the fire hose. "He kindled the fire and ran away. The neighbours saw it in time."

With a broken window, a hole in the roof and some dilapidated walls, the house stood mostly intact. Several others on the street had suffered worse fates, reduced by shelling to piles of rubble or black husks. The neighbourhood had been ravaged in the fighting but was considered the less-damaged part of the city.

As the Russians advanced in spring, they showered the southern section of Lyman with artillery fire and missile strikes, turning the neighbourhood of multistory houses into an apocalyptic ghost town. Hundreds of windows in the tall, off-white residential buildings bared their splintered glass teeth. A medical university building crumbled onto itself like a cardboard box hit by a fist, and one of the wings of the city hospital had a hole in the roof and a wall that was two floors deep.

Still, about 3,000 people from a prewar population of 24,000 remain in Lyman, calling the bombed-out set piece their home.

Trump tax returns undermine his image

JIM TANKERSLEY, SUSANNE CRAIG & RUSS BUETTNER

House Democrats released six years of former president Donald Trump's tax records on Friday, offering new insight into his business dealings that further undermined his long-cultivated image as a wildly successful businessman.

The release contained thousands of pages of tax documents, including individual returns for Trump and his wife, Melania, as well as business returns for several of the hundreds of companies that make up his sprawling business organisation. It followed the release of reports from Democrats on the Ways and Means Committee that showed Trump had paid a total of \$1.1 million in federal income taxes in the first three years of his presidency, but paid no tax in 2020 as his income dwindled and losses mounted.

The document disclosure drew rebukes and threats of retaliation from Trump and his Republican allies in Congress, who suggested that once their party takes over the House on January 3, they may seek to disclose tax returns filed by Democratic politicians, Supreme Court justices and members of President Joe Biden's family, such as his son Hunter.

The documents appeared to show that Trump violated his campaign promise to donate his salary as president, at least in 2020, when he reported no charitable giving of any kind. They also suggested Trump's tax bill may have gone

up because of a change in his signature 2017 tax overhaul: a limitation on the deduction of state and local taxes paid.

In a statement on Friday, Trump denounced Democrats and said the decision to release the returns had been "weaponized."

"The 'Trump' tax returns once again show how proudly successful I have been and how I have been able to use depreciation and various other tax deductions as an incentive for creating thousands of jobs and magnificent structures and enterprises," he wrote.

But the returns, which cover the tax years 2015 through 2020, do not show much success for Trump in his recent business dealings. They show Trump often reported heavy losses from his own ventures, even as he continued to cash in on assets he inherited. Trump's history of inheriting wealth and then losing it was chronicled by *The New York Times* in 2020, when it obtained decades of Trump's tax information, including much of what was disclosed on Friday.

In 2018, after a decade in which the former president declared no taxable income according to tax returns reviewed by the *Times*, Trump reported taxable income of more than \$24 million. He paid almost \$1 million in federal taxes, nearly the entire total he paid as president.

That income appeared to be the result of more than \$14 million in gains from the sale of an investment his father had made in the 1970s, a Brooklyn housing complex named Starrett City, which became part of Trump's inheritance.

Much of what the committee made public on Friday had also been revealed in a report with top line numbers that the



Trump's returns are complex, sprawling across thousands of pages. The documents show he has switched accountants to compile them.

The documents appeared to show that Trump violated his campaign promise to donate his salary as president, at least in 2020, when he reported no charitable giving of any kind

committee released last week. But the thousands of pages of tax documents offered new insights into the president's income and spending. The documents show, for example, that the effect of his inheritance in 2018 was greater than what the *Times* previously reported: Trump recorded \$25.7 million in gains from the sale of business properties that he and his siblings had inherited or taken through trusts, including the sale of Starrett City.

The sales of business properties Trump created himself came at a loss, however, dragging down his net proceeds and somewhat reducing his tax liability, the tax itemisation shows. They included a total of \$1 million in assets or equipment sold at a loss by two of his business entities, and another \$1 million loss for bailing his son Donald Trump Jr. out of a failed business to build prefabricated homes.

Trump also received tens of thousands of dollars in dividends while he was in the White House from trusts that had been established for him when he was young, his tax returns show.

Tax returns are among the most privately held documents in the United States. Although Congress has the power to obtain and release them, it rarely takes such action.

After Trump broke with tradition and declined to release his returns as a presidential candidate or while he was in office, Democratic lawmakers sought them out of concern about potential conflicts of interest. Ultimately, they were able to unlock them using their oversight powers through the inquiry into the Internal Revenue Service's policy of auditing presidents and vice-presidents.

What are your New Year resolutions?



Dr Hamed al Sinawi
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Every January many of us make resolutions for the New Year, yet few of us keep them.

I personally can think of a few that were difficult to keep, maybe because I was too ambitious or maybe they were not in line with my values. I wanted to know how the young people view New Year’s resolutions so I asked my son for his opinion. This is what he said:

“Perhaps the outlying cause that makes keeping our resolutions so hard is how glamorised the start of the new year often is. “New year, new me” is a phrase that is commonly thrown around during this time of the year. Another well-known phrase that perhaps hits closer to home is “old habits die hard”

The feeling of a fresh start is invigorating to many, as it

allows people to view their lives objectively, which in turn allows them to realise their unlimited potential for growth. Even so, this dopamine rush is usually short lived.

Setting high-achieving goals requires no effort, as everyone dreams big. Chasing those dreams is a whole other story. What people tend to overlook is that ambitious goals require an ambitious drive, and the tremendous amount of effort required to achieve these high-reaching goals releases a minimal amount of dopamine in comparison to the act of simply daydreaming about possibilities.

“Rome wasn’t built in a day.” This adage perfectly describes the nature of almost all the hefty goals that we set for ourselves at the start

‘PERHAPS THE OUTLYING CAUSE THAT MAKES KEEPING OUR RESOLUTIONS SO HARD IS DUE TO HOW GLAMORISED THE START OF THE NEW YEAR OFTEN IS. ‘NEW YEAR, NEW ME’ IS A PHRASE WE OFTEN HEAR AT THE NEW YEAR

of each year. Time, patience and consistency can be considered the trifecta of achieving success.

Life in itself is the compounding of efforts. Taking slow, consistent and deliberate steps towards a goal are necessary to build a solid foundation for success. When

broken down to simple steps, even the most outrageous and unfathomable endeavours are possible.

Virtually any skills can be learnt within a year by simply dedicating as little as 20-30 minutes daily. With such minimal yet consistent effort, one can master a skill and be ahead of the majority of the population in whatever field they wish to thrive in.

In my opinion, the reason people easily give up on their new year resolutions is not the lack of conviction or mindset, but rather the lack of consistency – ultimately coming down to habits. Habits cannot be formed in a day or a night. They require deliberate planning at the start, and become second-nature with enough consistency.

A concept that is often

mentioned in literature is keystone habits. These are habits that can spread out to other parts of one’s life – often unintentionally.

Think of a person that works out consistently every week. While their main focus might be to improve their physique or to be healthier, the byproduct of this action is being more disciplined, as working out also requires specific meals and tracking macronutrients for some people. This discipline eventually seeps into other aspects of their lives, helping them concentrate better, study better and generally minimise the effects of perpetual procrastination”.

Finally, whether you’re making resolutions or not, I wish you all a happy new year full of happiness, success and fulfilment.

Sweden takes EU presidency after shift to the right

MARC PREEL AND JEROME CARTILLIER

Sweden takes over the EU’s rotating presidency from January 1 vowing to maintain unity on Ukraine and uphold free trade in the face of calls for a tougher response to US green subsidies.

But the main questions for Stockholm as it takes the reins of the 27-nation bloc at this tumultuous time could be how new dynamics in its own domestic politics play out on the European stage.

After eight years of centre-left rule, the government of conservative Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson formed in October relies on an unprecedented alliance with the far-right Sweden Democrats for a majority in parliament.

While the nationalist party has dropped its earlier calls for Sweden to quit the EU, its hardline stance in key areas such as immigration looks set to cause friction at home and curb the room for manoeuvre.

Helene Fritzon, a European Parliament member for the opposition Social Democrats, said there were “lots of pretty words” from the Swedish government over its plans.

Alongside Russia’s aggression and trade, Stockholm has outlined climate change and protecting EU “fundamental values” in the face of disputes with Hungary and Poland as priorities.

“But there is great concern when, in practice, it is the Sweden Democrats who have the whip hand,” Fritzon said.

Others, however, are less worried about the potential for the far-right party to play spoilers during Stockholm’s time in the European spotlight.

The deal hatched to form the government means the Sweden Democrats formally have to be informed of any decisions taken in regards to the EU. “But generally EU matters are excluded from this agreement,” Goran von Sydow, director of the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies, said.

For von Sydow a bigger worry is how the neophyte administration copes with the burden of helping navigate the EU through such choppy geopolitical waters.

“The challenge would be the relatively inexperienced government,” he said. “So many of the ministers and their closest political aides have very little experience of at all being at EU meetings.”

Traditionally Sweden, which voted against joining the euro single currency, has had a slightly stand-offish relationship with Europe.

“They tend to keep a bit of a distance,” said Sebastien Maillard, director of the Jacques Delors Institute in Paris.

He predicted that Stockholm would “fulfil its duties” during its six-month presidency, but “there won’t be too much zeal”. — AFP

Free lift passes, anyone? Japan’s ski hot spot is desperate for workers



Motoko Rich

The writer is Tokyo bureau chief for NYT



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The writer reports for the Tokyo bureau of NYT

Along with its bountiful, gossamer-light snow, the Japanese ski resort area of Niseko has come to be known for luxury hotels charging upward of \$2,000 a night and high-end shops selling Moncler and Bogner jackets for even more.

But this season, amid the art galleries and Instagram-ready coffee kiosks, there is another inescapable sight, one that attests to the pandemic’s lingering economic mayhem: “help wanted” ads.

At Tamashii, a bar where dozens of empty liquor bottles hang from the ceiling, flyers advertise jobs for kitchen help, dishwashers and cashiers at about 70 per cent above minimum wage. Hanazono, one of four main ski resorts on Mount Annupuri, is offering ski passes, free accommodations and “the best powder, as much as you need” to those willing to fill its openings for ski instructors, shuttle bus drivers, lift operators and rental shop staff. Reju Spa is looking for massage therapists and will offer flight ticket rebates worth \$750.

