

Russia, Ukraine to discuss ceasefire

Russia and Ukraine will discuss a ceasefire at upcoming talks on the border between Poland and Belarus, Moscow's chief negotiator said on Wednesday, nearly one week into Russia's invasion of its pro-Western neighbour. "The Ukrainian delegation has already left Kyiv. We expect them to be here tomorrow morning," Vladimir Medinsky said, for ceasefire talks, while the Ukrainian presidency confirmed it. **SEE ALSO P7**



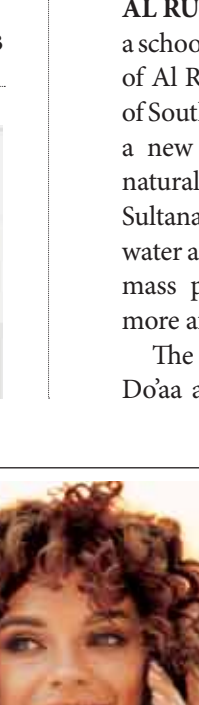
P12

AL RUSTAQ
BLANK DHOFAR
TO ENTER HM
CUP FINAL



P13

OMAN CRUDE SPIKES
TO \$110.81/B IN
RECORD SINGLE
DAY SURGE



P19

ARMANI PAYS
TRIBUTE TO UKRAINE
SUFFERING WITH
SILENT SHOW



MUSCAT

HM GREETINGS TO
BULGARIA PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Dr Rumen Radev of the Republic of Bulgaria on his country's National Day. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes to President Radev and the people of his country. — ONA

STATE COUNCIL
APPROVES 4 STUDIES

The State Council approved four studies submitted by the council's standing committee at its fourth regular meeting on Wednesday. The State Council approved a study on 'enhancing water, desert and mountain sports' submitted by the Social Committee in addition to two studies submitted by the Technology and Innovation Committee on the system of the Cyber Defence Centre promulgated by Royal Decree No 64/2022. **DETAILS ON P3**



HM GREETINGS TO TUNISIA PRESIDENT



Sayingid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, on Wednesday conveyed greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to President Kais Saied of the Republic of Tunisia. This came when President Saied received Arab Interior Ministers who are taking part in the 39th meeting of the Arab Interior Ministers Council (AIMC). **DETAILS ON P3**

Student invents new type of bioplastic

AL RUSTAQ: Neeam al Harrasi, a school student from the Wilayat of Al Rustaq in the Governorate of South Al Batinah, has invented a new type of bioplastic using natural materials available in the Sultanate of Oman, such as rice water and fish scales, to make the mass production of bioplastics more affordable.

The school project in which Do'aa al Hashmi, a student also



took part, aims to develop a decomposable plastic that is of similar quality to industrial

plastic and to meet the challenges arising from the growing bans on single-use plastics in the Sultanate of Oman and all over the world.

Citing from the website of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), Neeam's project by using the local materials would make the mass production of bioplastics more affordable. **TURN TO P3**

HM ISSUES TWO ROYAL DECREES

3 free zones
established

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has issued two Royal Decrees.

Royal Decree No 10/2022 establishes free zones at Muscat International Airport and in the airports of Sohar and Salalah.

Article (1) states that free zones shall be established as follows: A free zone at Muscat International Airport to be named "Muscat International Airport Free Zone".

A free zone at Sohar Airport to be named "Sohar Airport Free Zone".

A free zone at Salalah Airport to be named "Salalah Airport Free Zone".

The free zones will be set up in the designated land plot according to the layouts attached, which are specified in the concluded concession agreements.

Article (2) states that the Council of Ministers shall

Royal Decree establishes free zones at Muscat International Airport and in the airports of Sohar and Salalah. The Council of Ministers shall determine the operating party for the free zones

determine the Operating Party for the above-mentioned free zones (specified in the first article of this Decree) from among the companies reporting to Oman Investment Authority. These firms may seek the assistance of departments and companies specialised in the development, marketing, management and operation of those free zones. **TURN TO P2**



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■ DEPUTY PM RECEIVES ENVOYS



His Highness Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs received Ligia Maria Scherer, Ambassador of Brazil to the Sultanate of Oman in Muscat on Wednesday. HH Sayyid Shihab wished the ambassador success in her tour of duty in Oman. They discussed bilateral relations between the two countries and exchanged views on matters of mutual interest. HH Sayyid Shihab also received Shaiful Anuar Mohammad Malaysian Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman. HH Sayyid Shihab wished the ambassador success in his tour of duty in Oman. They discussed bilateral relations between the two countries and exchanged views on matters of mutual interest. — ONA

SAF Chief of receives UAE commander

MUSCAT: Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), received Maj Gen Said Rashid al Shehi, Commander of the United Arab Emirates Land Forces, in Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Wednesday. They exchanged views on several military matters of common interest between the two countries.

Maj Gen Al Shehi visited the Sultan's Armed Forces Museum at Bait Al Falaj Fort today. The guest was accompanied during the visit by Brigadier Humaid bin Abdullah al Maamari, Head of Administration and Human Resources at the Royal Army of

Oman Command. The guest and members of the visiting delegation toured the museum and viewed its historical manuscripts and models. They were also briefed on the march of SAF's development. The Director of the Museum accompanied the guest and his delegation during their tour in various sections of the museum.

They viewed the historic manuscripts and models. At the conclusion of the visit, the members of the visiting delegation signed the visitor's book, expressing their delight to view the rich military and civilised heritage of Oman, as well as its aspects of progress and growth.

Maj Gen Al Shehi also visited today the Maritime Security Centre (MSC). The guest was accompanied during the visit by Brigadier Humaid bin Abdullah al Maamari, Head of Administration and Human Resources at the Royal Army of Oman Command. Upon the guest's arrival at the MSC, he was greeted by the Acting Head of the MSC.

The Emirati guest and members of the visiting delegation were briefed on the roles and tasks carried out by the centre in maintaining safety of the maritime environment. — ONA

Three new free zones established

FROM PAGE 1

Article (3) states that both of the Operating Party and firms shall be granted the incentives and privileges stipulated in the Law on Free Zones promulgated under Royal Decree No 56/2002.

Article (4) states that the Operating Party and the firms shall be granted a 15-year Income Tax waiver for each separate project, extendable for a further 5 years. In all cases, this waiver is not valid for banks, financial institutions, insurance and reinsurance companies or projects providing services in telecommunications, land transport or contracts.

Article (5) states that the waivers stated in Article 4 of this decree shall be issued vide a decision by the Chairman of the Tax Authority and in accordance with the rules, regulations and procedures endorsed by the Board of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones, after the approval of the Ministry of Finance.

Article (6) states that the operating companies shall pay dues to the Operating Party in return for the services that the Operating Party renders to them.

The Operating Party has to specify the value of the service fee and the method of its collection, after the Board of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones approves the same.

Article (7) states that the Operating Party shall stick to governing aerial affiliation regulations and requirements for safety and security of civil aviation under the supervision of the Civil Aviation Authority.

The Operating Party has to coordinate with the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones to achieve the measures deemed necessary for the safety of individuals, operating companies, installations, goods and commodities within the purview of each zone, in addition to fully cooperating with the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones to observe the regulations governing the safety of the environment and the establishment of security.

Article (8) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on its date following its date of publishing.

Royal Decree No 11/2022 on the ratification of an agreement between the governments of the Sultanate of Oman and Hungary on the encouragement and mutual protection of investments, signed in Muscat on 2 February 2022, after presenting the same to the Shura Council.

Article (1) ratifies the above-mentioned agreement in accordance with the version attached to this Decree.

Article (2) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced on its date of issue. — ONA



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OSIP creates awareness for intellectual property



LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

How well do you know about intellectual property rights (IPR)? Who is it applicable for?

The Omani Society for Intellectual Property is armed with these questions while asking visitors to do a survey at the 26th Muscat International Book Fair. The Society has its pavilion where it encourages the visitors to find out more about the IPR.

The Society's objective is to work in the field of IPR to raise awareness about the fundamental importance of protecting intellectual property and work towards the implementation of protecting IP.

Muhanna al Zuhaimi from the Society said the OSIP also supports and encourages talents, promote scientific research on IP, create a network of national scientific competencies in the area and share experience and knowledge on IP issues in various fields.

OSIP also has a solid social media presence and invites the public to understand how their scientific research, creative ideas, thoughts and words can be protected.

About the exhibition, he said many publishers are available this year and because of the event being well organised as per the Covid-19 protocol, the public is keen to come.

"We have seen good turnout. This survey is important because it will not only create awareness but give us an idea on the current status when it comes to knowledge on intellectual property issues," he said.

"Intellectual property is the rights given to an individual for the creation of their minds. We at the Society are trying to create a network of scientific competence in the area of intellectual property rights as well as supporting and promoting intellectual property talents. Do we have a survey here at our pavilion and this is to calculate and get a good picture of the awareness level amongst awareness. We are also inviting scientists and experts on various subjects, researchers, writers and innovators to join the Association as members. All they require is to fill one page application," he pointed out.



Women have distinct presence at fair



AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 2

The Omani Women's Association (OWA) in Muscat is participating in the 26th Muscat International Book Fair (MIBF) at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre through a special pavilion in the exhibition. The pavilion showcases the role of women, their entrepreneurial activities and products they make at home or craft centres. The women are also taking part in many cultural activities (lectures and dialogue sessions), art workshops, and a permanent exhibition to display plastic art, calligraphy and sculpture paintings.

Omani women have always been actively taking part in international cultural events and exhibiting the roles played by the OWA.

In the MIBF there are 114 cultural activities. The OWA is taking part in some of the important events related to their local community engagements.

The OWA's stall has emerged as an important joint for those interested in the association's activities, as some volunteers are seen displaying and selling the association's publications, garment products, silver collections etc.

There has been a visual presentation detailing the association's activities, events and achievements, as the OWA claims to have implemented a number of technical workshops during the exhibition period.

The association's events include a drawing workshop, sailing with colours workshop, reading stories for children, a recycling workshop, a paper-wrapping workshop, a Diwani calligraphy workshop, a lecture "education begins with who", and an initial dialogue session on citizenship and its impact on the development of culture and community development in the Sultanate of Oman.

Najat bint Saad al Busaidi, Head of the Media Committee of the Omani Women's Association, said: "Women aim to register their presence at the 26th Muscat International Book Fair to enhance awareness and knowledge. Omani woman always stood for development along with men to raise social awareness and support cultural, intellectual and economic movements.

The OWA corner was distinguished by the attendance of a number of publications by the Omani Women's Association members, like *Shurooq* magazine and social studies prepared by the members to know the community needs and priorities upon which the association sets its plans.

The association's corner attracted visitors for its display of art and craft

THE DISCUSSION ON SATURDAY WILL FOCUS ON OMAN VISION 2040 AND ITS IMPACT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURE AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, CIVIL ASSOCIATIONS, INCLUDING THE OWA, IN PROMOTING DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP IN LIGHT OF GLOBALISATION AND THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

works, distinct Omani jewellery, paintings and products like environmental bags. The association has successfully produced environment-friendly women's and men's bags that also have a touch of Omani heritage.

Badriya bint Nasser al Wahaibi, a member of the Development and Innovation Committee of the OWA, mentioned that the association will arrange a dialogue on "The priority of citizenship, identity, heritage and national culture and its impact on the development of culture and community development".

It will be held on the sidelines of the exhibition on Saturday (March 5) with the participation of the members of the association, specialists from the State Council, Sultan Qaboos University, Shaikh Ali al Mahrouqi, Member of the State Council and International Ambassador for Social Responsibility and recipient of the Excellence Award in the field of Social Responsibility for the year 2021, and Dr Hamid al Saidi from the Ministry of Education.

The discussion will focus on Oman Vision 2040 and its impact on the development of culture and community development, civil associations, including the OWA, in promoting digital citizenship in light of the globalisation, and the industrial revolution. It will discuss the role of social media in promoting the values of citizenship and preserving the Omani identity.



RECALL CAMPAIGN
For Chevrolet Cruze, Aveo and Trax model vehicles

Date of Campaign : 3 / 3 / 2022
Campaign Type : Safety
Recall Segment : Airbags
Product Description : Chevrolet Cruze 2010-2017 / Chevrolet Aveo 2012-2018 / Chevrolet Trax 2013-2018

Model Year	Division	Vehicle Model	Affected Vehicle VIN Range	No. of Affected Vehicles in Oman
2010-2017	Chevrolet	Cruze	KL1PJ5C50AK538193 to KL1PM6D5XHK613990	2207
2012-2018	Chevrolet	Aveo	KL1JD5BE0CB036642 to KL1JM6DEXD8048849	564
2013-2018	Chevrolet	Trax	KL1JD7D50EB643894 to KL1JJ7E5XJB522159	129

Description:
These vehicles inflator of the driver's airbag, made with non-desiccated PSAN (Phase Stabilized Ammonium Nitrate) as a propellant, may experience alteration due to long term use, which may cause it to generate gas faster than designed when the airbag inflator is deployed during a crash.

Procedure:
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Two more firms get nod for security assessment

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology has accredited Phoenix Technologies and Solutions company (Securado) and Dream Lab Technologies company in the field of security assessment.

The move comes within the framework of the ministry's accreditation programme for IT service providers in the Sultanate of Oman.

The accreditation programme is considered an important tool to boost the government's digital transformation and enhance the digital economy.

It also supports nascent

Omani companies and raises the level of quality, efficiency and effectiveness of services rendered by technology companies in Oman. The programme defines technical and administrative national standards which must be met by IT service providers to be eligible in offering their services to the units of the State's Administrative Apparatus.

The programme also aims to stimulate the labour market and provide job opportunities, as well as Omani competencies that can compete at the local and international levels.

— ONA

■ ROHM OPEN HOUSE ON MARCH 5



ROHM's Open House events offer the public a window to enjoy a casual and welcoming atmosphere amid the inspiring beauty of the building. The doors of the Royal Opera House Muscat are opened for the public to experience a wide variety of events related to the performing arts and to the programme of the season, such as exhibitions and workshops with a special focus on the interests of children and families. Open House, which will be held on March 5, is a free ticketed event. It will discuss heritage and technology, history and dreams, preservation and innovation.

Travel sector upbeat over IATA positive forecast



KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

The travel and tourism sector is upbeat over International Air Transport Association's (IATA) positive outlook after further global relaxation in Covid-19 restrictions.

IATA's predictions of overall traveller numbers of 4.0 billion in 2024, including multi-sector connecting trips as one passenger, exceeding pre-Covid-19 levels by 103 per cent of the 2019 total, has boosted Oman based travel and tourism houses.

Speaking to the *Observer*, Sunil D'Souza, CEO of Travel City Group, expressed happiness over the announcement.

"The IATA report says, by 2024 the number of passengers travelling would reach 4 billion, which is 3 per cent more than the peak of 2019 numbers. It is highly realistic based on current growth and future trends," D'Souza said.

"Since people were stuck for two years due to Covid

related challenges, Oman too can witness a steady up-marching graph for both inbound and outbound tourism," he adds.

In addition, the Expedia Group, an American online travel shopping company for consumer and small business travel, has forecast that the 2022 summer will be the busiest ever in recent travel history.

"If the opinion of the CEO of Expedia Inc can be trusted, we, the travel houses in the Sultanate of Oman, can look forward to a busy season as summer 2022 is fast approaching and many small, as well as big players on the sector, can heave a sigh of relief," said Ijaz Kazi of Easy Travel.

Since the government-imposed travel restrictions in some markets have been lifted, expectations for the near-term recovery have gone high, according to travel experts.

"The trajectory for the recovery in passenger numbers from Covid-19 was not

Travel experts have further called for removing all travel barriers, including quarantine and testing for those fully vaccinated with a WHO-approved vaccine and implementing pre-departure antigen testing to enable quarantine-free travel for non-vaccinated travellers

changed by the Omicron variant. People want to travel. And when travel restrictions are lifted, they return to the skies. There is still a long way to go to reach a normal state of affairs, but the forecast for the evolution in passenger numbers gives good reason to be optimistic," said Willie Walsh, IATA's Director-General. In 2021, overall traveller numbers were 47 per cent of

2019 levels. This is expected to improve to 83 per cent in 2022, 94 per cent in 2023, 103 per cent in 2024 and 111 per cent in 2025.

In 2021, international traveller numbers were 27 per cent of 2019 levels. This is expected to improve to 69 per cent in 2022, 82 per cent in 2023, 92 per cent in 2024 and 101 per cent in 2025.

Travel experts have further called for removing all travel barriers, including quarantine and testing for those fully vaccinated with a WHO-approved vaccine and implementing pre-departure antigen testing to enable quarantine-free travel for non-vaccinated travellers.

All travel bans should be removed and travel restrictions be eased in recognition that travellers pose no greater risk for Covid-19 spread than already exists in the general population," Ashraf Omar, a frequent traveller and monitor of travel and tourism sector added.

In brief

NEW BATCH OF CITIZENS JOINS ROYAL OMAN POLICE



MUSCAT: A new batch of citizens with above-GED qualification joined the Royal Oman Police (ROP) as part of its efforts to recruit citizens in coordination with the Ministry of Labour, on Wednesday. The new batch comprises technicians in IT, electronics, communications, networks, mechanics, chemistry, aircraft engineering, among other specialisations. The new recruits will join the Institute of Police Recruits at Sultan Qaboos Academy for Police Sciences where they will undergo a training programme which includes military training, law studies and practical application.

UBAR GETS NOD FOR ON-DEMAND TAXI



MUSCAT: The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology said on Monday that it has granted a licence for on demand – both immediate and pre-booking – taxi service to Ubar Smart Cities. Based on the successful model of ride-hailing service Uber, which has a presence in 900 cities across the world, Ubar aims to make on-demand taxi services a pleasant and smooth experience for all commuters in Oman. The ministry stated that the licence has been given with the objective of improving public transport, stimulating tourism and boosting commerce.

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خدمات لوجستية فائقة

شركة المدينة للخدمات اللوجستية (ش.م.ع.م)

إعلان الدعوة لحضور اجتماع الجمعية العامة العادية السنوية لعام ٢٠٢١ م

يسر مجلس إدارة المدينة للخدمات اللوجستية ش.م.ع.م دعوة المساهمين الكرام لحضور اجتماع الجمعية العامة العادية السنوية للشركة المقرر عقده في تمام الساعة ١١ صباحاً من يوم الأربعاء الموافق ٢٠٢٢/٣/٢٣ م عبر المنصة الإلكترونية لانعقاد الجمعيات العامة ويمكن الدخول إليها عبر شركة مسقط للمقاصة والإيداع (www.mcd.gov.om). وفي حال عدم اكتمال النصاب القانوني للجمعية، سيتم عقد الاجتماع الثاني يوم الخميس الموافق ٢٠٢٢/٣/٢٤ م في تمام الساعة ١١:٠٠ صباحاً عبر المنصة الإلكترونية المذكورة أعلاه لمناقشة جدول الأعمال التالي:

١. دراسة تقرير مجلس الإدارة عن السنة المالية المنتهية في ٣١ ديسمبر ٢٠٢١ م، والموافقة عليه.
٢. دراسة تقرير مجلس الإدارة عن تنظيم وإدارة الشركة خلال السنة المالية المنتهية في ٣١/١٢/٢٠٢١ م، والموافقة عليه.
٣. دراسة تقرير مراقب الحسابات والموافقة على الميزانية العمومية وحساب الأرباح والخسائر عن السنة المالية المنتهية في ٣١ ديسمبر ٢٠٢١ م.
٤. إحاطة الجمعية العامة بالتعاملات التي أجرتها الشركة مع الأطراف ذات العلاقة خلال السنة المالية المنتهية في ٣١ ديسمبر ٢٠٢١ م والموافقة عليها.
٥. دراسة مقترح توزيع أرباح نقدية على المساهمين بتاريخ الجمعية حسب الكشف المرفق للسنة المالية المنتهية في ٣١/١٢/٢٠٢١ م والموافقة عليه (حسب المقترح المرفق).
٦. التصديق على مقترح توزيع مكافآت لأعضاء مجلس الإدارة عن السنة المالية المنتهية في العام ٢٠٢١ م (حسب المرفق).
٧. التصديق على بدل حضور جلسات مجلس الإدارة واللجان المنبثقة الذي تقاضاه أعضاء مجلس الإدارة عن السنة المالية المنصرمة وتحديد مقدار البدل للسنة المالية القادمة ٢٠٢٢ م (حسب المرفق).
٨. انتخاب أعضاء مجلس إدارة جديد للشركة من المساهمين أو من غير المساهمين وعلى كل من يرغب في ترشيح نفسه لعضوية المجلس تعبئة استمارة الترشيح المعدة لذلك وتسليمها للشركة قبل خمسة أيام من تاريخ انعقاد الجمعية العامة العادية السنوية في موعد أقصاه نهاية يوم عمل الخميس الموافق ٢٠٢٢/٣/١٧ ولن تقبل الشركة أي استمارة ترشح بعد ذلك التاريخ.
٩. تعيين مراقب الحسابات للسنة المالية التي ستنتهي في ٣١ ديسمبر ٢٠٢٢ وتحديد أتعابه (حسب المرفق).

وفقاً للنظام الأساسي للشركة وضوابط انعقاد جمعيات العامة باستخدام وسائل التقنية الحديثة نود أن تلتفت عنايتكم إلى الآتي:

(أ) يحق للشخص الاعتباري دون غيره تشييع شخص طبيعي لحضور اجتماع الجمعية العامة والتصويت نيابة عنه من خلال وسائل التقنية على أن يكون لهذا الشخص الطبيعي رقم مستمر بشركة مسقط للمقاصة والإيداع.

(ب) يبدأ التصويت على أي من البنود المطروحة على جدول الأعمال قبل تاريخ انعقاد الجمعية لمدة لا تزيد على ثلاثة أيام وحتى انتهاء عملية التصويت في يوم الاجتماع، وفي حالة تغيير رصيد المساهم بالزيادة أو النقصان فسيتم إلغاء عملية التصويت، ويتعين عليه إعادة التصويت مرة أخرى في يوم اجتماع الجمعية.

وفي حالة وجود أي استفسارات يرجى الاتصال بالفاضل / ماثيو فريسي أمين سر مجلس الإدارة على هاتف رقم ٣٦١٩٥٦٥٣.

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Sudan's economy tumbles in post-coup deadlock

KHARTOUM: Sudan is once again lurching towards economic collapse in the aftermath of a coup in October, with exports plummeting more than 85 per cent in January according to central bank data and the currency sliding on the black market.

Cut off from billions in foreign assistance, a military-led government is raising prices and taxes on everything from healthcare to cooking gas, but the increases have angered struggling citizens.

Sudan's long-running economic crisis — a legacy of decades of war, isolation, and sanctions — had shown signs of abating before the coup, but now poses a fresh humanitarian risk as its population faces renewed violence and rising levels of hunger.

Military leaders have yet to name a prime minister and protests have raged for months. The political deadlock is paralysing business, said Amin Shibeika, a Khartoum banker.

"No one is making future plans, it's all suspended. There's a lack of transparency, with no light at the end of the tunnel," he said.

The October 25 coup ended a power-sharing agreement between the military and civilians

struck after the overthrow of former leader Omar al Bashir in a 2019 uprising. Designed to lead to democratic elections, it had seen a civilian government implement painful economic reforms and secure foreign assistance and debt relief. That is now frozen.

In the latest effort by the leadership to rally scarce international support, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, deputy leader of Sudan's ruling council and commander of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, travelled to Moscow last week accompanied by finance minister and armed group leader Jibril Ibrahim.

While the delegation met senior figures including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, no major deals have been announced and Russia itself is now facing sweeping Western sanctions over the invasion of Ukraine.

A senior Sudanese official said the government saw no foreign bailout on the horizon, and Ibrahim has said Sudan would rely on its own resources for this year's budget.

According to a copy of the draft budget seen by Reuters, it is aiming for a 145-per cent increase in tax revenues and a 140-per cent



Sudanese anti-coup protesters take part in ongoing demonstrations against the military in Khartoum. — AFP

increase in revenue from the sale of commodities and services.

Among the tax measures to achieve that is what traders say is a four- or five-fold increase on annual business licence fees. But businesses are so used to not paying taxes that increases would be hard to impose, said Shibeika, the banker.

"Business has basically stopped in the last few months, so these are

NO PM APPOINTED
SINCE OCTOBER
MILITARY COUP AS
EXPORTS DOWN DUE
TO UNCERTAINTY
AND POLITICAL
BLOCKADES

additional burdens in difficult circumstances," said a business owner in central Khartoum. "This is the worst it's been since I started trading 20 years ago."

Revenues and spending are forecast to rise by more than a third, with a deficit of 363 billion Sudanese pounds (\$820 million).

Though the government has ratified the budget, a senior finance ministry official said it was

not realistic and not being applied on the ground.

Analysts say it would not be possible to pay salaries and meet other expenditures without resorting to inflationary printing of money, which Ibrahim last week denied doing. The finance ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

A weeks-long blockade of Port Sudan prior to the coup and barricades along a trade route with Egypt by anti-military protesters have restricted exports of goods such as sesame seeds, peanuts, cotton and gum arabic that bring in badly needed dollars.

In January, Sudan exported only \$43.5 million worth of goods, down sharply from \$293 million in December, according to central bank data seen by Reuters, although this is a peak agricultural export season.

Following the devaluation of Sudan's currency a year ago, the exchange rate had stabilised at about 450 pounds to the dollar. But in recent weeks the black market has resurfaced and the pound was changing hands at 530 against the dollar on Wednesday, compared with an official rate of 443.50. — AFP

Scholz says Iran deal 'cannot be postponed'

TEL AVIV: Germany's Olaf Scholz (pictured) said on Wednesday that a new Iran nuclear agreement "cannot be postponed any longer", during his first visit as chancellor to Israel, which staunchly opposes efforts to forge a deal with Tehran.

Scholz's visit, which included a ceremony at Jerusalem's Holocaust memorial a c c o m p a n i e d by Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, comes amid the geopolitical turmoil sparked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The two heads of government — both relatively new to office following many years when their countries were ruled by veterans Angela Merkel and Benjamin Netanyahu — met as rapidly moving world events test their leadership.

Policy differences on Iran, surfaced at a Jerusalem joint press conference, with Scholz saying Germany "would like to see an agreement reached in Vienna". The latest round of negotiations to salvage Iran's 2015 nuclear

deal started in late November in the Austrian capital and the talks are expected to reach a crunch point in the coming days.