After closing its borders to inbound tourists for 2 1/2 years, Japan finally reopened in October, ending an isolation that was among the longest of any top tourism destination in the world. Since then, international visitors have flooded the Niseko area, seeking to hit its globally renowned slopes.

The reopening, just before ski season, was a blessing for business owners in the area, which encompasses the towns of Niseko, Kutchan and Rankoshi on Japan’s northernmost island, Hokkaido. But it has also produced a perfect storm of challenges as they try to recruit someone, anyone, to fill gaping holes in their staff rosters and provide the kind of service that big-spending visitors expect.

While the area’s year-round local population is only about 25,000 residents, more than 1.3 million tourists could descend on the area between November and March, according to the Kutchan Tourism Association. With the borders only recently reopening, employers who typically hire seasonal workers from



The Niseko ski resort area on Hokkaido, in Kutchan, Japan, which has struggled with a lack of workers this winter season.

WITH THE BORDERS ONLY RECENTLY REOPENING, EMPLOYERS WHO TYPICALLY HIRE SEASONAL WORKERS FROM ABROAD HAVE STRUGGLED TO OBTAIN WORK VISAS. THE WEAK YEN HAS ALSO DETERRED SOME WORKERS

abroad have struggled to obtain work visas. The weak yen has also deterred some workers who don’t want to take what amounts to a pay cut.

And within Japan, people are not “interested in the ski industry or willing to spend three months in the snow-packed area,” said Satoshi Nagai, general manager of the Niseko Promotion Board.

The labour shortages have been a boon for workers, who are showered with perks. Markus Timander, 31, who obtained a working holiday visa from Sweden and travelled to Japan in the fall, snagged nine job offers within three days of posting his availability in a handful of Facebook groups aimed at Niseko workers.

He is now working as a driver for a new boutique hotel near the Hirafu ski resort. In addition to the use of a car during off hours, he has free accommodations — with his own bedroom — and a season ski pass.

“The response was much bigger than

I have had before or than I thought it would be,” said Timander, who has worked at ski resorts around the world since graduating from high school.

With Japan’s declining and rapidly aging population and strict immigration controls, labour shortages are not unique to Niseko. And Japan is far from alone in dealing with worker shortfalls that arose as countries around the world emerged from the pandemic and restarted their economies.

But the Niseko area is also grappling with an explosion of development, adding accommodations for more than 5,600 people since 2017, an increase of more than 30 per cent, particularly in luxury properties.

Newly built hotels range in style from international brands such as Ritz-Carlton and Park Hyatt, where the average daily rate for a room is now \$1,500 and ski valets meet guests when they come off the slopes, to Shiguchi, a remote complex of reconstructed traditional Japanese villas where some reservations run more than \$2,000 a night.

Along the main street in Hirafu, a central village that shares a name with the area’s most popular ski resort, masses of glass walls intercut with clean lines of concrete and steel loom over the snowy landscape. An assortment of stores sell designer outerwear and artisanal lattes.

— New York Times

Another year ay? Where has it gone?

Well, another year has come and gone, and with it, as always, an opportunity arises for me to reflect upon the old year, its good and not-so-good, and to have a bit of fun, at the expense of a few mates, young and old, here and there.

The highlights of 2022 have undoubtedly been the marriage of our daughter Sasha to Christian, her long-time partner, and more recently, the birth of our granddaughter Nina Rose. Walking Sasha down the aisle was a long-held ambition, and though it was only a few steps for the two of us, it was an emotional, reflective journey, a treasure, and a privilege. And now we have Nina to treasure as well.

She is her parent's daughter, intelligent, if not yet articulate, and is blessed with my appetite, and her other Grandad, Les's, looks. Ah well... And as for the Grannies, well Norma and Lena are the perfect support team, there when they are needed, with all the love in the world. Nina, watching you grow in 2023 is something we will all appreciate, and I know you will grow out of crying every time you look at me, or at least, I hope you do.

I generally have a 'pop' at a few of my buddies so Vishal, my Sultanate of Oman domiciled doctor, and the man I always referred to first when I wanted to put off meeting my maker. Ferrari fanatic, Indian cricket supporter and friend, I hope you are managing to keep yourself looking sharp? You will be doing your own car washes and laundry, of course, eating lots of salads and fruit, going to the gym regularly of course? I do miss our regular therapy sessions, and I'll never forget your wisest words: "Though an apple a day keeps the doctor away, if you're sweet and cute don't eat the fruit!"

The lycra-clad lads, Bernie, in Oman, and Andrew, now in Saudi Arabia, cyclists, who don the colours daily and cycle fifty kilometres, just to cycle back! I dunno about you, but just going, to come back, even if sweat is fat crying, has very debatable merit. And worse, they are not alone...



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THE HIGHLIGHTS OF 2022 HAVE UNDOUBTEDLY BEEN THE MARRIAGE OF OUR DAUGHTER SASHA TO CHRISTIAN, HER LONG-TIME PARTNER, AND MORE RECENTLY, THE BIRTH OF OUR GRANDDAUGHTER NINA ROSE

Sczepan in Poland, Dave in America, Si in Bahrain, and others... are all at it! Butt powered by ass, not gas, trying to stave off middle-age through cycling, it's a chronic bike-riding disorder, you're cycopathic!

Oh, and Andrew, he's always on the Internet buying bike stuff... but harbours an irrational fear that if anything happens to him, his wife will sell all his bike stuff for what he said he paid for it. Come to think of it... Bernie has a garage full of stuff, and he probably has similar reservations.

Speaking of sport, the Black Ferns won the Women's World Cup in front of 47,000 fans, Argentina probably deserved to win the football World Cup, Newcastle have got pursed up, England's women won the Euros, Ronaldo took a hike, Hamilton went winless, Rob Burrow and Kevin Sinfield raised a fortune for charity, Bazball has reinvigorated cricket, and Oman qualified for the T20 World Cup, but on the downside, Scottish rugby icon Doddie Weir, Lester Piggot and Shane Warne were among those gone too soon.

Absent friends and family, whether now lost to us, or just distant, always make the New Year a challenge for a few moments, so I tend to draw them all together, to imagine, see, and hear them... it does pull on the emotional heartstrings, but for me, some quiet, and some tears, are a small price to pay for cherished memories. So, losing Queen Elizabeth was sad, but it means she has great company with Noel, Dawn, Gayleen, Steven, and young Conor, rest well all of you.

To the hard-working teams at the University of Nizwa, the Bahla Training Institute, and the UTC South Durham, keep up the good work. To distant families and friends including Sue, Dave, and the wider family, Roy, Denise and all the whanau, Kevin, Kathy, Barry, Denise, and all the Golden Oldies, Khalfan, Sulieman, Ali, Nadia, Nastia, Vika, Anieta, Olga, Solia and Alex, and of course Abdullah, Samuel, and the *Observer* family, and the many others, may you all be blessed with a happy and prosperous 2023.

GOOD START TO THE YEAR!



A Palestinian man rows a boat at sunset off the coast of Gaza City. The Palestinians on Saturday welcomed a vote by the United Nations General Assembly to ask the International Court of Justice for an opinion on the legal consequences of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories. – AFP

More war means more inflation

Inflation rose sharply throughout 2022 across both advanced economies and emerging markets. Structural trends suggest that the problem will be secular, rather than transitory. Specifically, many countries are now engaged in various "wars" — some real, some metaphorical — that will lead to even larger fiscal deficits, more debt monetisation, and higher inflation in the future.

The world is going through a form of "geopolitical depression" topped by the escalating rivalry between the West and aligned (if not allied) revisionist powers such as China, Russia and North Korea. Cold and hot wars are on the rise. Russia's invasion of Ukraine could still expand and involve Nato. Israel — and thus the United States — is on a collision course with Iran, which is on the threshold of becoming a nuclear-armed state. And the US and China are facing off over the questions of who will dominate Asia.

Accordingly, the US, Europe, and Nato are re-arming, as is pretty much everyone in the Middle East and Asia, including Japan, which has embarked on its biggest military build-up in many decades. Higher levels of spending on conventional and unconventional weapons (including nuclear, cyber, bio, and chemical) are all but assured, and these expenditures will weigh on the public purse.

The global war against climate



Nouriel Roubini

The writer is a Professor Emeritus of Economics at New York University's Stern School of Business.

ADVANCED ECONOMIES AND EMERGING MARKETS ARE INCREASINGLY ENGAGED IN NECESSARY "WARS" — SOME REAL, SOME METAPHORICAL — THAT WILL LEAD TO EVEN LARGER FISCAL DEFICITS

change will also be expensive — for both the public and private sectors. Climate-change mitigation and adaptation could cost trillions of dollars per year for decades to come, and it is silly to think that all these investments will boost growth. After a real war that destroys much of a country's physical capital, a surge of investment can of course produce an economic expansion; nonetheless, the country is poorer for having lost a large share of its wealth. The same is true of climate investments. A significant share of the existing capital stock will have to be replaced, either because it has become obsolete or because it has been destroyed by climate-driven events.

We are also now waging a costly war against future pandemics. For a variety of reasons — some of them related to climate change — disease outbreaks with the potential to become pandemics will become more frequent. Whether countries invest in prevention or deal with future health crises after the fact, they will be incurring higher costs on a perpetual basis, and these will add to the growing burden associated with societal aging and pay-as-you-go health-care systems and pension plans. Already, this implicit unfunded debt load is estimated to be close

to the level of explicit public debt for most advanced economies.

Moreover, we will increasingly find ourselves fighting a war against the disruptive effects of "globotics": the combination of globalisation and automation (including artificial intelligence and robotics) that is threatening a growing number of blue- and white-collar occupations. Governments will be under pressure to help those left behind, whether through basic-income schemes, massive fiscal transfers, or vastly expanded public services.

These costs will remain large even if automation leads to a surge in economic growth. For example, supporting a meager universal basic income of \$1,000 per month would cost the US about 20% of its GDP.



Finally, we also must fight an urgent (and related) war against rising income and wealth inequality. Otherwise, the malaise afflicting young people and many middle- and working-class households will continue to drive a backlash against liberal democracy and free-market capitalism. To prevent populist regimes from coming to power and pursuing reckless, unsustainable economic policies, liberal democracies will need to spend a fortune to reinforce their social safety nets — as many are already doing.