The so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) secured sanctions relief for Iran in return for strict curbs on its nuclear programme to prevent it acquiring an atomic weapon, a goal Iran has always denied pursuing.

"Now is the time to make a decision," Scholz said. "This must not be postponed any longer and cannot be postponed any longer. Now is the time to finally say yes to something that represents a good and reasonable solution."

The original 2015 agreement unravelled when former US president Donald Trump withdrew from it, with Israeli encouragement.

Israel's Bennett has said he is "deeply troubled" by the outlines of a new deal taking shape, fearing it does too little to stop Iran from getting the nuclear bomb, while granting it sanctions relief.

— AFP



Australian floods spread to Sydney

LAWRENCE: Emergency services ordered some Sydney residents to prepare to flee on Wednesday as heavy rainfall barrelled down Australia's east coast, burying towns in floodwater, killing 13 and putting hundreds of thousands at risk.

A week-long torrential downpour has swollen rivers and reservoirs past bursting point, causing chaos in an area 800 kilometres long.

From Brisbane to Sydney, more than 30 evacuation warnings are in place and several dams are overflowing, with some near Sydney under threat of bursting.

Terrified residents have sought refuge on higher ground, in make-shift evacuation centres, or by clambering into attics or onto rooftops praying for rescue by boat or helicopter.

In the hard-hit town of Lismore, Lucy Wise said the floods came much quicker and much higher than expected.

"The rain just wouldn't stop and the water was just coming up so fast," she said.

She huddled at home as the waters rose through the night before grabbing her sleeping two-year-old son, cloaking him in a lifejacket and scrambling into



Flying instructor Peter Clement and his wife Kerrie stand in waist-high water as they examine their aircraft inside a hanger after a flood inundated Grafton Air Strip in Grafton. — AFP

the roof space of their house for safety.

"We were just lying there, silently, and the rain was just pouring down. I'd never heard such heavy rain in my life."

From outside neighbours watched as the house went under water.

"It was a few hours that I couldn't move. I could barely breathe. I was just taking it one breath at a time."

Wise and her family were eventually rescued by boat, but authorities say the floods have already claimed the lives of 13

others in Queensland and New South Wales.

The focus has now shifted to Sydney, Australia's largest city and home to more than five million people. The Warragamba Dam, which supplies 80 per cent of the city's water, began to spill over in the early hours of Wednesday.

Several western suburbs are under major flood and evacuation warnings, and authorities have told residents across the city to stop all "non-essential travel."

"There are quite a few hundred thousand people affected by these warnings that we are putting

out now," said State Emergency Services commissioner Carlene York.

A La Nina weather pattern has caused Sydney to experience its wettest summer in 30 years.

Meteorologist Ben Domensino of @Weatherzone described the current storm system as an "atmospheric river" featuring a "long area of airborne moisture that is going in one direction."

Scientists say climate change is making Australia's floods, bushfires, cyclones and droughts more frequent and more intense.

— AFP

SHORT TAKES

YANGON

Myanmar pardons actor jailed for dissent

A leading Myanmar actor, singer and model jailed for supporting pro-democracy protests has been pardoned and released, his legal team said.

Paing Takhon, 25, a star in both Myanmar and Thailand, had been active in the mass protests that rocked the country following last year's coup, leading rallies and advocating through his massive social media following.

He was arrested in a dawn raid at his mother's home in Yangon



in April and in December was jailed for three years with hard labour for spreading dissent against the military.

He was pardoned and released and had arrived home, his lawyer said, without giving details.

MANILA

Philippines celebrates Ash Wednesday

Thousands of Filipinos flocked to churches to observe Ash Wednesday, with Catholic priests and nuns daubing their foreheads with a cross for the first time since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

Most Covid-19 restrictions were scrapped this week after a sharp drop in infections and increased vaccinations, allowing churches to pack their pews and physical contact to resume.

Devotees wearing masks began lining up outside Baclaran



Church in Manila before dawn to receive the ash cross on their foreheads — a ritual that signals the beginning of Lent. Churches have in the past two years sprinkled it in people's hair due to anti-Covid measures.

CAIRO

Suez Canal announces hike in passage tolls

Egypt's Suez Canal Authority announced additional tolls for transiting vessels including fuel tankers, as oil prices soar in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Petroleum gas tankers will see a 10-per cent hike on passage fees while liquefied natural gas carriers and general cargo ships will incur a seven percent increase, an SCA statement said.

Ships carrying petroleum products will be hit with a five-per cent rise under the new tolls,



which are effective immediately. A six-per cent fee hike had already come into effect earlier this year, though cruise ships and liquefied natural gas carriers were exempt.

Ukrainians fight on as Russia bombs cities

KYIV/KHARKIV: Ukrainians said on Wednesday they were battling on in the port of Kherson, the first sizeable city Russia claimed to have seized, as air strikes and bombardment caused devastation in cities that Moscow’s bogged down forces have failed to capture.

After nearly a week, Russia has yet to achieve its aim of overthrowing Ukraine’s government, but has, according to the Ukrainian emergency service, killed more than 2,000 civilians and destroyed hospitals, kindergartens and homes.

The war has sent more than 870,000 people fleeing over Ukraine’s borders and retaliatory sanctions have shaken the world economy, with surging oil prices exacerbating fears of inflation.

Bombing of Kharkiv, an eastern city of 1.5 million people, has left its centre a wasteland of ruined buildings and debris.

“The Russian ‘liberators’ have come,” one Ukrainian volunteer lamented sarcastically, as he and three others strained to carry the dead body of a man wrapped in a bedsheet out of the ruins on a main square.

After an air strike on Wednesday morning, the roof of a police building in central Kharkiv collapsed as it was engulfed in flames. Authorities said 21 people were killed by shelling and air strikes in the city in the past 24 hours and four more on Wednesday morning.

Moscow denies targeting civilians and says it aims to disarm Ukraine, a country of 44 million people, in a “special military operation”.

Apple, Exxon, Boeing and other firms joined an exodus of international companies



Sergiy Badylevych hugs his wife Natalia Badylevych (R), and baby in an underground metro station used as bomb shelter in Kyiv. – AFP

from Russian markets that has left Moscow financially and diplomatically isolated since President Vladimir Putin ordered the February 24 war.

“He thought he could roll into Ukraine and the world would roll over. Instead, he met a wall of strength he could never have anticipated or imagined: he met

Ukrainian people,” US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday in his annual State of the Union address.

US lawmakers stood, applauded and roared, many waving Ukrainian flags and wearing its blue and yellow colours.

Russia said it had sent delegates for a second round of peace talks

in Belarus. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said Russia must stop bombing if it wanted to negotiate.

Moscow said on Wednesday it had captured Kherson, a southern provincial capital of around 250,000 people strategically placed where the Dnipro River flows into the Black Sea.

Zelenskiy advisor Oleksiy Arestovych denied Kherson was fully under Russian control, saying: “The city has not fallen, our side continues to defend.”

Also in the south, Russia was bombarding the port of Mariupol, which it says it has surrounded in a ring around the entire Sea of Azov. The besieged city’s mayor

said Mariupol had suffered mass casualties after a night of intense strikes. He gave no full casualty figure, but said it was impossible to evacuate the wounded and that water supplies were cut.

“The enemy occupying forces of the Russian Federation have done everything to block the exit of civilians from the city of half a million people,” mayor Vadym Boichenko said in a live broadcast on Ukrainian TV.

On the other two main fronts in the east and north, Russia so far has little to show for its advance, with Ukraine’s two biggest cities, Kyiv and Kharkiv, holding out in the face of increasingly intense bombardment.

“We are going to see ... his brutality increase,” British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said of Putin in a radio interview. “He doesn’t get his way, he surrounds cities, he ruthlessly bombards them at night ... and he will then eventually try and break them and move into the cities.”

In Kyiv, the capital of 3 million people where residents have been sheltering at night in the underground metro, Russia blasted the main television tower near a Holocaust memorial on Tuesday, killing bystanders.

Zelenskiy, in his latest update to his nation, said that attack proved the Russians “don’t know a thing about Kyiv, about our history. But they all have orders to erase our history, erase our country, erase us all.”

Earlier, a tired and unshaven Zelenskiy, wearing green battle fatigues in a heavily guarded government compound, said and CNN in an interview that the bombing must stop for talks to end the war. — Reuters

Conflict reignites debate over national service

BERLIN: The Ukraine crisis has brought more change to German defence and energy policy than many national governments achieve in a normal term in office. Previously tied into to a multi billion-dollar gas pipeline to Russia, Europe’s biggest economy is now aiming to decouple itself from Russian fossil fuels and turning to liquefied natural gas from other parts of the world and renewables.

When it comes to defence, Chancellor Olaf Scholz has said that Germany’s defence budget will from now go above 2 per cent of GDP, a Nato target that the government had always paid lip service to and was indeed creeping towards, but wasn’t expected to reach anytime soon.

The Ukrainians’ fight against the might of the Russian army has also reignited what was a dormant debate over national conscription.

Politicians mainly from the right urged a fresh debate on the issue, arguing that it would help the German army meet the military challenge posed by countries such as Russia.

The leader of the Christian

Democrats (CDU) in Hamburg, for one, said the service could be “carried out in the Bundeswehr, but also, for example, in aid organisations or in the areas of care and education,” he told the newspapers of the *Funke Mediengruppe*. Compulsory military service in Germany was suspended in 2011 after 55 years under the then defence minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, himself a conservative. This in practice meant the abolition of the system whereby school-leavers could choose whether to serve their time in the military or in civilian service.

Leading centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) — who are currently the largest party in the government coalition in Germany — have however poured cold water on the latest idea from the opposition.

“National conscription — we have discussed this for long enough,” SPD party leader Saskia Esken told German broadcaster RTL on Wednesday. It would neither improve the state of the Bundeswehr nor the current dispute with Russia, she argued. — dpa

Europe creates ‘humanitarian corridor’

WARSAW: About half a million refugees have made it on to Polish territory from Ukraine since the start of a Russian war into the former Soviet republic last week, according to officials in Warsaw on Wednesday.

“We are obliged to help our neighbours and we are doing it. We have created a humanitarian corridor and we have sped up all processes that we can speed up from our side,” said Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki before a joint visit to the Korczowa border crossing with European Council President Charles Michel.

The stance earned praise from Pope Francis, who noted from Rome: “You were the first to support Ukraine, by opening your borders, hearts and doors to those Ukrainians fleeing war.” Michel said it was important for all EU member states to show solidarity as the Ukraine crisis unfolds and to do their best to show support to Ukrainians fleeing the Russian attack.

Russia’s war of Ukraine, which started last week after months of Russian denials that any such attack was on the cards, has prompted hundreds of thousands of civilians to flee westward to escape the fighting.

“Poland is helping all the people fleeing the war, all



war refugees, regardless of their country of origin,” said Morawiecki.

He also urged people seeking shelter to ignore Russian propaganda about the way they would be treated at the border.

He was likely referring to images recently shared on social media in which people of African origin complained they were being forced to wait at the border

while other refugees of European origin were allowed through.

Poland is not the refugees’ only destination. About 120,000 have made their way to Romania, though more than half have already travelled onto other countries, leaving about 46,000 still in Romania, said Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucu, in comments reported by Mediafax. — dpa

Japan willing to accept refugees: PM

TOKYO: Japan will accept Ukrainian refugees fleeing Russia’s ongoing war, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said Wednesday, in a break with the country’s usual reticence to accept humanitarian arrivals. Japan typically accepts just a few dozen refugees a year out of thousands of applicants, and its borders are currently closed to virtually all foreign visitors to prevent Covid-19 infections. But Kishida said the country would now “proceed with a plan to welcome people from Ukraine who have fled to third countries” in a bid to “demonstrate our solidarity with the Ukrainian people at such a crucial moment.”

Kishida’s remarks came after he held talks with the prime minister of Poland, which is hosting many of the more than 800,000 refugees who have fled Ukraine since the war began. — AFP

Strengthening human development



Dr Anchan C K

The writer is an adviser on business, economy and investments

Human capital will play the central role in shaping the trajectory of the Sultanate of Oman over the next few years. People are the greatest assets of economies on the rise, the skills, knowledge and innovation, which they possess and accumulate, will make huge impact.

It's been seen that human capital explains up to two thirds of income differences across the world.

Over the years, two measurements have been used to get a sense of how well a country is doing. One is GDP, or gross domestic product, the amount a country earns. The other is its unemployment rate.

When it comes out how well a country is serving its citizens, the Sultanate of Oman is certainly standing tall, as the nation has been investing in human capital over the years now.

The result is proven. The

Sultanate of Oman is currently geared up with supply of homegrown talents in areas such as service, banking, tourism, energy, industries, construction, manufacturing, and information and communication technology.

It is hard to build prosperous, inclusive and resilient economies that can compete and succeed globally with the rapidly growing and changing skills demands of technology-intensive century.

The government has been extremely focused on delivering access to high-quality basic education which plays the critical role in creating much needed human wealth. The foundation for human capital is in fact set long before students get to the level of higher education. There is a huge body of medical and socioeconomic evidence showing that investing in the early years — in the nutrition,

THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN EXTREMELY FOCUSED ON DELIVERING ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY BASIC EDUCATION WHICH PLAYS A CRITICAL ROLE IN CREATING MUCH NEEDED HUMAN WEALTH

stimulation and protection of children — is essential to ensure future productivity and economic growth.

According to the Global Index of Terrorism, the Sultanate of Oman is one of the few countries that has a zero-terrorism rate.

That's not only because of the great efforts and dedication of the police forces and the army, but also because of the care of the Omanis

themselves. They sincerely care about their country, its reputation and the well-being of its residents, and that's why they do everything they can to maintain its safety and peacefulness.

'Vision 2040' is going to be turning point in the history of the Sultanate of Oman. The government has embarked upon a total change in the economy and its administration, such a rapid visualisation and conceptualisation of achieving the noble objectives and deployment of tremendous number of human resources.

The plan emphasises on strengthening of sustainable human development and safeguarding human capital by developing the school and university education system to raise the level of education and to enhance the competitiveness of graduates in the local and global markets.

Building a higher level of technical-scientific skills is one of the surest ways to better prepare the youth expected to enter labour markets every year in a changing world.

The Sultanate of Oman will require tens of thousands of professionals to steer the economy to achieve the objectives of Oman Vision 2040. They are the custodians of the national wealth and they are the conscience keepers of the economy. Omanis in every aspect respect their culture and traditions. They are respectful, kind, helpful and very sympathetic.

The bottom line is that human capital will be the ultimate asset for this century, offering more provident prospects for prosperity for all, in the days to come. The Sultanate of Oman will certainly lead by example by its people – its greatest asset.

Russia sanctions could hurt Cuban tourism

RIGOBERTO DIAZ

International sanctions against Russia over its invasion of Ukraine could have wide-ranging impacts on its Latin American allies such as Cuba, experts say. Since the coronavirus pandemic, Russian tourists have become the single largest group of visitors to the island nation but events in their homeland have left many eager to return home.

"What we want is to go home calmly and on time," journalist Evgenia Darovskaya, 43, said in Varadero, a beach resort town near Havana.

After a two-week holiday with her family, she was due to fly home on Tuesday.

But that journey became more complicated after the EU closed its airspace to Russian planes and companies as part of a raft of sanctions aimed at crippling the Russian economy.

Russia responded by barring its airspace to 35 European countries and Canada. According to Juan Gonzalez, senior director for the western hemisphere on the US National Security Council, the Russian sanctions are deliberately aimed at also hitting its allies.

"These sanctions against Russia are so robust that they will have an impact on those countries with economic links to Russia, and that is by design," Gonzalez told Voz de America.

"Venezuela will start to feel this pressure, Nicaragua will feel this pressure and so will Cuba."

He said 13 sanctions against 13 Russian financial institutions "cannot fail to impact any government or business that does business with these institutions." Experts believe that many more Latin American countries could also be affected if sanctions target Russian oil exports.

After the paradise of a Cuban holiday, Darovskaya admitted to concerns over her return. "Of course we feel afraid... because no-one wants war for their children," she said.

The airspace closures have already started having an impact.

Russian airline Aeroflot on Monday suspended the sale of tickets to Cuba, Mexico and the US while Azur Air halted flights to Cuba, Mexico and the Dominican Republic, according to Prensa Latina.

It means the sight of masses of Russians flooding the beaches of Varadero may disappear.

"I don't agree with the airspace closures but we're not worried about staying with you because you're very friendly," said metal worker Dxana Lapushkina, 35. "The war is something else, it is pain." — AFP

A new normal greets Biden



Emily Cochrane

The writer is a correspondent based in Washington

President Joe Biden arrived at the Capitol on Tuesday for a State of the Union address that was supposed to mark something of a return to normalcy, with pandemic restrictions easing as coronavirus cases fall and memories of the January 6 riot fading with more than a year's time.

But even as the Capitol settled back into its old ways, there were hints of the extraordinary challenges that have racked Biden's presidency and the country: lawmakers seated far apart and some absent after testing positive for the coronavirus; a security fence and National Guard patrols that were a reminder of the specter of political violence; and members wearing blue and yellow in solidarity with Ukraine as Russian bombs fell in the country while they gathered.

"Last year, Covid-19 kept us apart," said Biden, who entered the House chamber to a standing ovation from Democrats, chanting his name. "This year, we are finally together again."

With Ukraine's ambassador to the United States seated as a guest of honour above, Biden tried to conjure a sense of unity, telling his audience that despite political differences, they were bound together by "an unwavering resolve that freedom will always triumph over tyranny."

Lawmakers in both parties applauded, waving Ukrainian flags across the chamber.

BIDEN TOLD HIS AUDIENCE THAT DESPITE POLITICAL DIFFERENCES, THEY WERE BOUND TOGETHER BY 'AN UNWAVERING RESOLVE THAT FREEDOM WILL ALWAYS TRIUMPH OVER TYRANNY'

There were plenty of divisions on vivid display, particularly as Biden turned to domestic issues. Multiple right-wing Republicans, including Reps Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and Lauren Boebert of Colorado, maintained a steady stream of audible criticism, boos and eye-rolling as Biden spoke.

As Biden described soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan in flag-draped coffins, Boebert could be heard shouting, "You put them in — 13 of them," in an apparent reference to the 13 US service members who died in August in an attack outside the airport in Kabul, Afghanistan.

It was a jarring moment that came just as Biden was recalling the death of his son Beau Biden from brain cancer,



President Joe Biden departs after delivering his first State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress at the Capitol in Washington.

and the possibility that the illness was tied to exposure to toxic burn pits during his service in Iraq. Democrats booed Boebert's outburst.

Hours before escorting Biden into the chamber, Rep Victoria Spartz, R-Ind, a Ukrainian American, delivered a tearful and at times angry speech, condemning what she described as a "genocide" in the country of her birth and heaping criticism on Biden for his response.

"This is not a war. This is genocide of the Ukrainian people," Spartz said, her eyes filling with tears. "They're bombing civilians nonstop, day and night."

Like many of the lawmakers on Capitol Hill for the speech, she was dressed in the colours of her native flag. Women wore coordinated jackets and dresses, while others sported elaborate yellow and blue pins. Sen Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, crafted a sunflower pin out of yellow quilting fabric and scraps of blue swimsuit material, an aide said. Some men wore patterned ties, or tucked a yellow and blue pocket square into their jackets.

In the weeks before Biden's speech, House Democratic women had discussed wearing bright colours "symbolising hopefulness and exuberance," as Rep. Veronica Escobar, D-Texas, put it. But as Russian troops began to invade Ukraine, they prioritised yellow and blue, she said, as a colleague handed her a yellow sweater to offset her blue dress.

During Biden's joint address in 2021, Escobar had declined a ticket to sit in the gallery of the House chamber, the emotions and trauma of hiding from the mob in the very same spot still too raw at that moment. Just under a year later, she said, "it feels like we've turned a corner in many ways."

Days before the speech, Dr Brian P Monahan, the attending physician at the Capitol, said masks would no longer be required in the House, making them optional regardless of vaccination status for the first time in more than a year. Instead, lawmakers, staff aides and reporters were required to provide proof of a negative coronavirus test before being allowed into the chamber.

— The New York Times

Two years into the pandemic, is the end in sight?

JULIEN DURY

Two years after the official start of the pandemic, some countries are now trying to “live with Covid”, however scientists warn that potential new variants and unequal vaccination rates threaten any long-awaited return to normality.

When US global health researcher Christopher Murray wrote “Covid-19 will continue but the end of the pandemic is near”, in *The Lancet* medical journal in late January, he summed up the hopes of many national health authorities around the world.

In the weeks leading up to the two-year anniversary of the World Health Organization declaring a pandemic in March 2020, countries such as Britain and Denmark lifted all legal Covid restrictions. Many US states also relaxed mask and other rules.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the change marked the beginning of learning “to live with Covid”, as the global death toll falls after the more transmissible though less severe Omicron variant swept the world.

The WHO has said that the “acute phase” of the pandemic could end by the middle of this year — if around 70 per cent of the world is vaccinated.

Spain has been among the nations calling for approaching Covid as having transitioned to an “endemic” phase, meaning it has milder seasonal outbreaks that humanity can live with, such as the flu.

However some scientists worry governments could use the somewhat vague-term to justify lifting life-saving measures. University of Oxford evolutionary virologist

Aris Katzourakis said “the word ‘endemic’ has become one of the most misused of the pandemic.”

“A disease can be endemic and both widespread and deadly,” he wrote in the journal *Nature* last week, pointing out that malaria killed more than 600,000 people in 2020, while 1.5 million died of tuberculosis.

There are also other options than just pandemic or endemic. The British government’s scientific advisory body SAGE has laid out four potential scenarios for the years to come.

Under the “reasonable best-case” scenario, there will be smaller regional or seasonal outbreaks, as the higher Covid numbers lead to fewer flu cases.

Under the worst-case scenario, new unpredictable variants build into repeated damaging virus waves, requiring the return of harsh restrictions.

The different outcomes hinge on two key uncertainties: the possible emergence of new variants and the ability of vaccines to protect against the disease in the long-term.

When it comes to vaccines, Omicron has served as both a warning and a test.

Many epidemiologists say that simply letting Covid spread unchecked gives it a greater chance of mutating into new strains. And there is no guarantee that such new variants will be less deadly.

“There is a widespread, rosy misconception that viruses evolve over time to become more benign,” Katzourakis said.

“This is not the case: there is no predestined evolutionary outcome for a virus to become more benign,” he said, pointing out that the Delta variant was deadlier than the first strain that emerged in Wuhan, China.

Omicron also partly evades protection from the currently available vaccines.

But they are very effective in preventing severe disease and death — particularly third booster shots which have been rolled out across the world.

Countries such as Israel and Sweden have started administering fourth doses, but experts fear that an endless number of booster shots is a short-sighted strategy. An Israeli trial in January also found that a fourth dose was less effective against Omicron.

Pharma giants have raced to develop a vaccine that specifically targets Omicron, but none seem close to becoming available. Several recent preliminary results of tests carried out on animals and not peer reviewed have suggested the targeted vaccines are no more effective against Omicron than their predecessors.

But there could be another way: broadening rather than narrowing the scope of the vaccine. — AFP



SHOWING SUPPORT

A picture in Colmar, eastern France shows the replica of the Statue of Liberty covered with a giant fabric bearing the national colours of Ukraine, as a show of support following the Russian invasion of the country. — AFP

Is the peace dividend over?



KENNETH ROGOFF

The author is Professor of Economics and Public Policy at Harvard University and recipient of the 2011 Deutsche Bank Prize in Financial Economics, was the chief economist of the International Monetary Fund from 2001 to 2003

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine should be a wake-up call for Western politicians, corporate leaders and economists who advocate a green and equitable future but lack any practical or strategic sense of how to get there. Regardless of what short-term tactics Europe and the United States use in responding to the current crisis, their long-run strategy needs to put energy security on a par with environmental sustainability and funding essential military deterrence on a par with financing social priorities.

The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 in no small part because Russia’s leaders, most of all President Boris Yeltsin and his economic advisers, recognised that the Soviet communist military-industrial complex could not afford to keep up with the West’s superior economic might and technological prowess. Today, with Russia’s economy less than one-twentieth the combined size of the US and EU economies, the same strategy of vastly outspending Russia on defence should be much easier to execute. Unfortunately, there is a hesitancy in many Western societies, particularly on the left, to admit that defence spending is sometimes a necessity, not a luxury.

For many decades, Western living standards have been boosted by a massive “peace dividend.” For example, US defence spending fell from 11.1 per cent of GDP in 1967, during the Vietnam War, to 6.9 per cent of GDP in 1989, the year the Berlin Wall fell, to just over 3.5 per cent of GDP today. If US defence spending as a share of GDP was still at the Vietnam-era level, defence outlays in 2021 would have been \$1.5 trillion higher — more than the government spent on social security last year and almost triple government spending on non-defence consumption and investment. Even at the level of the late 1980s, defence spending would be more than \$600 billion higher than today. The extra cost would have to be funded by higher taxes, greater borrowing, or lower government spending in other areas.

Europe’s defence spending has long been far lower than that of the US. Today, the United Kingdom and France spend just over 2 per cent of their national income on defence, and Germany and Italy only around 1.5 per cent. Moreover, national interests and domestic lobbying mean that European defence spending is highly inefficient, with the whole being considerably less than the sum of its parts. I am amazed by how many of my otherwise well-informed friends have been asking why Europe does not mount a stronger military response to Russia’s attack on Ukraine and looming threats to the Baltic states. Part of the answer, of course, is Europe’s dependence on Russian gas, but the larger reason is its egregious lack of preparedness.

Thanks to Russian President Vladimir Putin, this may all change. German

ONE HOPES THAT RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN WILL SOON REALISE THAT HIS UKRAINE INVASION HAS BEEN A SPECTACULAR MISCALCULATION. BUT EVEN IF THE CURRENT CRISIS SUBSIDES, IT SHOULD REMIND WESTERN GOVERNMENTS THAT SUSTAINABLE GROWTH REQUIRES PAYING FOR THE CAPACITY TO SUSTAIN ECONOMIES AGAINST EXTERNAL AGGRESSION

Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s announcement on February 27 that Germany will increase its defence spending to more than 2 per cent of GDP suggests that Europe may finally be getting its act together. But such commitments will have major fiscal implications — and after the large pandemic-era fiscal stimulus, these may be difficult to digest. As Europe rethinks its fiscal rules, policymakers must consider how to make enough space to deal with unexpected large-scale military buildups.