Fighting these five "wars" will be expensive, and economic and political factors will constrain governments' ability to finance them with higher taxes. Tax-to-GDP ratios are already high in most advanced economies

— especially Europe — and tax evasion, avoidance, and arbitrage will further complicate efforts to increase taxes on high incomes and capital (assuming such measures could even get past the lobbyists or secure buy-in from center-right parties).

Thus, waging these necessary wars will increase government spending and transfers as a share of GDP, and without a commensurate increase in tax revenues. Structural budget deficits will grow even larger than they already are, potentially leading to unsustainable debt ratios that will increase borrowing costs and culminate in debt crises, with obvious adverse effects on economic growth.

For countries that borrow in their own currencies, the expedient option will be to allow higher inflation to reduce the real value of long-term fixed-rate nominal debt. This approach functions as a capital levy against savers and creditors in favour of borrowers and debtors, and it can be combined with complementary, draconian measures such as financial repression, taxes on capital, and outright default (for countries that borrow in foreign currencies or whose debt is largely short-term or indexed to inflation).

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Oman post second win over Syria

WALEED AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, DEC 31

Oman national football team registered their second international friendly win against Syria 1-0 in Dubai on Friday night. Khalid al Buraiki scored the only goal of the match in the 86th minute at the Dubai Police Officers Club Stadium. The match was part of Oman's preparatory external camp in the UAE. Oman team entered with a starting line-up that included Ibrahim al Mukhaini as the goal-keeper, Juma al Habsi, Ahmed al Khamisi, Mahmoud al Mushaifari

and Ahmed al Kaabi in the defence line. Harib al Saadi, Arshad al Alawi, Salah al Yahyaei and Zaher al Aghbari featured in the midfield. Essam al Subhi was the lone forward. Oman tried to find a goal from set-pieces as they found several such situations from a rigid Syrian defence. Ahmed Al Saleh, captain of the Syrian team, was shown red card in the 84th minute after a violent tackle, forcing Syria to complete the last minutes with ten players. Oman head coach Branko Ivankovic will announce the list of 23 players from the available 29



players that he will choose to compete in the 25th Arabian Gulf Cup. Six players will be excluded from the Gulf Cup squad. Professional players Omar al Maliki, Zaher al Aghbari and Arshad al Alawi recently joined the camp after the first friendly against Syria. The Dubai camp includes 29 players namely, Ahmed al Rawahi, Mohammed al Musallami, Juma al Habsi, Salah al Yahyaei (Seeb), Harib al Saadi, Fayez al Rushaidi, Ahmed al Khamisi, Amjad al Harthy, Essam al Subhi, Khalid al Buraiki, Mahmoud al Mushaifri (Al Suwaiq), Ibrahim

al Mukhaini, Ahmed al Kaabi, Ali al Hinai, Al Munthir al Alawi, Ahmed al Matroushi (Al Nahdha), Moataz Abd Rabbo, Yazid al Maashani, Awad al Shehri, Abdullah al Mishrafi (Dhofar), Musab al Maamari and Ahmed al Adawi (Al Rustaq), Fahmy Bait Durbin (Al Nasr), Waleed al Musallami (Bahla), Jameel al Yahmadi (Qatar's Al Markhiya), Zaher al Aghbari (Bahrain's Al Khalidiya), Omar al Malki (Bahrain's Al Rifafa), Hatim al Rawshdi (Jordan's Al Faisaly), and Arshad al Alawi (Al Kuwaiti). Oman are targeting their third title in the Gulf Cup under

the guidance of Croatian coach Branko Ivankovic. Oman had emerged champions in the 19th edition held in Muscat and 23rd edition hosted by Kuwait. The 25th edition of the Arabian Gulf Cup is scheduled from January 6-19, 2023, with the participation of 8 teams. Oman will meet hosts Iraq in the opening match at 7:45 pm (Oman Time) in Basra Stadium. The second match will be on January 9 with Yemen at 5:15 pm at Basra Stadium, and third match will be against Saudi Arabia on January 12 at the Olympic Port Stadium (7 pm).

Bidiya to host Oman Desert Marathon on January 21



WALEED AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, DEC 31

The organising committee of the Oman Desert Marathon revealed the details of the eighth edition of international race hosted by the Sultanate of Oman, during January 21 to 24, in the golden sands of Bidiya. Top marathon runners from the world and amateurs from Oman and neighbouring countries have confirmed their participation. The 165-kilometre race is an opportunity to discover the desert of the Sultanate of Oman, through the four stages of the race, respectively, with a distance of 47 km, 55 km, 42 km and 21 km. The committee has started registering the participants through a website dedicated to the categories and stages of the race, while field preparations are continuing to make the event a success. The new edition includes three races for short distances, where the first 'Jawhara Bidiya' is for children for a distance of 2 kilometres. The cross-country race is for 5 km and the 'Al Wasl' race for beginners and families is for 5 km. The Oman Desert Marathon is approved by the International Association of Runners, which awarded the next edition 3 points for the marathon represented in the mountain point and confirmation of a distance of 164.40 km with a horizontal height of 1,570 metres. The Oman Desert Marathon started in 2013, with a distance of 165 km, comprising four stages of natural beauty and scenic views, starting from Al Wasl Oasis in Bidiya and ending with the Jawharat Resort in Bidiya. The upcoming edition in January was chosen to keep pace with the winter tourism season in the Eastern Sands, which these days hosts huge numbers of foreign tourists and visitors.



2021 Oman Rally winner Abdullah al Rawahi in action.

Oman Automobile Association to host opening round of Merc 2023

MUSCAT: The Oman Automobile Association (OAA) will host Oman International Rally, the opening round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship (Merc), from January 26 to 28, 2023.

The Sultanate has some of the smoothest and most challenging gravel special stages on the planet and the Oman event has been one of the most popular in the regional calendar since it burst on to the international scene way back in 1979 and then became a round of the inaugural Merc in 1984.

The 2023 event is being run under the chairmanship of Brigadier (Retd) Salim bin Ali al Maskiry and will offer 13 special stages over two legs. Chris Hodgson will act as the new Rally

Director, working with Clerk of the Course Ahmed al Zadjali and his deputies, Saud al Rawahi and Younis al Balushi.

Administration checks will take place at rally headquarters on Wednesday evening (January 25), with scrutineering scheduled for Thursday morning at the OAA. Both the official ceremonial start and opening super special will then take centre stage from 15.00hrs on Thursday afternoon.

The OAA will then host the prize giving (17.30hrs) and post-event press conference (18.30hrs) on Saturday afternoon (January 28) after two days of competitive action on the surrounding gravel trails.

Friday's action will be fought out over two passes through the Al

Khoud, Jafnayn and Sa'al special stages, split by a midday service stop and regroup. Saturday's timetable will use two passes of the Murayrat, Misfah and Mulinah stages.

"We are delighted to be hosting the opening round of the FIA Middle East Rally Championship again in 2023," said OAA managing director Suleiman al Rawahi. "We invite drivers and teams from around the world to take up the challenge of racing on our country's varied gravel and sandy stages."

Nasser Saleh al Attiyah is the most successful driver in recent seasons in Oman, the Qatari defending regional champion now having seven wins under his belt,

spanning a time period of 21 years between 2003 and 2022.

The current FIA President Mohammed Ben Sulayem also won the event on seven occasions between 1986 and 1998, while Saeed al Hajri recorded three successive wins (1983-1985).

The late Bjorn Waldegard (1988), Tony Georgiou (1992), Michel Saleh (1993), Khalid al Qassimi (2007), Abdulaziz al Kuwari (not an Merc round - 2014) and Abdullah al Rawahi (2021) have taken solitary wins in recent Merc history.

Entries close on Wednesday, January 9. Registration and entry forms are available from Thuwan Ehab Ossen, Email: thuwan@omanauto.org.

Faes in double own-goal disaster as Liverpool down Leicester

LONDON: Leicester City's Belgian defender Wout Faes inadvertently boosted Liverpool's hopes of making the Champions League by scoring two own-goals in his team's 2-1 loss at Anfield on Friday.

Kiernan Dewsbury-Hall had given Leicester a fourth-minute lead when he strolled through the middle of the Liverpool defence.

However, that was the cue for Faes's double dose of embarrassment. In the 38th minute, Faes, in his first season at the club after a £15million move from Reims, sliced an attempted clearance from a Trent Alexander-Arnold cross over the head of his goalkeeper Danny Ward.



Leicester City's Wout Faes reacts after scoring an own goal and Liverpool's second. - REUTERS

Seven minutes later, his evening got worse. Darwin Nunez was sent through by Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain and his lob over Ward hit the post.

However, as the ball came back, Faes somehow managed to hammer the ball into his own net.

"He has come back a little rusty having not played in a long time having got no minutes with Belgium at the World Cup," said Leicester boss Brendan Rodgers of the unfortunate Faes.

"When he came in, he was absolutely fantastic for us and was just unfortunate today."

The result left Liverpool in sixth place, two points off the top four while Leicester are down in 13th.

"At times, I thought we were poor today. It's a cliché but it's important to get the three points and win," Liverpool defender Virgil Van Dijk told Sky Sports.

"We tried to get in the game but we weren't good enough and we know that. We won, which is positive, but there are plenty of things we have to improve on."

Meanwhile, West Ham's year ended by being booed off the

pitch following a 2-0 defeat to London rivals Brentford.

First-half goals from Ivan Toney and Josh Dasilva piled the pressure on West Ham boss David Moyes after a fifth consecutive Premier League defeat.

West Ham are just one spot above the relegation zone while Brentford climbed to ninth.

"I thought we played well today. The goals were completely against the run of play, we've lost two goals to throw ins. We made a lot of opportunities, we just couldn't take them," Moyes told Match of the Day.

"It's small margins, I thought the players did a great job, kept going. We just didn't have the final bit of the jigsaw."

The defeat means Moyes has now lost five successive games for the first time since 2005 when he was in charge of Everton.

"It's a big result, to come here and win 2-0 is impressive," said Brentford manager Thomas Frank. — AFP

Nadal crashes in season-opening match

S W I A T E K C R U I S E S A T U N I T E D C U P

SYDNEY: Rafael Nadal lost his opening match of the season on Saturday in the countdown to the defence of his Australian Open title, but women's world number one Iga Swiatek cruised to victory at the United Cup.