Many seem to have forgotten that wartime spikes in expenditures were once a major driver of government spending volatility. In a war, not only do government expenditures and budget deficits typically increase sharply, but interest rates sometimes go up as well. Nowadays, policymakers (along with many well-intentioned economists) have become convinced that big global economic shocks such as pandemics or financial crises will invariably drive down interest rates and make large debts easier to finance. But in wartime, the need to front-load massive temporary expenditures can easily push up borrowing costs.

True, in today’s complex world

of drones, cyberwar, and automated battlefields, how governments spend their defence budgets matters greatly. Still, it is magical thinking to assume that every time defence budgets are cut, military planners will make up the difference with increased efficiency.

It would also help if the West could avoid further strategic energy-policy blunders of the sort that led us to this point. In particular, Germany, which relies on Russia for more than half of its gas needs, appears to have made a historic mistake in decommissioning all its nuclear power plants after the 2011 Fukushima disaster. By contrast, France, which meets 75 per cent of its energy needs through nuclear power, is significantly less vulnerable to Russian threats.

In the US, the cancellation of the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline may have been based on sound environmental logic. But now the timing seems awkward. Measures intended to protect the environment do little good if they lead to strategic weakness that increases the possibility of conventional wars in Europe — leaving aside the large-scale radioactive pollution that would result if neutron bombs or tactical nuclear weapons were deployed.

Stiff Ukrainian resistance, swift and severe economic and financial sanctions, and domestic dissent could yet force Putin to recognise that his decision to invade Ukraine was a spectacular miscalculation. But even if the current crisis subsides, the horrific attack on Ukraine ought to remind even the most committed peace advocate that the world can be harsh and unpredictable.

Everyone hopes for lasting peace. But hard-headed analyses of how countries can achieve sustainable and equitable growth requires leaving fiscal space — including emergency borrowing capacity — for the costs of guarding against external aggression.

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A woman walks past an advertising billboard painted over with the colours of the Ukrainian flag and soliciting donations, in Berlin on Wednesday. — AFP

sport

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World Athletics chief Lord Sebastian Coe (second left) with Shaikh Salim al Amri, Chairman of Oman Athletics Association (left), and athletes during a press conference ahead of the World Athletics RaceWalking Team Championships 2022, in Muscat on Wednesday.

‘WRW2022 COULD BE SPRINGBOARD FOR OMAN ATHLETICS’

HARIDEV PUSHPARAJ
MUSCAT, MARCH 2

World Athletics President Lord Sebastian Coe stated the Sultanate of Oman’s athletics scene will get a huge boost when the country hosts the prestigious World Athletics RaceWalking Team Championships 2022 in Muscat this weekend.

The legendary Coe felt the event happening in Muscat could just be the launchpad for creating a culture of athletics among the local community and lead to the hosting of many more such events.

“It could definitely be a springboard to develop more

championships in the community. This is a World Championship. The local people need to make the most of it. Hopefully, this will encourage young kids to join athletics clubs. This could be the beginning of a great journey. These championships will be very good.”

Coe also dwelt upon the prevailing crisis in Ukraine after Russia’s invasion and the World Athletics’ decision to ban Russian and Belarusian athletes from taking part in the event.

“The decision was not easy, never an easy decision. But I feel it was the right decision with the consultation of everyone in the council. However, we want the journey the neutral athletes are making to

continue.” Coe stated the decision was completely taken by World Athletics without any interference from any other body.

“This was our own decision, it was not in consultation with IOC. It was taken in by the athletes council,” he added.

THE EVENT

The event will take place around the splendid loop courses of Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) which was ideally selected as a perfect venue for its top-class services and exceptionally accommodative facilities to enable ease of preparations for a highly professional and well-coordinated competition within an optimal

time. Friday and Saturday will see as many as 1,000 athletes, walkers and sport delegates from about 46 countries participating in the tournament.

The championships will feature seven different race categories – 10 km races for under 20 men and women, 20 km races for women and 8 km master relay races on the first day. On the following day, there will be 35 km races for men and women, 20 km races for men and 10 km master races.

The Sultanate of Oman will also participate with the national team and 80-strong crew of referees in addition to 22 international referees to ensure compliance with the rules of the game.

Shaikh Salim al Amri, Oman

Athletics Association (OAA) Chairman, stated that the event will have multiplier benefits for the Sultanate of Oman.

“We are hopeful that this event will be a prime opportunity for Oman to reap far-reaching economic, tourism and social benefits by flaring up the local business sectors including freight, aviation, hospitality, transportation and many more. On the promotional side, the event will be aired live on over 50 TV stations around the globe. This will effectively showcase the Sultanate of Oman’s profile as an ideal venue for world class sport events and actually has the potentials to host similar global athletic events in the future.”

“It could definitely be a springboard to develop more championships in the community. The local people need to make the most of it. Hopefully, this will encourage young kids to join athletics clubs. This could be the beginning of a great journey.”

SEBASTIAN COE
World Athletics President



Legendary Coe reminisces the heady 80s

HARIDEV PUSHPARAJ
MUSCAT, MARCH 2

He is the man who pioneered middle distance running in the 80s and took it to the next level and Sebastian Coe, behind all the administrative hats that he has wonderfully adorned over the years, remains the quintessential athlete.

The British legend who fired up the 1980 Moscow Olympics and the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics with his 1,500m golds reminisced when asked about these two highlights of his illustrious career.

“When you set off in your athletics career, you start in a small way by joining

a club, which I did. I joined a junior team. It is important that you always have an ambition. My record in the World Championships prior to the Olympics was not good one. The first and second I was injured. I look more favourably at the Olympics. It was an outstanding Olympics, organised very well. I was delighted with both Olympics 1,500m golds. It was the highlight of my career. Some of the world records that I broke were the highlights of my career.”

Coe competed in the Athletics World Cup in 1981 and 1989 and finished first and second respectively. At the Olympic Games in Moscow in 1980 he won gold in the 1,500m and silver in the 800m a feat which he repeated in Los Angeles in 1984. In all Lord Coe set 12 world records during his athletics career. He retired from competitive

athletics in 1990.

Lord Coe is the former chairman of the British Olympic Association and was chairman of The London Organising Committee for the Olympic Games and Paralympic Game Limited having previously been chairman of London 2012 Limited, the London 2012 bid company.

From 2010 to 2019, he chaired the Sport Honours Committee, and from the autumn of 2012 to 2014 he served within the Cabinet Office as Legacy Ambassador for the London 2012 Games.

Lord Coe has been president of World Athletics (formerly International Association of Athletics Federations) since 2015 after serving as a vice-president since 2007 and was elected to become a member of the International Olympic Committee in July 2020.

FIERCE COMPETITION ON THIRD DAY AT AL BASHAYER FESTIVAL

WALEED AL JAHWARI
ADAM, MAR 2

The competitions continued on the third day in the annual Al Bashayer Camel Festival organised by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan.

The fifth edition of the camel race will continue till March 5, with participation of camel owners and trainers from various governorates of Oman and GCC countries in 74 rounds.

While Monday and Tuesday races were for young categories, Wednesday's competition started for old category 'Elythaa' for 6 km



in 10 rounds with 206 participants in the morning with cash prizes for the top 10.

The first round winner was 'Gazy'a' owned by Humaid al

Gahafi which covered 6 km in 9 minute 19 seconds out of 17 participants. In the second round competed by 19 camels, 'Shaheen' for Bader al Daree claimed the top



spot (9:28).

The third round (16 camels) was won by 'Adbyah' for Mohammed al Dahri from UAE in 9:37.

In the fourth round (15 camels), 'Muaaned' for Sultan al Gfeali came top on 9:32.

In the fifth round took part by 22 camels, Zaher al Malki's 'Butolah' finished on top in 9:36. 'Ektyar' owned by Khalid al

Hajri claimed the 6 km sixth round honours in 9:35 out of 20 participants. 'Dari' of Salim al Daree won the seventh round in 9:39 over 31 camels.

The eighth round honours was taken by 'Alaber' for Mousa al Ghafi with 9:37 out of 25 participants. In the ninth round, 'Entebah' from UAE for Suhail al Amri emerged winner in 9:38 out of 21 camels. The tenth and last race was won by 'Musda' of Hamed al Wahibi in 9 minutes and 43 seconds out of 20 camels.

'REFAL' WINS BIG

In the evening, the competitions were more intense among 167 participants in 5 rounds as the prizes was SUV cars with valuable symbols (cups and gun).

The opening race for the cup and a car was grabbed by 'Refal' owned by Royal Camel Corps (RCC) under coach Amer al Amri with 9:13 out of 15 camels. The second cup and a car was snatched by 'Al Dabi' for Mohammed al Muhrami from UAE with a time of 9:25 out of 25 camels.

In the third round for gun and a car, 'Alwasmi' for Abdulah al Darmaki came on top in 9:24 out of 53 participants. The fourth round was claimed by 'Hawaii' for Mohamed al Jenaibi with 9:17 out of 36 camels.

In the fifth and last round for car, 'Hudor' for Awad al Wahibi covered the 6km with 9 minutes and 19 seconds out of 38 participants to claim the prize.

AL FAISAL TO DEBUT IN GT WORLD CHALLENGE EUROPE

AL MANAR RACING BY HAUPT RACING TEAM (HRT) TO FLY OMAN'S FLAG IN THE GT RACING SERIES

MUSCAT: Oman's talented driver Al Faisal al Zubair will make his debut in the highly-competitive 2022 GT World Challenge Europe Powered by AWS Endurance Cup this season.

Al Faisal will be spearheading the challenge for Oman-based Al Manar Racing by Haupt Racing Team (HRT). The three-member team will comprise Germany's Fabian Schiller and Dubai-based Zimbabwean Axcil Jefferies.

The trio will be competing in the five-round GT World Challenge Europe series with the opening round to be held at Imola circuit in Italy from April 1-3.

The other stopovers for Al Manar Racing-HRT will be Paul Richard (France), Spa-Francorchamps (Belgium), Hockenheim (Germany) and Barcelona (Spain).

Following a successful campaign in the 2021 International GT Open Series - Al Faisal's Lechner Racing claimed the overall runner-up position and was placed third in drivers' championship standings - it will be a new challenge for the 23-year-old Muscat-based racer.

Al Faisal will be taking part in the Silver Cup class, along with Schiller and Jefferies, in



the Endurance Series of the GT Challenge. The trio completed the first of the three testing sessions for the season at Imola circuit on Thursday. The team will have further two more testing sessions at Paul Ricard and Hockenheim circuits before the launch of the season in April.

The highlight of the series will be the participation in the 24 Hours of Spa from July 28-31. The Belgian endurance classic combines a unique sense of

history with the unparalleled sporting challenge.

The twice-around-the-clock event represents the pinnacle of global GT racing, drawing the world's best teams and drivers to the Belgian Ardennes.

While the races at Imola, Hockenheim and Barcelona will be run over three hours each, Circuit Paul Ricard 1,000 km will feature a six-hour race.

TOP CHALLENGE

Looking ahead to his debut

in the GT World Challenge in Mercedes AMG, Al Faisal 'was hopeful of gaining maximum experience' while competing in one of the biggest grids in world of racing.

The 23-year-old said: "The decision to move into the GT World Challenge was a result of extensive planning. It certainly has come a bit early than what I expected but the series was always what I was looking to compete.

"It is one of the toughest GT

series in the world and I am proud to be one of the possible two drivers and teams from Arab region that will take part in 2022. Flying the Oman flag in some of the world's best known circuits during the series is definitely a high point in my young career."

"With a grid of over 50 cars and the world's best automotive brands getting their best machines and drivers, my debut year will a big learning curve. The competition is extremely difficult and we will take each race as it comes in our class (Silver Cup).

Al Faisal announced himself as a rising star in 2018, when he won the Porsche GT3 Cup Challenge Middle East and then claimed the overall title for the second time in a row in 2019.

GT WORLD CHALLENGE EUROPE SCHEDULE

April 1-3: Imola, Italy
June 3-5: Circuit Paul Ricard 1,000km, France
June 21-22: Test days, 24 Hours of Spa, Belgium
July 28-31: 24 Hours of Spa, Belgium
September 2-4: Hockenheim, Germany
September 30-October 2: Barcelona, Spain

Tabook, Al Harthy get Asian 'C' umpiring license



SPORTS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MAR 2

Omani referees Adnan Tabook and Omar al Harthy earned category 'C' license of umpiring from the Fencing Confederation of Asia (FCA). Both national umpires successfully completed all the requirements to receive the Asian umpiring badge for 'pee' category.

Tabook and Al Harthy passed the examinations during the FCA refereeing seminar in Dubai recently.

The license will allow the Omani duo to officiate at the Asian continental level. Also, through this licence, they can apply for the category 'B' license which will enable them to officiate in the international level.

This achievement is part of Oman Fencing Committee (OFC) efforts to develop human resources in the sport. The OFC has set a working plan for the development of the players, umpires and coaches in its major agenda for the coming years.