Nadal, who was also below-par at the season-ending ATP Finals in November, crashed to Britain's 14th-ranked Cameron Norrie 3-6, 6-3, 6-4 in the mixed-teams tournament in Sydney.

The 22-time Grand Slam champion struggled with his first serve, getting just 58 per cent in, which ultimately cost him a first defeat to Norrie in their fifth meeting.

"It's pretty crazy, I never won a set before (against him) so firstly I wanted to do that and I had to stay super patient," Norrie said after the 2hrs 44mins battle at a packed Ken Rosewall Arena.

"It was a super physical match and huge to get through that and finally beat him. He's beaten me easy the last few times."

There was little to separate them in the opening games, with a first break point in game six for Nadal, but Norrie saved with a half-volley.

Nadal's relentless pressure earned him a second and this time the Spanish world number two converted with a searing cross-court forehand before methodically closing out the set in 52 minutes.

But his poor first-serve was an issue and he was broken to go 4-2 behind in the second set. He saved two set points but Norrie nailed a third on his serve to level at one set-all.

Nadal fired consecutive double faults to open set three and while he recovered to hold, his serve once more deserted him in the fifth game when he was broken and the 36-year-old couldn't find a way back.

In Brisbane, Swiatek got Poland off to the perfect start with a dominant 6-1, 6-3 win over Kazakhstan's Yulia Putintseva.

She broke three times in the



first set and twice in the second to completely overpower her opponent in just 64 minutes.

"I'm pretty happy with my performance — first matches of the season are always rusty so I'm happy that in the important moments I was very composed," Swiatek said.

"I feel that representing Poland is always really special. I am willing to focus even more because when I go on court I have goosebumps."

"It's hard to play so well when you're so emotional, but I have to get used to it and I'm really proud to represent my country. I feel like this is a really inspiring tournament."

- Crucial moments - Also in Sydney, former world number two Alexander Zverev slumped to defeat in his first ATP match since tearing ankle ligaments during his French Open semi-final against Nadal in June.

The two-time ATP Finals champion hit eight double faults in losing 6-4, 6-2 to 81st-ranked

Jiri Lehecka.

His German team mate Jule Niemeier then lost to Marie Bouzkova 6-2, 7-5 to give the Czech Republic a 2-0 lead in the tie.

Olympic champion Zverev, who has dropped to 12 in the world from a career-high two before his injury, was clearly still struggling.

He fended off break points at 2-3 in the first set but a double fault at 4-5 handed the Czech set point and he grabbed the opportunity, converting with a lob.

With his serve not firing, Zverev was broken to go 3-1 behind in the second set and never recovered.

"I was able to show up in crucial moments. All the experience from last year, losing to good players, gave me the confidence to play against a player like him," said Lehecka, 21.

Brazil, meanwhile, took a 2-0 lead over Norway with Beatriz Haddad Maia and Felipe Meligeni Alves both winning in straight sets. — AFP

RONALDO IS THE TOP SCORER IN THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE AND WITH THE PORTUGUESE NATIONAL TEAM WITH WHOM HE WON EURO 2016



Portuguese soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo, along with Musalli Al Muammar, president of the Saudi Arabian club Al Nassr, holds a shirt of the club after signing the contract that runs until 2025. – REUTERS

RONALDO SIGNS FOR AL NASSR IN DEAL WORTH MORE THAN

2000

MILLION EUROS

RIYADH: Cristiano Ronaldo on Friday signed for Al Nassr of Saudi Arabia, the club announced, in a deal believed to be worth more than 200 million euros.

The 37-year-old penned a contract which will take him to June 2025.

“I can’t wait to discover a new football league in a different country,” said the former Manchester United, Real Madrid and Juventus player.

The Portuguese star was pictured on the Al Nassr Twitter feed holding a blue and yellow shirt with his favoured number seven printed on the back.

“The vision with which Al Nassr operates is very inspiring, and I am delighted to join my team-mates, so that together we can help the team achieve greater success,” he added.

Al Nassr have won nine Saudi Arabian league titles, the last in 2019.

“This is more than history in the making. This is a signing that will not only inspire our club to achieve even greater success but inspire our league, our nation and future generations, boys and girls to be the best version of themselves. Welcome @cristiano to your new home @alnassr_fc,” tweeted the Saudis.

Ronaldo heads to the Gulf after a year that saw him relegated to the bench for Portugal and cut adrift by Manchester United.

United parted ways with the Portuguese star after the veteran forward gave an explosive TV interview in which he said he felt “betrayed” by the club and had no respect for coach Erik ten Hag.

United terminated his contract while Ronaldo was with Portugal at the World Cup.

Ronaldo’s quest for a World Cup winners’ medal started well as he became the first player to score in five global tournaments when he converted a penalty in their win against Ghana.

But he was left out of the starting line-up for their last-16 clash as Portugal ripped Switzerland apart.

When Portugal lost to Morocco in the quarterfinals, he started on the bench and ended the tournament in tears.

Ronaldo has long been one of the top-paid players in football.

His salary was a reported 31 million euros at Juventus, although the Turin club’s accounts are being investigated for possibly under-reporting what they paid players.

While he took a pay cut to rejoin United, with reports putting his basic annual salary somewhere between 15 million and 28 million euros, before bonuses, that still made him one of the best-paid players in Europe.

As his relationship with United soured, Ronaldo was linked to a string of Champions League contenders including Chelsea, Bayern Munich and Napoli.

A return to his first club Sporting in Lisbon was also rumoured. There was talk of a move to the MLS to join Inter Miami, part-owned by former United team-mate David Beckham. None of those deals came to fruition.

United decided his diminishing contribution coupled with his growing and public dissatisfaction made him a pricey luxury they no longer needed.

SAUDI IMAGE

For Saudi Arabia, Ronaldo is the latest high-priced sporting jewel acquired to add lustre to their international image.

The rebel LIV Golf series has offered huge guaranteed contracts and purses to attract stars.

Dustin Johnson reportedly signed a contract worth up to \$125 million and then won more than 35 million, including bonuses, in eight tournaments.

Saudi Arabia has staged heavyweight boxing title bouts, has hosted a Formula One grand prix the last two years as well as the Dakar Rally. The Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia acquired Premier League club Newcastle in 2021 and is being linked with Manchester United.

Ronaldo has long been in competition with Lionel Messi for the titles of greatest player and biggest earner in football.

Messi pulled away from Ronaldo on the field by winning a World Cup, but the sums of money the Portuguese star will reportedly receive in Riyadh far surpasses what the Argentine is making from Paris Saint-Germain.

Ronaldo has won five Champions League titles (2008, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018), league titles in Italy (2019, 2020) with Juventus, in Spain (2012, 2017) with Real Madrid and in England (2007, 2008, 2009) with United. He is also the top scorer in the Champions League and with the Portuguese national team with whom he won Euro 2016. — AFP

RONALDO HAS WON FIVE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TITLES
2008
2014
2016
2017
2018

WON LEAGUE TITLES IN ITALY
2019, 2020
WITH JUVENTUS

WON LEAGUE TITLES IN SPAIN
2012, 2017
WITH REAL MADRID

WON LEAGUE TITLES IN ENGLAND
2007, 2008, 2009
WITH UNITED

business

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Debt management contributes to fiscal stability: MoF

The Ministry of Finance also affirmed that provisional results indicate an improvement in the financial performance of the state's general budget for the 2022 fiscal

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, DEC 31

The ongoing efforts to reduce the size of the Sultanate of Oman's public debt was significant which had implications for the Omani economy, according to the Ministry of Finance.

Besides contributing to economic growth in general, reining in public debts will improve the credit rating of the country, increase the flow of investments, reduce external financing risks, restore fiscal space, reduce the cost of servicing public debt, and make available the resultant savings for the financing of additional development projects, it has



stressed. The gross domestic product of the Sultanate of Oman at current prices exceeded RO 32 billion at the end of September 2022, registering a growth of 30.4 per

cent compared to the same period of the previous year, according to data issued by the National Center for Statistics and Information (NCSI). This increase is due to the

improvement in oil prices and the economic recovery from the effects of the pandemic. Oil activities grew by 72.5 per cent to reach RO 12.48 billion at the end of September, compared to RO 7.23 billion a year

earlier. The Ministry of Finance also affirmed that provisional results indicate an improvement in the financial performance of the state's general budget for the fiscal year

2022. Public revenues climbed 34.5 per cent to RO 14.234 billion, compared to projections in the budget at the start of the year. This has resulted in expectations of a financial surplus of about RO 1.146 billion, compared to an anticipated deficit at the beginning of the year at about RO 1.550 billion.

The financial indicators of the Sultanate of Oman witnessed a remarkable improvement during the year 2022, supported by an increase in oil revenues, as the average oil price reached \$94 per barrel, and prices reached record levels hitting a peak last August of \$112.9 per barrel as against a year's low of \$73.1 per barrel in February.

Regardless, it was well above the \$50 per barrel price approved in the state's general budget for 2022.

Overall, Oman continued to manage its public debt and enhance its ability to face the financial challenges that the world has witnessed in the past period, the ministry added.



RO 21m Suhar grain silo complex to launch on Jan 4

SUHAR: Sohar Mills Company, a subsidiary of Oman Flour Mills, will celebrate on Wednesday, January 4, 2023, the opening of grain storage silo complex at Sohar Port. The facility has been set up with an investment of RO 21 million. The opening ceremony will be held under the auspices of Qais bin Mohammed al Youssef, Minister of Commerce, Industry

and Investment Promotion. With a storage capacity of 160,000 tonnes, the Suhar silo considered one of the strategic national projects that will help create stockpiles of grain to meet the nation's requirements. The project stems from Oman Flour Mills' commitment to enhancing food security and securing strategic stockpiles of grain.

— ONA

3 IPOs slated for launch on Oman bourse in 2023

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 31

A trio of Initial Public Offerings (IPO) linked to subsidiaries and affiliates of Oman Investment Authority (OIA) is expected to help energise the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) during 2023, according to leading Omani investment firm Ubhar Capital SAOC (U-Capital).

IPO candidates include Abraj Energy Services (Abraj), a leading Omani oilfield and gas services company and a wholly owned subsidiary of global integrated energy group OQ; Majis Industrial Services — an integrated water solutions provider presently operating at Sohar Port and Freezone and the surrounding areas; and OQ Gas Networks — the monopoly owner and operator of the nation's gas grid.