40 teams to compete in Grand cricket tournament

MUSCAT: The Grand cricket tournament 2022, a tennis ball T10 tournament organised by the Grand Global Investment (GGI), will begin at the Al Hail Cricket Club grounds from Friday.

The knockout tournament with free registration had attracted a good number of teams as 40 local clubs will compete for the honours in three weekends starting from March 4.

Women cricketers will also get a chance to test their credentials as GGI will also organise a Women's Cup tournament alongside the main event. Four teams have so far registered for the women's tournament, which is scheduled for March 12.

The tournament fixtures and



groupings were finalised at the draw ceremony held at Amarah Hotel in Bausher on Tuesday.

The men's tournament for Challenger's Cup will be held among 40 teams divided into four groups.

The men's and women's finals

are set for March 19.

Chief organiser Ali bin Humaid al Alawi, Chairman of Grand Global Investment, said he was elated by the overwhelming response to his first venture in organising a cricket tournament.

"We are overwhelmed by



the great response from the local teams to our debut cricket tournament. We believe it is our social responsibility to bring the sports loving people back into action after a challenging period of pandemic," Ali said.

This motto of GGI was the main

reason to make the tournament with free registration, he said.

The GGI chief also announced a Corporate Cricket Cup event as the group's next venture. The details of the tournament will be unveiled soon, Ali al Alawi said, adding that the registration has

started for the prize-money event.

The final and most of the matches of the Challenger's Cup will be live telecasted on GGI website and its social media channels. The tournament will also offer attractive trophies for the top-placed teams and individual prizes as well.

The draw was conducted by Sanjit Kanojia, technical director of the tournament.

"The matches will be held on Fridays and Saturdays from 7 am to 9pm for three weeks starting from March 4," Kanojia said.

The tournament organising committee members along with the captains and managers of the participating teams took part in the draw.

Al Rustaq blank Dhofar to enter HM Cup final

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MAR 2

Al Rustaq imprinted their name in the history as they secured spot in the final of the His Majesty’s Cup football championship for the first ever time.

The Southern Batinah team defeated Salalah giants Dhofar 2-0 on Wednesday in a thrilling semifinal second leg. Despite Dhofar’s triumph in the first-leg of semifinal 2-1 at Al Saada Stadium on February 20, the aggregate score ended 3-2 for Al Rustaq as they moved into the historic final of the prestigious HM Cup.

At Al Rustaq Sports Complex and in front of big home fans, coach Deno Katlin’s battalion made an impressive show to blank the 10-time winners.

Abas al Hashami and Abdulrahman al Ghassani netted the goals for the hosts in the 77th and 82nd minutes respectively.

Both teams secured their defence in the first half to avoid receiving any goals.

The actual attempts were registered in the last 15 minutes of the game. The initial opportunity in the fixture was through Hatim al Rushdi who hit a powerful grounder which went above Dhofar’s goalkeeper and above the net after a perfect header assist from Mohammed al Ghafri in the 32nd minute.

Al Rustaq’s Mahmood al Shaqsi missed a scoring chance as he met Dhofar’s goalie Dawood al Kahali but Al Shaqsi’s shot was saved by the defender Sudeek Atenda in the 42nd minute. Two minutes later,

Abdullah Fawaz crossed a ball that continued with a strong header from Omar al Malki who could have opened the account for the visitors but Al Rustaq’s goalkeeper Ammar al Rushaidi came to the rescue. The first half ended in a goalless draw.

Dhofar pressed hard from the beginning of the second half as Rasheed Jaber’s men were looking for a goal that could confuse the hosts situation in the encounter.

Qasim Said managed to enter the danger box and met Rustaq’s goalie face-to-face but his shot was saved by Ammar in the 48th minute.

Al Rustaq players felt dangerous and bounced back strongly to the match. The first response for the visitors in the second half was through Ammar al Shiyadi, who advanced with a scoop pass from his team-mate Mahmood al Shaqsi but the shot went over the bar in the 50th minute.

The excitement rose as both sides pressed hard towards seeking the opening goal. Omar al Malki was very close to score the first goal in the match after Yazeed al Mashani managed to send him a perfect pass but Al Malki’s shot went away from the target in the 63rd minute.

After series of missed chances, Abas al Hashami struck the first goal for the hosts Al Rustaq in the 77th minute. The goal gave more energy for the hosts and few minutes later, Abdulrahman al Ghassani added a second goal in the 82nd minute to confirm Al Rustaq’s presence in the title-clash for the first time.



Top seed Liang through to last 16, Persson upsets Gauzy

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, MAR 3

Men’s top seed Liang Jingkun of China battled past French qualifier Alexandre Cassin to enter the last 16 of the WTT Contender Muscat 2022 at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex on Wednesday.

The World No 5 was stunned by 115th-ranked Cassin in the first set to take it 11-1. The Chinese champion was back to his self in the next three games to win 11-4, 11-9, 11-6.

China’s Zhou Qihao (World No 112) upset World No 54 Ibrahima Diaw of Senegal 3-1 to book his last 16 clash against compatriot Jingkun. Qihao won 6-11, 11-7, 11-6, 11-4.

World No 49 Ahmed Saleh of Egypt prevailed over World No 69 Joao Monteiro of Portugal 3-1 (11-4, 5-11, 11-7, 11-8 to set up a last-16 clash with Jon Persson of Sweden.

World No 44 Persson edged World No 20 Simon Gauzy 3-2 in a tight tussle with scores of 12-10, 7-11, 8-11, 11-6, 11-7. After losing the first set, the Frenchman came back brilliantly to take the second and third sets. But Persson had the last laugh after claiming the last two sets comfortably.

World No 12 Wang Chuqin beat 51st ranked Vitor Ishiy of Brazil 3-1 to book a place in last 16.

The Chinese player will meet compatriot Zhao Zihao in the last 16 after Zihao beat another Chinese player Xu Yingbin 3-1.

China’s Xiang Peng will take on World No 24 Chuang Chih-Yuan



of Chinese Taipei in the last 16.

Peng accounted for Bence Majoros of Hungary, while Chuang blanked Oman’s Muhammad al Balushi 3-0.

SIQI STUNS DIAZ

In women’s section, China’s Fan Siqi will take on Jia Nan Yuan of France in the last 16.

Siqi upset World No 11 Adriana Diaz of Puerto Rico 3-1, while Yuan edged Sreeja Akula of India 3-2.

Italy’s Debora Vivarelli prevailed over Australia’s Minhyung Jee 3-2 to set up a last-16 clash against

Portugal’s Jieni Shao. Shao beat Bruna Takahashi of Brazil 3-1.

India’s Archana Girish Kamath earned a last-16 encounter against China’s Xiaoxin Yang after a 3-1 victory over Mo Zhang of Canada.

Yang ended the challenge of 67th ranked Melanie Diaz of Puerto Rico 3-1.

In the women’s doubles, Indian pair of Sutirtha Mukherjee and Ayhika Mukherjee will meet Czech Republic’s Zdena Blaskova and Katerina Tomanovska in the quarterfinal.

Another Indian pair Sreeja Akula and Selena Selvakumar also made it to the last eight and will meet Goi Rui Xuan and Wong Xin Ru for a place in the last four.

Chinese pair of Qian Tianyi and Chen Xingtong will take on Chinese Taipei’s Chen Szu-Yu and Li Yu-Jhun, while another Chinese pair of Zhang Rui and Kuai Man take on Hungarian duo of Leila Imre and Mercedes Nagyvaradi in the other quarterfinals of the women’s doubles.

MCC vs Dromedary, an evening of rich tradition at OCA

MUSCAT: Dromedary beat MCC by 6 wickets in their match at the Oman Cricket Academy on Tuesday.

After winning the toss, MCC elected to bat first and posted a total of 105/7 at the end of 20 overs and Dromedary CC chased the target down with 11 balls to spare.

But more than events on the pitch, this game was about tradition and history. As many as 24 travelling members from the golf society of the Marylebone Cricket Club — the custodians of the gentleman’s game, formed the playing squad for the MCC. All of them were above 60 years.

The Dromedary team profiled similarly in terms of average age and both sides included one lady in their starting 11.

The rules were also tweaked slightly in keeping with the occasion. A batsmen had to walk back after scoring 30 runs to

keep the game fun and fair for everyone involved. Nevertheless, the stature of the names involved ensured a cricketing contest of genuine quality. To single out an individual, Sidath Wettimuny, who top-scored for the MCC was the first Sri Lankan batsman to score a century at the Lord’s Cricket Ground.

Paul Sheridan, the chairman of Dromedary said, “The purpose of our team is to simply get more people playing cricket. We generally play the Chairman’s XI but this time it is the MCC side. But speaking of the MCC, this is the golf society’s fifth tour here. All of them keep wanting to come back which makes the game more popular than ever before. Goes to show what a lovely place Oman is and how good the facilities over here are”.

A non-playing member of the MCC explained further. He said, “We have known Pankaj (Khimji)

for a long time. He is an extremely generous man. (He) Generally hosts a lovely dinner for all of us at his place on our last night here and it is his enthusiasm and passion for the game that never fails to impress”.

“The facilities here (Oman Cricket Academy) are great too. We were at the indoor nets earlier and they are stunning. This stadium — since the last time we came, a World Cup has happened here and it is easy to see why. The flood lights, press room, seating all compare well to many world-class ones around the world. Cricket in Oman is going places and it will be exciting to see what comes next”.

All in all, the first evening of March 2022 at the Oman Cricket Academy saw cricket in the Sultanate receive further exposure, with the event promising to be a precursor for further such occasions to come.



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Oman crude spikes to \$110.81/b in record single day surge

JOMAR MENDOZA
@JmObserver

Oman crude gained \$9.96 per barrel overnight — the biggest single day surge — to settle at \$110.81 per barrel on Wednesday, tracking sharp spikes recorded by international benchmarks in response to the escalating crisis between Russia and Ukraine. In comparison, the marker price of Oman crude on Tuesday was \$100.85/b on the Dubai Mercantile Exchange.

The crude price average for March delivery was \$83.62 per barrel, which was higher by \$10.48/b compared to the February delivery average.

According to Reuters, Brent crude futures rose by nearly \$9, reaching a peak of \$113.94 a barrel, the highest since June



2014, before easing to \$113.07, up by \$8.10 or 7.7 per cent. US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures jumped more than \$9 to \$112.51 a barrel, hitting the highest since August 2013 before losing some steam to trade up

\$7.74 or 7.5 per cent to \$111.15 a barrel.

“Investors, traders and politicians alike are scrambling to address the worsening Russia-Ukraine standoff. The initial upward price reaction after the

conflict in Ukraine started six days ago is only intensifying,” said Rystad Energy analyst Louise Dickson.

Meanwhile, a coordinated release of 60 million barrels of oil by International Energy Agency member countries agreed on Tuesday failed to reassure the market, and prices rose after the announcement.

In a move likely to exacerbate global supply tightness, buyers are avoiding oil from the CPC pipeline originating in Kazakhstan, source of over 1 per cent of the world’s supply, due to sanctions concerns.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, Russia and allies, together known as OPEC+, agreed on Wednesday to again raise their monthly output by 400,000 barrels per day.

(With inputs from Reuters)



1,121 tonnes of lobster caught in 2021

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, MARCH 2

Around 1,121 metric tonnes of lobster, valued at around RO 5.1 million, were caught by Omani fishermen during the three-month harvest season in 2021, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources stated here on Wednesday.

The announcement came at the start of this year’s lobster season, which began on March 1 and will continue for three months till the end of May 2022.

Of the total lobster catch of 1,121 metric tonnes, around 500 tonnes were consumed locally, while the balance of around 621 tonnes was exported. Based on average

market price of RO 4.5 per kilo, the total catch is valued at roughly RO 5.1 million, it noted.

According to the ministry, of the five types of lobster species that thrive in the Sultanate of Oman, only the Panulirus Homarus and Panulirus versicolor are known to be commercially valuable.

In a post, the ministry urged fishermen to comply with adhering to approved lobster fishing practices.

Only plastic cages may be used to catch between 20-40 lobsters, which must be bigger than 80mm, aimed at conserving this important fisheries resource from the risk of depletion, and to support the sustainability of lobster stock.

CMA intensifies fight against money laundering

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 2

The Capital Market Authority (CMA) has taken a number of steps to combat money laundering and terror financing within the broader umbrella of the National Committee for Combating Money Laundering and Financing Terrorism (AML-CFT).

According to Majed bin Mohammed al Kiyumi, Director of the Anti-Money Laundering and

Combating Financing Terrorism Department, Royal Decree 30/2016 promulgating the AML-CFT law mandates all regulated entities to apply electronic payment methods as well as circulate reporting forms for suspected transactions issued by the National Centre for Financial Information as part of efforts to curb suspected money laundering or terror financing.

In support of awareness efforts for the benefit of compliance of-

ficers of financial and insurance company, the department organised eight workshops on the risk-based approach, enhanced due diligence, suspected transactions and reporting method in addition to a workshop on the AML-CFT Law, targeted financial sanctions, cross border customers, financial payments as well as using social media platforms to spread awareness on such crimes and their economic and social impact.

Additionally, the department

analysed the data related to 81 companies and prepared risk matrix to identify the companies exposed to high risk and developed an audit and examination plan based on the outcome of the analysis whereby a comprehensive audit was carried out for 13 companies, thematic audit for four companies and held meetings with 8 companies and issued compliance orders for 9 companies after the conclusion of the audit and examination process.