IPO sizes are reckoned to be around \$500 million for Abraj and \$800 million for OQ Gas Networks, while Majis is yet to reveal the size of its planned offering, says U-Capital.

In comparison, 2022 was a relatively low-key year on the IPO front, with only two public offerings launched during the year. The Pearl RIEF, the first leveraged sharia-compliant REIF in Oman and only the third real estate investment fund of its kind, was rolled out with an IPO size of RO 23.3 million.

Since its listing on the MSX, the Fund has moved up by 4.46 per



cent to RO 0.118/share, up from RO 0.112/share on listing day. The other IPO, launched by Barka Desalination with a public offering of RO 4.4 million in shares, has gained 3.45 per cent in value to end the year at RO 0.150/share, up from RO 0.145/share at listing.

Significantly, investors and market experts envision a phase of sustained growth in the performance of the MSX during 2023, underpinned by a raft of initiatives that were implemented by the regulator, the Capital Market Authority (CMA), as well as the stock exchange, to help develop Oman's capital market. Many of these initiatives, launched during the course of 2022, flow from the updated Securities Law promulgated in June 2022.

U-Capital explained: "The new Securities Law offers multiple financing options and provides a legal framework for virtual assets. The law keeps pace with the

developments brought about by the technological revolution, as it provides a legal framework related to regulating the requirements of Fintech, which contributes to providing financial support to economic sectors using innovative financial solutions. The law also confers on the CMA the power to regulate innovative financing and approval of the application of technology and virtual investments.

Additionally, the law allows expanding financing options by regulating new products and services such as warehouse receipts, derivatives, futures etc. It has created the necessary legislative infrastructure to ensure the independence of the MSX from the CMA as a self-regulated institution, and allowed the stock exchange to regulate brokerage activities, market making and margin financing. Furthermore, the law confers on the CMA

the authority to licence the establishment of a stock exchange for small and medium enterprises."

Also during the year, the CMA together with the Muscat Clearing & Depository Company SAOC (MCD) announced a collaboration with Belgium-based Euroclear Bank SA/NV to establish a new Euroclear international central securities depository (CSD) account in the Sultanate of Oman to be operated by MCD.

Going into 2023, the MSX has pledged to finalise guidelines to regulate the activities of market makers and liquidity providers. In addition, the stock exchange plans to launch three new indicators for the total returns of the primary sectors: finance, industry, and services.

Efforts are under way to support the establishment of a dedicated securities market for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) as well.

NBO recognised for empowering disabled persons

MUSCAT: In recognition of its commitment towards empowering communities, National Bank of Oman (NBO) was recently awarded by the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) for supporting people with disabilities across Oman.

The accolade was awarded during a ceremony organised by MoSD on the occasion of the United Nations-sanctioned International Day of Persons with Disabilities, which aims to promote the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities in all

spheres of society.

The event was held under the auspices of Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najar, Minister of Social Development, while it was sponsored by NBO.

NBO aims to support and empower all members of the communities in which it operates, which is in line with its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme.

The bank's CSR activities include efforts to support and promote a society that is inclusive of people with disabilities and



that aims to further increase their participation in public life. Last year, NBO was awarded by MoSD for supporting people with disabilities in Oman as well.

Through its active CSR programme, NBO continues to fulfil its commitment to make a positive impact on society. Its CSR activities, which are carried out throughout the year, include a variety of educational and youth-led programmes, donations and sponsorships, all reflecting the bank's core values and aimed

at supporting those in need in particular.

Earlier this year, for example, NBO undertook the full refurbishment of the children's playroom at the Oman Cancer Association's (OCA) Dar Al Hanan.

Meanwhile, the bank also utilised its annual holy month of Ramadhan community outreach programme, to share the spirit of giving across Oman by distributing food hampers to families in need and people with disabilities.

Omantel Innovation Labs announces startups for Accelerator Cohort 2

MUSCAT: Omantel, the leading provider of integrated telecommunication services in the Sultanate of Oman, has announced the names of the Omani startups selected for the 2nd cohort of the Omantel Accelerator programme managed by the Omantel Innovation Labs.

Cohort 2 of the Omantel Accelerator will include three startups that were selected from more than 100 startups that applied online after a public call for applications.



These startups were selected after a rigorous selection process that included bootcamps and interviews with experts from within and outside Omantel.

These selected startups are: AirGo, iON and Touchpoynts which helps technology professionals enhance the customer journey.

AirGo is a modern high-tech enterprise founded in 2020 to lead the drone industry in the Sultanate of Oman by offering intelligent services and products.

AirGo provides an Unmanned Traffic Management System named Tahleeq in Oman. It operates as a platform-as-a-service that enables businesses, governmental entities, and educational institutions to avoid the operating risk, regulatory challenges, and capital expenses associated with drone operations.

iON is a social commerce platform that helps sellers

achieve higher conversion rate by providing them with the ability to post products/services on social media, create and customise private online stores, manage product inventory, manage payments and shipping from multiple sales channels and manage a customer chat center under different social media platforms.

Touchpoynts provides smart retail technology solutions that enhance customer experience and increase loyalty including digital signage, big data and analytics, facial recognition and audience measurement, programmatic advertising and smart retail implementations.

The 2nd cohort will also include two startups that were selected from Omantel's recently launched internal innovation programme,

Fikra: Sayyad, a one-stop shop for the fishing industry where sellers and buyers from across Oman can connect, trade and deliver goods and services and Zabonex, a CX management software provider that uses data insights to create opportunities.

"Congratulations to the startups for being selected as part of the Omantel Accelerator.

The selection process was intensive and each of these startups has demonstrated the strength of their foundation by making it through. We are looking forward to working closely with them over the next few months to accelerate their solutions and provide them with some of the best of international and local mentorship and support," said HH Ghada al Said, Senior Manager of the Omantel Innovation Labs.

Bank Muscat celebrates achievements of partners in automobile sector



MUSCAT: In line with the bank's commitment to further strengthen its relationship and support to partners, Bank Muscat, the leading financial provider in the Sultanate of Oman, recently hosted special event to celebrate the achievements of the new and used vehicle dealers in automobile sector.

The event was attended by Ahmed bin Faqir al Bulushi, Chief Banking Officer, Bank Muscat, and a number of representatives from auto dealerships from across Oman.

This event is part of the bank's constant initiatives targeted at enhancing partnership and cooperation with customers and partners and share ideas and feedback in line with its vision "To serve you better, everyday".

Speaking on the occasion, Saleh bin Mohammed al Maaini,



Deputy General Manager — Capital Regions, Bank Muscat, said: "We are delighted to host our valued partners today as we constantly endeavour to celebrate this partnership and cooperation. Our partners play a huge role in helping the bank to provide the best offers, services and facilities for its valued customers and give them the chance to own their dream cars. This success in the field would not have been possible without the cooperation, trust and partnership between the bank and all car companies, agencies and galleries in various governorates."

Saleh al Maaini further elaborated saying: "Throughout four decades, the bank was keen to develop banking services and facilities for individuals and improving the quality of

the various products offered to enhance financial inclusion and offer a wide range of options to meet customers' needs and aspirations."

"We are proud of the success we have achieved in this field, and we are pleased with the positive feedback and trust in the bank's services and products."

During her opening speech, Radhiya bint Hassan al Lawatiya, Head of Sales, Bank Muscat, said: "We are pleased to gather today in this event which is organised to further enhance communication with our valued partners. Bank Muscat is committed towards maintaining a strong relationship with car companies, agencies and galleries across the Sultanate of Oman in order to develop services, facilities and offers to meet the current and future needs of customers."

Will six Rs currency plan usher in new world order?

The six Rs could be an alternative to the IMF's Special Drawing Rights (SDR) – a basket of currencies of the world's major economies, including US dollar, euro, yen, British pound, and Renminbi

MOHAMMAD SHOEB

Saudi Arabia, the Middle East's largest economy, has shown interest to join the BRICS block. This alliance of emerging economies comprises Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

This group's common currency plan comes amid global market stresses. Under this pressure, Central banks of several countries seek to diversify their holdings to minimise their exposure to the dollar.

Some have switched to conventional assets such as Swedish krona, South Korean won, and non-traditional assets

like Renminbi.

Increasing US sanctions against Russia and China have swung world's currency markets. The swings threaten US dollar's dominance as international reserve currency.

Sanctions announced recently could inflict severe financial and economic losses on many countries. Economists say the latest round of sanctions on Russia by the US may be the last straw that breaks the camel's back.

At one of the BRICS forums, President Vladimir Putin said Russia, China and other BRICS nations will launch a new global reserve currency, comprising a basket of currencies of member countries.

BRICS block could extend its influence with the new currency. It could be digital currency. They may either back it with gold, oil or other asset as an alternative to replace the dollar.

Success of this new reserve currency has major outcomes. It will threaten US dollar's



supremacy. The question arises, will Saudi Arabia join the BRICS alliance and be part of a common currency (may be digital) at the cost of antagonising the US?

If yes, what happens to the Petrodollar? Will the move impact dollar supremacy? Does the BRICS reserve currency stand a chance to replace the greenback? Yes, definitely.

Data shows, the existing five BRICS economies currently comprise 41 per cent of the world population. They have 24 per cent

share in world GDP and 16 per cent share in world trade. Add other members like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Argentina then their combined GDP jumps to nearly 35 per cent of the world GDP.

Such a group could grow into a major trade entity. It justifies a reserve currency comprising a basket of Real, Rouble, Rupee, Renminbi, Rand, and Riyal (6Rs).

The new currency could work like game changing sixers in the last over of a T20 cricket match! The six Rs could be an alternative to

the IMF's Special Drawing Rights (SDR) — a basket of currencies of the world's major economies, including US dollar, euro, yen, British pound, and Renminbi.

Key members of the block, China and Russia have amassed gold for years to back their currency. This is a strategic move to address the perceived US hegemony of the IMF.

Note the volume of global trade of commodities produced by BRICS members.

The expanded BRICS nations

produce nearly 26 per cent of global oil output and 50 per cent of iron ore production used to make steel. They produce around 40 per cent of global corn production and 46 per cent of global wheat production.

If they trade these commodities in the new reserve currency, it would become a strong pillar of the global economy. This will challenge the US, a service and consumer-based economy that produces little of the global output.

Some experts see no threat to the dollar's dominance, at least soon, given some serious concerns of investors, such as controls related to conversion.

Chinese Renminbi and other currencies of the BRICS nations are not fully convertible in international exchanges, and traders need prior approval from regulators in case of large amounts.

(The author has more than 15 years of experience in business and economics journalism. He has worked for leading newspapers in India and Qatar.)



How Oman has addressed public debt reduction



STEFANO VIRGILLI

The author is member of the International press Association

Many countries around the world aim to reduce their public debt as a way to improve their fiscal stability and create a more favourable economic environment for their citizens.

High levels of public debt can be a burden on a country's budget and can limit the government's ability to fund important programmes and initiatives.

There are various strategies that countries can use to reduce their public debt, including implementing fiscal austerity measures, such as cutting spending and raising taxes, and implementing structural reforms to increase economic growth and improve the efficiency of government operations.

Some countries may also consider debt restructuring or debt forgiveness as a way to reduce their public debt burden.

It is worth noting that reducing public debt is not always the best course of action for a country, as it may also come with economic trade-offs and negative consequences.

For example, austerity measures can lead to slower economic growth and higher unemployment, while structural reforms may be politically difficult to implement and can take time to yield results. It is important for countries to carefully consider the best approach for their specific circumstances when seeking to reduce their public debt.

It is difficult to point to a specific country that has "failed" to reduce its public debt, as the success or failure of a country's efforts to reduce its public debt can depend on a variety of factors.

Public debt can be a complex

and challenging issue for governments to address, and it is not uncommon for countries to face challenges in their efforts to reduce it.

For example, a country may face economic headwinds or other challenges that make it difficult to implement the necessary fiscal austerity measures or structural reforms. In some cases, a country's efforts to reduce its public debt may be slowed or reversed due to unexpected events or circumstances, such as natural disasters or economic shocks.

That being said, there are many examples of countries that have struggled to reduce their public debt levels. For instance, Greece and Italy have faced challenges in their efforts to reduce their public debt in recent years due to a combination of economic headwinds and structural challenges.

Similarly, many developing countries have struggled to reduce it due to a variety of factors, including economic instability, weak institutions and a lack of access to international capital markets.

Oman is taking steps to reduce its public debt in order to maintain financial and economic stability. It is with this intention in mind that the Sultanate has paid back almost RO 5 billion in government debt over the course of five years.

To address these issues, the government is implementing measures to decrease the debt-to-GDP ratio and improve fiscal sustainability. These measures include reducing budget deficits, increasing revenue and improving debt management practices.

The government is also working to diversify the economy, which will help to reduce reliance on oil exports and provide alternative sources of income. This will in turn help to strengthen the country's financial position and increase its ability to weather economic challenges.

Overall, Oman's efforts to reduce public debt are an important step towards ensuring long-term financial and economic stability. By taking proactive measures to address its debt levels, the country can create a more sustainable and prosperous future for its citizens.

MSX 30 Index closes 2022 up 17.63 pc

MUSCAT: The MSX 30 Index closed 2022 up by 17.63 per cent year-on-year (YoY) at 4857.44, while the MSX Total Return Index was up by 23.38 per cent to close the year at 6194.67.

The Index has closed a year in the positive territory for the second consecutive year since 2016.

Amongst the sub-indices, the Financial Index gained the most, closing higher YoY by 20.15 per cent. The Industrial Index rose 5.77 per cent and the Services Index closed down by 0.26 per cent.

The MSX Shariah Index ended down by 4.99 per cent.

"The MSX30 Index started the year on a positive note on announcement of State Budget 2022 as well as corporate's Earnings Announcements for 2021.

The first quarter, however, saw a mixed performance, with the Index hitting the lowest level seen in 2022 at 3,547.962 in February 2022, largely due to Russia-Ukraine conflict and its ramifications. Nevertheless, the market ended 1Q22 up by 1.8 per cent on quarter-on-quarter (QoQ) basis," said leading investment

MSM30 Monthly Performance



firm U-Capital in a report on the market's performance.

The second quarter witnessed muted performance of the Index, losing about 2 per cent QoQ, on fewer working hours during the Holy Month of Ramadhan as well as many companies going ex-dividend.

The third quarter was the best performing quarter of the year, with the MSX30 Index gaining about 9.8 per cent QoQ on the back of excellent 1H22 corporate financial results as well as credit rating upgrades for the country.

The fourth quarter saw an increase of about 7.3 per cent

in the index, mostly on lots of positive news like Government's macroeconomic indicators as well as rating agencies improving Oman's outlook. The Index reached its highest level seen at 4,898.86 on December 13, 2022.

U-Capital analysis shows that 19 companies have had share capital increases in 2022 with the total increase equal to about RO 590m. Out of these companies, 11 belong to the financial sector (5 banks, 3 leasing companies, 2 insurance companies and 2 investment and holding companies), 7 to the industrial sector and 1 to the services sector.

Two companies have had capital decreases during 2022.

During the year, there were no Government Development Bonds listed. However, there was the issuance of a Government Sukuk (Series 6), worth RO 150m, offering coupon rate of 4.85 per cent.

The total issuance value of corporate bonds and Sukuk that got listed on the Muscat Stock Exchange in 2022 stood at RO 581m, up by about 2184 per cent compared to total issuance value of bonds in 2021. Bank Muscat PER.B1 formed the highest share at 56.7 per cent of the total value.

Norwegian Cruise Line ordered to pay \$110 million for use of Cuba port

MIAMI: Norwegian Cruise Line must pay \$110 million in damages for use of a port that Cuba's government confiscated in 1960, a US judge ruled on Friday, a milestone for Cuban-Americans seeking compensation for Cold-War era asset seizures.

The decision by US District Judge Beth Bloom in Miami follows her March ruling that the use of the Havana Cruise Port Terminal constituted trafficking in confiscated property owned by the plaintiff, Delaware-registered Havana Docks Corp.

"Judgment is entered in favour of Plaintiff Havana Docks Corporation and against Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings, Ltd," reads the decision.

"Plaintiff is awarded \$109,848,747.87 in damages,"



it says, adding that Norwegian should also pay an additional \$3 million in legal fees and costs.

Norwegian Cruise Line did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel has harshly criticised the Helms-Burton Act, describing it

as an extra-territorial violation of international law.

Havana Docks had also sued cruise lines Carnival, Royal Caribbean and MSC under the Helms-Burton Act, which allows US nationals to sue over use of property seized in Cuba after 1959.

The ruling could fuel more

lawsuits by Cuban exiles pursuing claims, which according to one estimate are worth \$2 billion, over asset seizures under late Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

It may also serve as a reminder to multinational firms of the complications that can come with doing business in Cuba.

US cruise ships in 2016 began travelling to Cuba for the first time in decades following a detente negotiated by former president Barack Obama that eased some provisions of a US embargo in place since the Cold War.

But the Trump administration in 2019 ordered a halt to all such cruises amid efforts to pressure Cuba over its support for Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, an ideological adversary of Washington. — **Reuters**

China December manufacturing contracts sharply

BEIJING: China's factory activity shrank for the third straight month in December and at the sharpest pace in nearly three years as Covid infections swept through production lines across the country after Beijing's abrupt reversal of anti-virus measures.

The official purchasing managers' index (PMI) fell to 47.0 from 48.0 in November, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said on Saturday. Economists in a Reuters poll had expected the PMI to come in at 48.0. The 50-point mark separates contraction from growth on a monthly basis.

The drop was the biggest since the early days of the pandemic in February 2020.

The data offered the first official snapshot of the manufacturing sector after China removed the world's strictest Covid restrictions in early December. Cumulative infections likely reached 18.6 million in December, UK-based health data firm Airfinity

estimated.

Analysts said surging infections could cause temporary labour shortages and increased supply chain disruptions.

Reuters reported on Wednesday that Tesla plans to run a reduced production schedule at its Shanghai plant in January, extending the reduced output it began this month into next year.

Weakening external demand on the back of growing global recession fears amid rising interest rates, inflation and the war in Ukraine may further slow China's exports, hurting its massive manufacturing sector and hampering an economic recovery.

"Most factories I know are way below where they could be this time of year for orders next year. A lot of factories I've talked to are at 50 per cent, some are below 20 per cent," said Cameron Johnson, a partner at Tidalwave Solutions, a supply chain consulting firm.



"So even though China is opening up, manufacturing is still going to slow down because the rest of the world's economy is slowing down. Factories will have workers, but they will have no orders."

NBS said 56.3 per cent of surveyed manufacturers reported that they were greatly affected by the epidemic in December,

up 15.5 percentage points from the previous month, although most also said they expected the situation will gradually improve.

"While (the factory PMI) was lower than expected, it is actually hard for analysts to provide a reasonable forecast given the virus uncertainties over the past month," said Zhou Hao, chief economist at brokerage house Guotai Junan

International.

"In general, we believe that the worst for the Chinese economy is behind us, and a strong economic recovery is ahead."

The country's banking and insurance regulator pledged this week to step up financial support to small and private businesses in the catering and tourism sectors that were hit hard by the Covid-19

epidemic, stressing a consumption recovery will be a priority.

The non-manufacturing PMI, which looks at services sector activity, fell to 41.6 from 46.7 in November, the NBS data showed, also marking the lowest reading since February 2020.

The official composite PMI, which combines manufacturing and services, declined to 42.6 from 47.1.

"The weeks before Chinese New Year are going to remain challenging for the service sector as people won't want to go out and spend more than necessary for fear of catching an infection," said Mark Williams, Chief Asia Economist at Capital Economics.

"But the outlook should brighten around the time that people return from the Chinese New Year holiday — infections will have dropped back and a large share of people will have recently had Covid and feel they have a degree of immunity," — **Reuters**

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A graphic of a smartphone screen displaying a WhatsApp QR code. Above the screen, the text 'Now get news on the go' is written in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. The screen itself has a light beige background with a faint pattern of various communication icons. In the center of the screen is a large green WhatsApp logo. Below the logo, the text 'To receive news updates from OMAN OBSERVER,' is written in a blue, sans-serif font. Further down, the text 'WhatsApp' is written in a bold, blue, sans-serif font, followed by '<your name> to' in a blue, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the screen, the number '96473232' is displayed in a large, bold, blue, sans-serif font. Below the smartphone screen, there is a row of social media icons: a globe, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and a magnifying glass. To the left of these icons is the text 'omanobserver.om' and to the right is '@omanobserver'.