Oman to procure first-ever public schools via PPP route

PROMISING PARTNERSHIP: Pvt sector invited to design, finance, construct and operate 42 schools on behalf of MoE

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

Expanding its landmark Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) programme, the Ministry of Finance has launched a competitive process for the procurement of as many as 42 schools to be developed and operated at key locations around the country on behalf of the Ministry of Education (MoE).

It marks the first time that the PPP programme, operationalised for the first time last year following the promulgation of the PPP Law in 2019, has been extended to the educational sector.

Last December, the Ministry of Finance formally kicked off its PPP-based procurement programme with an invitation to private investors to participate in

a competitive bid for the development of Liwa Fishery Harbour in North Al Batinah Governorate via the PPP route.

On Wednesday, the Ministry of Finance — which has the mandate to implement the nation’s PPP programme — issued a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for the ‘Design, Construction, Finance, Operation and Maintenance’ of 42 school buildings under the PPP model. The objective, it noted, is to engage the private sector in contributing to “fostering service innovation and achieving sustained growth” through PPP arrangements.

Last year, the ministry had pointed out that the procurement of school buildings represents part of a wider school-building programme.



“The first phase of the school-building project aims at developing the educational infrastructure to meet the increasing demand for schools in various governorates. The expertise of the private sector can be used advantageously in designing and building schools and multi-purpose projects,” it had stated.

Late last year, the ministry, in coordination with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water

Resources, launched the procurement process for the development of Liwa Fishery Harbour — an initiative aimed at catalysing the growth of a thriving fisheries-centric economy around Liwa.

In addition to an upgrade of the harbour’s rudimentary infrastructure, the ministry has identified the potential for private investment in, among other things, a full-fledged fish market, ice-making and refrigeration fa-

cilities, boat-building and repair workshops, fish processing and value-adding plants, fish waste processing and disposal, and other commercial activities.

Opportunities for the inclusion of a marina for leisure boats, watersports, and other tourism, hospitality, dining and entertainment facilities may be explored as well.

In the healthcare services sector, the ministry plans to tap the private sector in the development

of a Hemodialysis Services Project envisioning the establishment of a number of dialysis centres in key locations around the Sultanate of Oman. The PPP-based initiative is designed to ease the burden on the Ministry of Health, as well as provide greater convenience to patients distributed around the country.

Separately, a Drug Rehabilitation Centre is planned at Suhar to provide treatment and post-treatment services to recovering addicts.

Rounding off the list of initiatives proposed for PPP procurement is a proposal for a new expressway dedicated to trucks operating between Thamrait and Salalah Port.

While heavy vehicles will be obligated to use this toll-based road system, the option will be available to the general public as well, the ministry pointed out.

Meethaq extends its exclusive financing offers

MUSCAT: Meethaq, the pioneer of Islamic banking in the Sultanate of Oman from Bank Muscat, has announced that its current promotional offer on a number of financing products will be extended till March 31.

Meethaq has decided to extend the offer period after receiving excellent feedback from its customers. An attractive profit rate of only 4.99 per cent is available to all customers who apply for home, auto and personal financing facilities. All new and existing Meethaq customers availing fresh financing from the bank can benefit from this offer, which is available for Omani nationals working in government institutions as well as semi-government and Tier 1 companies.

Speaking about the extension of promotional period, Sami Bait Rashid, Assistant General



Manager, Personal Banking, Meethaq, said: “Meethaq is delighted to extend its attractive offers on home, auto and personal financing facilities in line with our customer-centric vision and

commitment to innovation. We encourage all customers who are considering financing options for their various needs to take full advantage of this offer, which allows them to access quality

financing solutions at highly-competitive rates.”

In line with its full commitment to offer a world-class Islamic banking experience to customers in every corner of the country,



Meethaq has established the largest Islamic branch network in the Sultanate of Oman consisting of 12 branches in the Governorate of Muscat and 12 branches across other governorates. In addition to its already excellent network of branches, Meethaq has a dedicated network of over 40 ATMs and CDMs and also provides free access to more than 740 plus ATMs and CDMs of Bank Muscat across the country for customers to conduct their

banking transactions with ease.

Meethaq Islamic Banking, which has been recognised as the Best Islamic Bank in the Sultanate of Oman by Islamic Finance News in 2019, has adopted the best global practices in Islamic banking and finance to combine a robust model, which protects customers and complements the Islamic banking industry.

Every Meethaq product goes through the process of Shari’a compliance certification by the Shari’a Supervisory Board and is created in line with the guidelines of the Central Bank of Oman. Meethaq has been recognised as Oman’s Most Trusted Brand for Islamic banking in 2021 by Apex Media.

For more details about the extended offers, please go to https://www.meethaq.om/en/takaful/Documents/Special_Financing_Offer.pdf.

Ford’s exciting new year delights across the range

MUSCAT: Own a Ford and benefit with exciting offers before the campaign ends on March 9. Offers include service 3 years/60,000 kms, petrol card worth RO 100 and registration a year.

Ford’s range in the Sultanate of Oman includes the all-new F-150 XLT. This powerful truck raises the standard for all light-duty trucks. It boasts best-in-class towing and payload capability, introduces all-new features to increase customer productivity. The Ford F-150 is equipped with a 3.5-litre EcoBoost twin-turbo V6 engine that produces 400 horsepower and 677 Nm torque to give it impressive payload capabilities. The all-new F-150 starts with a durable, proven foundation — a fully boxed high-strength steel frame with a high-strength, military-grade, aluminium alloy body. All-new F-150 offers the latest driver-assist features as part of Ford Co-Pilot360 2.0.



More features are now standard, including Pre-Collision Assist with Automatic Emergency Braking and Pedestrian Detection to help avoid a possible collision with another vehicle or a pedestrian, rearview camera with dynamic hitch assist, auto high-beam headlamps and auto on/off headlamps.

The Ford Explorer comes standard with a 2.3L i-4 EcoBoost engine. The Ford Explorer’s new features include better cargo space behind the third row and

a quiet highway ride, Intelligent 4WD Terrain Management System, BLIS with Cross Traffic Alert, Individual Tyre Pressure Monitoring System, 360-Degree Camera, Tri-Zone Electronic Temperature Control and more.

The Expedition is the most powerful and fuel-efficient Ford SUV till now, offering customers a full-size utility vehicle with a 3.5L V6 EcoBoost Engine producing 400 HP, stylish design and fresh interiors. It also features rotary gear shift and 10-speed automatic

transmission and safety features like Pre-collision assist with pedestrian detection and much more.

The Ford Taurus has been redesigned with a focus on safety and practicality. The Taurus has the effortless power to match its sporty appearance. The Taurus is powered by a 2.0-litre EcoBoost inline four-cylinder petrol engine that produces 240 horsepower and an impressive 390Nm torque. The engine is mated to an eight-speed automatic transmission which is operated by a contemporary rotary gear shifter on the centre console.

In the Sultanate of Oman, Ford vehicles are brought to you by Arabian Car Marketing Co. LLC. Log on to www.fordoman.com, or www.facebook.com/FordOman or www.youtube.com/FordOmanChannel or www.instagram.com/ford_oman for the latest news, test drive requests and press releases.

BankDhofar sponsors Dhofar annual camel race festival



MUSCAT: BankDhofar recently sponsored the 22nd Dhofar annual traditional camel festival. This is in line with BankDhofar’s commitment to support authentic Omani culture and traditions. The event was attended by invited guests, shikhs and dignitaries of Dhofar Governorate. The festival was held from February 20 to 24 and included a number of camel related competitions.

Commenting BankDhofar’s sponsorship of the events and its commitment in promoting Omani cultural heritage, Aziz bin Sulaiman al Harrasi, Acting Head of Marketing and Corporate Communications at BankDhofar, said: “At BankDhofar we believe that it is our responsibility to extend our support to various social activities.

“The traditional camel races has always been one of the popular sports in the Sultanate of Oman. In fact, it highlights the key values of heritage, honour, competitiveness, excitement and celebrates the history and traditions of the region. BankDhofar participates in such events to ensure that local traditions are kept alive and continue to exist. These

events also promote the rich cultural heritage of the country.”

CSR is an important pillar of BankDhofar’s operations; environment element, community development and social have always been among the priorities and interests of the Bank.

BankDhofar continues to deliver on its commitment by innovating strategic sustainable CSR programmes, initiatives, activities and potential investment opportunities; ensuring lasting positive benefits aimed at strengthening ties with the local community.

The Bank provides support to a number of charitable organisations and social activities and initiatives.

The combination of the thorough vision of the Bank’s executive management, the comprehensive operational strategy that revolves around following best international banking practices and providing best customer experience, as well as commitment to community development and contribution to the growth of the national economy, placed BankDhofar on top of the list of best banks in the region.

Hyundai takes the lead in safety with 8 awards

MUSCAT: Hyundai Motor continues to assert in vehicle an unrivalled dedication to safety, earning eight 2022 the US Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) Top Safety Pick and Top Safety Pick+ awards.

Hyundai’s current SUV products each earned a TSP (Top Safety Pick) or TSP+ rating designation. Additionally, of the eight Hyundai products awarded thus far for 2022, five included eco-friendly powertrain options. Parent company, Hyundai Motor Group (Hyundai, Kia and Genesis), leads the industry with the most awards in each category, when equipped with optional front crash protection and specific headlights — 11 Top Safety Pick+ and 10 Top Safety Pick awards for a total of 21.

“We value the important acknowledgment by the industry renowned IIHS, the leading contributor in road safety research in the US, granting Hyundai eight titles, thus acknowledging our



commitment to safety, which is an upmost priority in every step on the road of product development,” says Hyung Jung Im, Vice-President of Hyundai Motor Company. “This achievement is dedicated to our engineering and safety teams to honour their efforts devoted to provide our customers with the safest driving experience on the road.”

Several Hyundai models have received 2022 IIHS Top Safety Pick or Top Safety Pick+

ratings which include Top Safety Pick with specific headlights. The IIHS Top Safety Pick with specific headlights Awards were earned by all 2022 Elantra, Sonata, Venue and Santa Cruz. And for the Top Safety Pick+, Tucson, Palisade, NEXO. 2022 Santa Fe as Top Safety Pick+ built after July 2021.

To qualify for an IIHS Top Safety Pick+, the higher of the Institute’s two awards, vehicles must earn good ratings in all six IIHS crash-worthiness

evaluations, including the driver-side small overlap front, passenger-side small overlap front, moderate overlap front, side roof strength and head restraint tests.

Additionally, vehicles must be available with a front crash prevention system that earns advanced or superior ratings in both the vehicle-to-vehicle and vehicle-to-pedestrian evaluations and good or acceptable headlights must be standard across all trim levels.



Oman to take centre-stage at intl green hydrogen summit

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, MARCH 2

Building on the outstanding success of the inaugural edition of the Green Hydrogen Summit Oman (GSHO) last December – an event that has firmly entrenched the preeminent role of hydrogen in Oman's decarbonisation strategy – a follow-up edition is being held later this year to accelerate the realisation of this green future for Oman and its international partners.

This time around, the 2nd Green Hydrogen Summit and Exhibition (greenhydrogensummitoman.com), scheduled to be held at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) from December 5 to 7, 2022, will focus not just on the Sultanate of Oman, but key global markets as well.

The enlarged forum, featuring prominent experts, energy companies, utilities, R&D institutions and governments, will seek to harness growing international interest in adopting green hydrogen as the world's zero-carbon fuel of choice.

As with last year's inaugural event, this year's three-day forum and exhibition will be held under the auspices of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, with the support of a number of Omani government ministries, key energy companies and public sector organisations. It is being organised by Muscat-based Birba Energy in cooperation with Oman



Society of Petroleum Services (OPAL), along with the Energy Renewal Unit of Petroleum Development Oman as strategic partners.

The overarching theme is: 'Leading the Energy Transition Strategy'.

But dedicated sessions over the three-day event will seek to do a deep dive a broad array of themes vital to the success of a future green hydrogen industry. Key areas for discussion include Green Hydrogen Potentials, Opportunities and Challenges; Regulations and Policies; Certification; Emerging Technologies; Storage and Transportation Challenges; Green Hydrogen Financing and Projects/Investments Partnership; Renewable Energies at the Heart of Green Hydrogen Production; Water Resources for Green Hydrogen; and the Transition to a Green Hydrogen Society.

To help fine-tune the programme agenda, the organisers have constituted high-level Executive and Technical Committees to ensure that the event is both illuminating for attendees and impactful for the participating countries.

The Executive Committee comprises Dr Abdullah al Abri, Head, Energy Renewal Unit of PDO (Conference Chairman); Abdulrahman al Yahyaei, CEO, OPAL; Mohammed al Mukhaini, Oman LNG; Dr Salim al Huthaili, CEO, Solar Wadi; Nasser al Rizeiqi - Hydrogen/New Energies Specialist, Ministry of Energy and Minerals; and Dr Faiza al Harthi, Energy Sector Head, Oman Vision 2040 Implementation and Follow-Up Unit.