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An advertisement for property rental services. It features a 3D orange figure holding a blue megaphone. The text "HAVE A PROPERTY" is in a grey box, "FOR RENT?" is in a red banner, and "Advertise with us." is in black text. At the bottom, it says "Contact us on: 99639264" in white and yellow text on a red background.

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Be Careful
Be Responsible

UN HAILS COUNTRIES THAT SUPPORT PEACE IN YEMEN

NEW YORK: Secretary-General António Guterres has hailed the efforts of the United Nations and its member states to support peace in Yemen. He said the UN is grateful to all those who are working to end the conflict and bring stability to the country. "The UN stands ready to support the Yemeni people and their aspirations for a better future," Guterres said.

HIS MAJESTY ADMINISTERS OATH TO NEW MINISTER



MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries Dr. Saad bin Hamoud bin Ahmad al-Hadi, Chairman of the Supreme Court Sayed Khalifa bin Said bin Hamoud bin Ahmad al-Hadi, and Chairman of the Administrative Council Dr. Saad bin Hamoud bin Ahmad al-Hadi, took the oath of office at Al Sarakhal Palace on Thursday. SEE ALSO PAGE 18



MUSCAT: The 500th anniversary of the Oman Ruler's accession to the throne is being celebrated in a series of events. The Sultanate is marking the occasion with a series of cultural and sporting events. The anniversary is a testament to the resilience and strength of the Omani people and their leadership.

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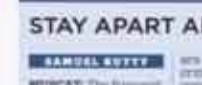
SOME PEOPLE NOT FOLLOWING SOCIAL DISTANCING NORMS

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NEW 50 BANKNOTE FROM THIS MONTH

MUSCAT: To mark the 50th anniversary of the Oman Ruler's accession to the throne, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) has issued a new 50 Omani Rial banknote. The new banknote features a series of cultural and historical motifs. It is the first time that the 50 Omani Rial banknote has been redesigned. The new banknote is expected to be in circulation by the end of the year.



NEW 50 BANKNOTE FROM THIS MONTH

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IT IS SNOWING IN THE DESERT

There, one is trying all snow exercises, sipping on steamy coffee amid the chilly winds beside the buildings covered in shimmering white snow as the ships frozen in time stood as reminiscences of the past while children went sledding down frozen sand dunes... **P20**

Human hair recycled in Belgium to protect the environment

COIFFEURS ACROSS BELGIUM are sweeping up and bagging hair clipped from their customers, and then handing it over to an NGO that recycles it to protect the environment.

The Hair Recycle project feeds locks and tresses into a machine that turns them into matted squares that can be used to absorb oil

and other hydrocarbons polluting the environment, or made into bio-composite bags.

Project Co-founder Patrick Janssen, explaining that 1 kilogram (2.2 lbs) of hair can absorb 7-8 litres (1.8-2.1 US gallons) of oil and hydrocarbons, said the mats can be placed in drains to soak up pollution

in water before it reaches a river.

"Our products are all the more ethical as they are manufactured locally... they are not imported from the other side of the planet," he told Reuters. "They are made here to deal with local problems."

The project said on its website that hair has

powerful properties: one strand can support up to 10 million times its own weight, and as well as absorbing fat and hydrocarbons, it is water-soluble and highly elastic due to its keratin fibres.

Isabelle Voulkidis, manager of the Helyode salon in Brussels, is one of dozens of hairdressers across the country that pay a small fee to the project to collect their hair cuttings.

"What motivates me, personally, is that I find it a shame hair is nowadays just thrown in the bin, when I know that so much could be done with it," she said, as she combed and clipped one of her customer's hair.

— Reuters



READ

REALLY GOOD, ACTUALLY

BY MONICA HEISEY

Comedian, essayist, and screenwriter Monica Heisey makes her novel-length debut with the tragicomic story of Maggie, the Surprisingly Young Divorcée.



HISTORY

A picture shows a view of the statue of Emir Abdelkader, a historic Algerian leader and hero of the independence war with France, at the square of the same name in the centre of the capital Algiers.

— AFP



CELEBRITIES

Italo Bettiol, the creator of "Chapi Chapi", a stop-motion animated series popular in the 1970s, died on Wednesday at the age of 96 at his home in southern France, a family friend said.





The Beauty of Hawaii

WHEN I TOLD a friend that I planned to stay in an off-the-grid cabin on a farm in Hawaii, her response, a combination of confusion and intrigue, mirrored my general attitude towards camping and most outdoor activities: “You’re doing this voluntarily? Doesn’t Hawaii have literally hundreds of the most beautiful hotels and resorts?”

She wasn’t wrong. Hawaii does have hundreds of hotels spread across its islands. And for someone who generally considers a jog through the park an outdoor adventure, my choice of lodging in one of the most beautiful places in the world was understandably confounding.

But I wanted a different kind of adventure than the kind people tend to associate with the islands, one that didn’t involve parking myself on a beach with a mai tai. I planned to kayak, snorkel, go on local tours and view local art. I wanted to have fun, but I also wanted to learn something and support local businesses in the process.

I also knew that making local and Native-Hawaiian-owned businesses a bigger part of tourism was a major goal of the Council for Native Hawaiian Advancement, the organisation recently tasked with marketing the state to the rest of the country.

“Have fun, I guess,” my friend told me a few days before I left.

I planned to. Farm Stay

I was drawn to the Inn at Kulaniapia Falls in the hills of Hilo by its stunning 120-foot waterfall and because it offers a number of interesting activities. It also offers a window into how tourism in Hawaii and other overtouristed places could thrive in the future, without harming the environment or the people who call a place home.

The inn is on one side of a more than 40-acre property; on the other side is a farm with three

cabins that guests can rent (I paid \$147 a night in November). The waterfall, along with solar panels, powers just about everything, including the cabin where I stayed. Rainwater is also collected and goes through a multistep filtration process; it’s used for drinking, bathing and cleaning. The entire operation is an exciting experiment in sustainable and regenerative travel (and liv-

spent hours walking along verdant trails (failing miserably at identifying most of the plants), sitting in bamboo gardens and swimming in cool, still waters. Looking up at the trees from below the falls, I felt the need to put away my phone and disconnect.

And this is exactly what everyone who works on the property hopes guests will do, said Christophe Bisciglia,

many of the activities offered on the property involve local businesses.

One of those activities involves rappelling down the falls with a guide, an activity I decided against. Instead I went on a farm tour (\$29) led by two members of the Kulaniapia “family,” as they refer to themselves. About a dozen members live there full-time. Many are part of its community project, which allows them to gain experience in hospitality, farming, construction and other skills.

On the tour, I learned about the vegetables and fruits grown on the farm, including taro, bananas, cauliflower and broccoli, among others. These are the ingredients used in the farm’s cooking classes, which are offered a few times a week and give “farm-to-table” a very literal and personal meaning.

As I explored I occasionally walked by the inn’s kitchen and caught glimpses of Gregg Lockwood, the chef, preparing the night’s dinner. Served on the lanai, or veranda, with a view of the falls, trails and gardens, Lockwood’s dinner included Kauai prawn and mahi mahi ceviche with ahi tuna poke and sushi rice. Another course was kabocha squash soup with coconut cream and pancetta. The third course was opakapaka (one of seven snapper species endemic to Hawaii) with poi from Japanese taro and ginger-lemongrass broth, snap peas and grape tomatoes. Dessert was coconut ice cream pie with a macadamia nut crust and Hawaiian dark chocolate ganache.

For the indecisive or easily overwhelmed, like me, this meal was ideal not only for its rich flavors and freshness, but also because there were no decisions to be made. Gregg chose local meats, fish and produce and which wines to pair with each course. — NYT



ing) that’s worth watching and experiencing — even for me, a skeptic of paying hundreds of dollars to be outside.

Within an hour of checking into my cabin, which did not have a private bathroom or electricity but did come with an ocean view and an extremely comfortable bed, I was kayaking under the falls, an experience that made me utter, out loud, that this was the beginning of my outdoor girl era. I

one of the inn’s partners. Access to Kulaniapia is restricted to overnight guests and those who register and purchase day passes (\$49 for adults, \$29 for children) in advance, an arrangement that limits the number of visitors, Bisciglia said, and ensures that “each guest gets to enjoy our wild and natural setting.” He added that more than half of the full-time staff is of Native Hawaiian descent and

CLIMATE CHANGE

They survived the hunters: Now king penguins face climate change



ONCE HUNTED TO the brink of extinction, the thousands of king penguins that densely congregate on the remote Possession Island each year now face a new threat: climate change.

The birds spend most of their life at sea, but come breeding time in December half the world’s population flock to the islands in the southern Indian Ocean’s Crozet archipelago, roughly halfway between Antarctica and the southeastern tip of Africa.

Robin Cristofari, a specialist in penguins at Finland’s University of Turku, looks out on a colony massed at a bay on Possession Island.

“This species was not very far from extinction” after being massacred by seal hunters from the end of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th, he said.

When the hunters ran out of seals to kill, they used the penguins as fuel, burning them to melt seal blubber in cauldrons, said Cristofari.

For a short time they even made penguin oil, “but it was not good quality”, he added.

The king penguin population rebounded in the latter half of the 20th century, but their numbers plateaued around 20 years ago.

“After that first hurdle, the species now faces a second, more insidious one: climate change,” Cristofari said.

He was the lead author of a 2018 study that found that global warming was on track to wipe out 70 per cent of the world’s king penguins by the end of the century.

POLAR FRONT

King penguins stand just under a metre (three feet) tall and sport black-and-white tuxedos accessorised with bright orange on their necks and beaks.

They only return to land to breed, and are very picky about where they do so.

It must be a dry place, without winter sea ice around the island, and have a smooth beach of sand or pebbles as well as plentiful, accessible sources of food.

This means breeding spots need to be close to the Antarctic Polar Front, where cold waters from the south converge with warmer northern flows to create an area abundant with fish, squid and other marine food.

In January, the polar front is usually 350 kilometres (about 220 miles) south of the Crozet archipelago.

But during hot years it can be up to 750 kilometres away — too far for penguins to get food and quickly return to their hungry hatchlings and relieved partner.

“Reproductive success is directly related to the distance from the polar front,” Cristofari said.

But with the polar front drifting southwards as human-driven climate change warms the world, the Crozet Islands could soon become uninhabitable for king penguins.

And that would leave the flightless birds with only a handful of islands to the south, many of which cannot sustain large breeding colonies.

“We are not worried about the species, the population will not disappear in the next 50 years,” Cristofari said. But their way of life could be seriously disrupted, he said.

PLAYFUL AND CURIOUS

King penguins live for about 25 years and have their first chicks aged about six or seven.

Out of more than a million breeding pairs worldwide, around half breed on the Crozet Islands.

They typically arrive in early November, selecting and mating with the partner with whom they will stay faithful for a year.

The parents share equal responsibilities during the 50-day incubation period and the first month after the chick hatches.

Cristofari said the “playful and curious” birds barge into the gigantic nesting colonies on the islands, carefully waddling with their egg nestled between their feet.

Finding a place among the crowd, the partners take turns using their bellies to warm their precious future offspring, Cristofari said.

The parent not caring for the egg or chick heads out to sea in search of food. Their partner back on land can go a month without eating.

The chicks are well fed until May then fast during the Southern Hemisphere’s winter. The parents come back to feed their offspring occasionally until spring.

“The cycle is timed to make it as easy as possible for the chick to start feeding on its own, ideally during the peak of summer,” Cristofari said.

Then, a full year after hatching, the hungry penguins enter the water to catch their own food for the first time. — AFP



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AROUND THE WORLD

SPECIES

Reindeer among the threatened species highlighted by WWF



REINDEER AND EMPEROR penguins are among the species highlighted by environmental organisation WWF this year to illustrate the threats faced by thousands of animals world-wide.

Thousands of species are struggling with a population decline and an increasing number of threats, the organisation said in its annual summary released on Thursday.

"The International Red List now lists more than 42,100 animal and plant species as threatened," the organisation said, referring to the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species.

In 2000, the world's largest population of wild reindeer in the Taimyr region in the Russian Arctic consisted of 1 million animals. Today, only a quarter of them remain, according to the WWF, citing climate change and poaching as the main reasons for the decline.

The organisation also highlighted the plight of emperor penguins, saying that nothing had been done this year to better protect the species.

"At current greenhouse gas emission levels, between 80 and 100% of all known emperor penguin colonies are at risk of extinction by 2100," the WWF said.

Meanwhile this summer's mass fish deaths in the Oder River, which runs between Germany and Poland, was also a setback for the reintroduction of the Baltic sturgeon, as thousands of young fish died, the WWF said.

In August, thousands of fish were found dead in the Oder. Experts believe that the cause of the mass fish deaths was salt discharges combined with low water and high temperatures, which led to the mass reproduction of a toxic algae species (*Prymnesium parvum*).

The WWF also highlighted positive examples of species conservation, including the tiger population in Nepal, which was recovering well, as well as humpback whales in Australia. The animals had been removed from the list of endangered species due to a significant population increase. Nevertheless, more measures were needed to protect the whales from threats such as fishing, ship traffic and pollution, the organisation said. — **dpa**

MARINE LIFE

'It just dies': Yellow-band disease ravages Thailand's coral reefs



UNDERNEATH THE calm turquoise waters off eastern Thailand, a rapidly spreading disease is killing corals over vast stretches of the sea floor, and scientists fear it may be getting worse because of climate change.

Yellow-band disease — named for the colour it turns corals before destroying them — was first spotted decades ago and has caused widespread damage to reefs in the Caribbean. There is no known cure.

But it was detected for the first time off Thailand's eastern coast just last year, near the popular tourist city of Pattaya, and has already spread over roughly 600 acres (240 hectares) of the sea.

"I haven't seen anything like this before," said marine scientist Lalita Putchim, of Thailand's Department of Marine and Coastal Resources.

"Everywhere we went we saw it, and we expect to see more of it as we go."

Scientists believe

overfishing, pollution and rising water temperatures because of climate change may be making the reefs more vulnerable to yellow-band disease.

The disease's impact cannot be reversed, unlike the effects of coral bleaching.

"When the coral is infected with this disease, it just dies," Lalita said.

The loss of corals could have a devastating impact on the ecosystem — the reef is "like a forest", sustaining massive amounts of life, and its death could eventually impact humans too, she added.

Thai scientists are hoping their investigation into this outbreak will help find a way to stop or cure yellow-band disease.

On one research trip near Samaesan island in Chonburi district, Lalita and her team donned diving gear on a boat before heading underwater.

They photographed infected corals, taking measurements and photographs while harvesting samples to

study later.

Thai marine authorities are using social media to track reports of infected reefs, and have also asked the public to report any sightings of affected corals.

Thai researchers have also been aided by local volunteers, as well as business owner Thanapon Chaivanichakul, who collected underwater photographic evidence.

"I was shocked when I first saw it," Thanapon told AFP, using a series of expletives to describe the disease.

The disease is also a threat to the livelihoods of many in the area.

Choopan Sudjai, the owner of a sightseeing boat, relies on the income from tourists who come to see the area's natural beauty — especially the coral reefs.

"Now that the coral has been infected and will be destroyed, what will we do in five years?" said the 55-year-old.

"It feels as if our own home has been destroyed." — **AFP**

A PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE



Dr Yousuf Ali al Mulla

Organ donation...a gift of life!

A TEN-YEAR-OLD daughter had what looked like the flu: persistent fever, vomiting, dizziness and fainting. On her third trip to the paediatrician, the doctor asked the family to take her to the emergency room. There, a blood test reported scary news: Her kidneys had stopped working! And here she was put in an ambulance and rushed to a nearby hospital that has a paediatric nephrology unit, which made her undergo dialysis immediately, perhaps saving her life!

We may realise here that, unfortunately for that girl, dialysis also threatened to take over her life. May be because it is a long-term treatment for permanent kidney failure, dialysis is good as well as bad news for that child, given other dimensions of her or any other child's life. It preserves life, but it is often demoralising! Moreover, dialysis patients are susceptible to anaemia, weight gain, low blood pressure and infection from catheterisation. In fact they gradually lose the ability to urinate and can drink very little of anything! Many children on dialysis experience stunted growth. However, unfortunately I would sometimes say that dialysis does not make patients well, it simply postpones their death!

Somehow, when we return to that child, the doctors discover that she has a rare genetic disorder that has no cure. But there is one treatment that can solve the problem for years, even decades: a kidney transplant!

Sure, we can find enough kidney donors to end this child's crisis, but what about other people's lives...those who might need a transplant?

Therefore, solving this problem requires creativity, audacity and above all, a sense of urgency. That is why a few years ago, a national programme was launched in the Sultanate of Oman to organise organs transplant and donation, not to mention the establishment of an Omani association for it. Imagine with me the frustration of watching your sister or daughter die of kidney failure and that you are ready and healthy enough to donate to her and restore her life.

In general, with the progress in the donor and transplant with the cultural and societal shift in the world of organ transplantation, away from the legalisation of cadaveric organs and towards the search for living donors, I believe that we must continue to build a relatively new idea, religious and ethical: that strangers give organs to strangers — and it all has its reward — with a growing conviction that rewarding patients for waiting their turn while their health deteriorates is unnecessary and they deserve another chance at life.

In the end, those families who are unwilling to accept that no more can be done to save their loved ones, have always tried to attract the attention of people and society and we are with them to say that organ transplantation and donation has become a hope and gift for a new life and that something better should be possible. Hence, in ways we've never imagined before, we can transform death and pain into life and hope.

Dr Yousuf Ali Al Mulla is a physician, medical innovator and writer.



IT IS SNOWING IN THE DESERT



KABEER YOUSUF

IT has been snowing in Oman since December 24 and a steady stream of yearning visitors comprising people from different walks of life who wished to bask in the snow and to shiver in the cool winds have been making it to the snow. There, one is trying all snow exercises, sipping on steamy coffee amid the chilly winds beside the buildings covered in shimmering white snow as the ships frozen in time stood as reminiscences of the past while children went sledding down frozen sand dunes, and couples went discovering an exciting world of fun in icy cold temperatures. Spread over a massive 14,830 square metres with a 'Desert Blizzard' theme — a reimagined world where Oman's cityscapes and sand dunes are covered in real snow in the heart of the Mall of Oman, Snow Oman, the largest

snow park in the MENA region, is the coolest must-visit destination that features a gamut of family-friendly rides. And the rides vary from the Mountain Thriller, Snow Bullet, Slide Winder, and Cloud Climber to Zorb Ball, besides unique attractions such as Cold Town Muscat, Frozen Shipwreck and Lighthouse, and a 475-square metre ice rink. It is the only snow ambience in the Sultanate of Oman which is catering to those who love to explore icy alleys and frozen pathways between snow-frosted buildings. "This is not the first time that an indoor snow experience is offered in the region. In 2005, the same group pioneered the first, sub-zero leisure offering in the Mall of the Emirates: Ski Dubai. The award-winning experience has been recognised as the World's Best Indoor Ski Resort by the prestigious World Ski Awards for seven consecutive years. In 2017,

Ski Egypt opened in the Mall of Egypt and set an all-new record for being the first of its kind in the African continent," a representative from the Majid al Futtaim, the leading shopping mall, communities, retail and leisure pioneer across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, which owns Snow Oman said. Like its sister brands Ski Dubai and Ski Egypt, Snow Oman is now home to a colony of king and Gentoo penguins who are provided with the best possible care in a custom-built penguinarium. There are 6 King penguins and 6 Gentoo penguins at the Snow Oman. They come from a colony that was established in Ski Dubai in January 2012. The first colony hatched from eggs that were laid in San Antonio, US, and have since had chicks of their own and all the penguins at the Snow Oman are provided with the best natural habitat possible in a custom-built home.

SOME OF THE ATTRACTIONS ONE SHOULD NOT MISS AT SNOW OMAN:

FROZEN SHIPWRECK AND LIGHTHOUSE
It is an experience packed with adventure aboard a ship frozen in time, and climb as high as you dare in the lighthouse.

SNOW PARK RIDES
One can climb from snowy chills to high-speed thrills, and it is a must for those who love snow rides and it caters to everyone in the family to enjoy.

ZORB BALLS
Families are provided with an unforgettable ride and one can tumble down a snowy slope in the safety of the giant inflatable Zorb balls in the snowy surrounding.

SNOW CONSTRUCTION
Young, budding architects can practice their snow-building skills in this exciting, challenging attraction and see how they build their own igloo.