Also assisting in the delivery of a high quality forum is a Technical Committee including: Prof Dr Ing Michael Modigell of Oman Hydrogen Centre (Technical

Committee Chairman); Dr Khalil al Hanashi, PDO Energy Renewal Unit; Dr Zakiya al Azri, Corporate Research and Development Adviser, PDO; Dr Juman al Saqlawi, Alternative Energy, OQ; Mohammed al Taie, Project Engineering Manager, Oman LNG; Khalid bin Hadi, Managing Director, Siemens Energy; Olav Carlsen, Founder, Hydrogen Rise; Dr Amer al Hinai, SQU Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Postgraduate Studies and Research; Dr Talal al Wahaibi, Associate Professor at Engineering Department A'Sharqiyah University; Prof Bruno G Pollet, President of Green Hydrogen Division at International Association for Hydrogen Energy, Director of Green Hydrogen Lab, University of Quebec at Trois Rivières, Canada; Monica Trench, Hydrogen Origination and Business Development at BP-UK; Simone Corbò, Hydrogen Platform Leader Baker Hughes; Cédric Roux, Green Hydrogen Technical Manager, Total Energies; and Stephen B Harris, CEO, SPH4 GmbH, Germany.

Underscoring the broad international appeal of the Green Hydrogen Summit, a number of leading global organisations have extended their backing to the event. The list includes the International Energy Agency (IEA), Green Hydrogen Lab, Arab-German Chamber of Commerce and Industry, AKH German Industry and Commerce, and World Hydrogen Leaders.



Al Ghalbi begins training of 30 Omanis under Imdad programme

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, MARCH 2

Well-known Omani oilfield services firm Al Ghalbi International Engineering and Contracting Company organised an introductory meeting for 30 Omani trainees, who were assigned to the company through the Imdad (On the Job Training) programme launched by Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) in conjunction with the

Ministry of Labour.

They will receive training in various technical and mechanical disciplines. They are among a total of 250 young Omanis who will be trained in various mechanical specialisations in a number of oil companies.

The introductory meeting was attended by Ali bin Suleym al Junaibi, Chairman, Al Ghalbi International, executive management members, and officials of PDO and OPAL.



Madayn lecture focuses on digital transformation

MUSCAT: The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates "Madayn" organised a virtual awareness lecture highlighting the government's digital transformation programme, in cooperation with the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology. The lecture, which

was held for Madayn's employees, elaborated on the government's digital transformation programme and Madayn's plan to align with this programme.

The lecture also underscored Madayn's organisational transformation plan including the associated projects, key indicators and expected outcomes.



Forum highlights chemical industry's role in achieving net-zero goals

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, MARCH 2

The downstream hydrocarbon industry in the Arabian Gulf plays a critical role in achieving zero goals, according to speakers at the second edition of the Gulf Petrochemicals and Chemicals Association (GPCA) Leaders Forum held in Dubai on Wednesday.

Delivering the Inaugural address at the forum, Yousef al Benyan, Chairman, GPCA, and Vice-Chairman and CEO, SABIC, stated that the long journey of carbon neutrality begins with a few steps which include creating



a baseline, setting emission reduction targets and establishing strong governance.

He also highlighted the role of policymakers in shaping

the pathway for hydrogen and facilitating international cooperation and collaboration. Achieving net-zero goals will require complete transformation

of businesses, supported by policy makers, investors, companies and consumers.

Following Al Benyan's address, a session on "The Future of the Oil

Market under Carbon Neutrality Policies" was delivered by Dr Anas al Hajji, Managing Partner of Energy Outlook Advisors and Editorial Advisor for Attaqa.net.

Dr Al Hajji shared his insights on the shortcomings in current long-term forecasts of the oil market, discussed the true impact of renewable energy on the oil market and touched upon the key areas the petrochemical industry can benefit from. He also delved on the impact of the regional and global carbon neutrality policies and its implications on the petrochemical industry.

The session also emphasised on the growing interest in sustainable hydrogen (blue and green hydrogen and ammonia) in the GCC and globally and how this will help reach their greenhouse gas emissions targets.

Sustainability: A nice-to-have or A need-to-have?



ABEER AL MUKHAINI,
Founder, Carbon 6

Tejarah Talks

BUSINESS STORIES ABOUT THINGS THAT MATTER

As part of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion’s newly launched Tejarah Talks series we sat down with Muscat-based environmental expert, Abeer al Mukhaini, Founder, Carbon 6, to get her views on Oman’s sustainability journey, green consumer behaviour, the potential wrath of investors and shareholders and an economy based on regenerative principles.

How do you define sustainability?

The United Nations definition of sustainable development strives to strike a balance between the present and the future and is a great source of inspiration.

“Sustainable development has been defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

“For sustainable development to be achieved, it is crucial to

harmonise three core elements: economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection. These elements are interconnected, and all are crucial for the well-being of individuals and societies.”

Where is Oman on its sustainability journey?

Oman has a long-standing tradition of environmental protection, preserving the Sultanate’s outstanding natural beauty and resources. One of the main goals of Oman Vision 2040 is to improve our Environmental Performance Index (EPI) standing to more than 74.69 (currently at 38.5). We are already seeing that translated into Oman’s 2nd NDCs GHG emission reduction target of 7 per cent by 2030 and raising renewable energy in the country’s energy mix to 20 per cent by 2030 and up to 35-39 per cent by 2040 as well as reducing oil’s share of GDP to 8.4 per cent by 2040.

Oil and gas companies such as PDO are also announcing NetZero targets by 2050, including a substantial investment in renewable and alternative energy sources and a commitment to achieve Zero Routine Flaring by 2030.

How do you advise companies about setting sustainability goals knowing there are so many directions they can go in terms of trying to deliver the impact they want to see?

The business community, especially SMEs, has a vital role to play in achieving Oman Vision 2040 and the UN SDGs. The key to implementing a sustainability strategy is to:

- Define clear goals and work on small but consistent improvements.
- Incorporate sustainability requirements into your supply chain.
- Allocate resources to your sustainability goals, ROI should not only be calculated in financial terms, but also in positive social impact, environmental protection, employee welfare, consumer engagement and loyalty and positive brand image.
- Last but not least, engage employees in developing the company’s sustainability strategy, this is key.

What do you see as the sustainability challenges facing Omani companies today?

The global climate crisis is the

most significant challenge we face today. It affects all aspects of our daily lives. Most climate/sustainability issues require systemic change, and systemic change requires collaboration among stakeholders. We need to encourage more communication, more dialogue.

Do you think there is a gap between consumer expectations and sustainable product availability?

Driven by a desire to protect the planet and improve local livelihoods, Omani consumers are adopting increasingly sustainable behaviour — they are scrutinising the things they buy. Local businesses that have not embraced sustainability are risking their reputations, and clearly missing out on commercial opportunities. Despite the growth in sustainable goods, there remains a gap between consumer expectations and businesses meeting those expectations.

What do you think it is going to take for more companies to make larger investments in sustainability?

What is becoming clear is companies that prioritise profit at

the expense of the environment, or disregard the social consequences risk the wrath of consumers, investors and shareholders. As a result we are beginning to see the emergence of purpose and impact driven businesses — organisations that are actively trying to solve social and environmental problems as part of their main business activities. I am delighted to see socially and environmentally responsible companies with sustainability at the heart of their business already finding success in the market.

One final question, what needs to be done for business to rise to the sustainability challenge?

To navigate and survive the coming decades of transformative change, we will clearly need business leaders and entrepreneurs who can steer our economy and their businesses away from relying on the exploitation of nature and resources and towards a new model of economic prosperity, one based on green and regenerative principles.

With so much at stake, clinging to the business-as-usual model is not just risky, but a narrow and irresponsible approach.

A future powered by Artificial Intelligence



HAIDER AL LAWATI

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The author is a Muscat-based economic analyst who previously worked for the Central Bank of Oman and Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry

With the development of modern technologies in various fields, the future of the world has become dependent on the accelerated application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations.

Today, these technologies have great potential to guide us in securing the future of the planet we live on. Artificial Intelligence will enter all areas of life, to sustain our daily living, and to enable the delivery of speedy and efficient services. AI will enable individuals, industries and societies to meet, to a certain extent, the required service and resource needs of the

growing population.

During the past few years, Artificial Intelligence has developed significantly.

AI-based advanced tools are beginning to replace workers in certain jobs and functions. This is no longer science fiction, but rather a fact as a result of the development of Artificial Intelligence methods through machine learning by these technologies.

Consequently, mastery in Artificial Intelligence has become the goal of all countries, which are now strengthening efforts, developing scientific capabilities, strengthening the fields of scientific research and qualifying cadres and workers in institutions on how to benefit from AI in the future.

It also requires accelerating the

COUNTRIES IN THE GULF, MIDDLE EAST HAVE BEEN MAKING GOOD STRIDES IN THE APPLICATION OF TECHNOLOGIES AND UTILISING AI

adoption of Artificial Intelligence in vital sectors in order to drive economic diversification and boost economic growth. Today, Artificial Intelligence has become an important tool to change the course of people’s lives by developing applications that are involved in various industries and daily production processes by relying

on deep learning technology and algorithm sciences that simulate neurons in the human body, which enables to understand and analyse data, information and ideas.

With the use of AI, machines can be programmed to, for example, respond to human requests, read pictures, understand others, listen to voices and learn everything new.

Such ideas require strengthening cybersecurity programmes and solutions for institutions and companies that rely on modern technologies.

Countries in the Gulf and Middle East have been making good strides in the application of technologies and utilising AI, given that the high-tech industry based on these technologies will be worth \$320 billion by 2030.

Also, according to Gartner, around 50 per cent of companies are expected to adopt global Artificial Intelligence operations by 2025, and improve their strategy to deal with big data and modern technologies to keep pace with developments.

However, governments will also need to create laws to protect data and privacy, use information and communication technology and digital services, develop communications infrastructure and provide digital skills and entrepreneurship to apply Artificial Intelligence in public services such as health, education and smart government applications, and in the areas of investment, finance and the promotion of scientific innovation.

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features



Inspiring a nation to embrace the culture of playing tennis

Professional Italian tennis player Horst Rieder is in the country for a four-month tennis ambassadorship and coaching. Within the last two months, he has already organised nearly half a dozen tournaments for amateur players hoping that it will become a motivation for many Omanis to start loving the game and embrace it... **P20**

DISCOVERY

READ



HOUSE OF SKY AND BREATH
BY SARAH J. MAAS

The second book in the Crescent City series, Bryce Quinlan and Hunt Athalar must choose to fight or stay silent.

Fossil of dinosaur with hard head and tiny arms found in Argentina

SCIENTISTS HAVE unearthed in Argentina the remains of a previously unknown species of meat-eating dinosaur that lived about 70 million years ago that had puny arms and may have used its powerful head to ram its prey. The fossil skull of the Cretaceous Period dinosaur, named Guemesia ochoai, was discovered in Argentina's north-western Salta province. The researchers said it likely belongs to a carnivorous group of dinosaurs called abelisaurids, which walked on two legs and possessed only stub-like arms, even shorter than those of North America's Tyrannosaurus rex.

The short arms may have forced Guemesia to rely on its powerful skull and jaws, the researchers said. "It's so unique and so different from other carnivorous dinosaurs, which allows us to understand that we're dealing with a totally new species," Federico Agnolin, lead author of a study on the dinosaur published in the Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology and a researcher with Argentine national science council CONICET, said. The animal, possibly a juvenile, lived just a few million years before an asteroid impact at what is now Mexico's Yucatan peninsula wiped out about three-quarters of Earth's species including the dinosaurs about 66 millions years ago.



Scientists believe abelisaurids roamed what is now Africa, South America and India, and several dozen specimens have previously been dug up in Argentina — nearly all of them in southern Patagonia, far from the site of Guemesia's discovery. "We know it had a very sharp sense of smell and was short-sighted," said Agnolin, noting that it would have walked upright on its large feet, with its solid cranium leading the way. "Some scientists think that could mean the animal hunted its prey by charging them with its head," Agnolin added. The discovery adds to Argentina's reputation as a treasure trove of fossils of dinosaurs and other prehistoric creatures. Guemesia takes its name from Argentine independence hero Martin Miguel de Guemes and Javier Ochoa, a museum worker who made the discovery. — **Reuters**



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AROUND THE WORLD

ENTERTAINMENT

A yak at the Oscars: first nomination for Bhutanese film



FILMED IN ONE of the remotest corners in one of the world's most inaccessible countries, "Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom", is the first Bhutanese film ever nominated for an Academy Award.

At an altitude of 3,400 metres (11,150 feet), Lunana, where it was shot on location, is home to around 50 people and lies up to 10 days' trek from the nearest motorable road.

Winters are long and harsh, and solar power is the only electricity source, creating major logistical challenges.

Equipment and supplies for the film were carried in by 75 mules, while more than 70 helicopter trips transported the cast and crew.

The movie explores a society in transition through Ugyen, a discontent teacher with dreams of making it big as a singer in Australia, but who is transferred to Lunana, a village of yak herders and fungus collectors.

His initial reaction to Lunana is overwhelmingly negative, but the locals — real-life villagers playing themselves — slowly spark a change of heart.

The script is laced with Bhutanese mysticism and environmental messages, while the action takes place against a natural backdrop of vast vistas and snow-capped peaks.

"It is a story about yak songs, it is a story about the value of yak dung," said first-time director Pawo Choyning Dorji.

"It touches upon this universal human story, about seeking what you want, where you belong, seeking happiness."

"That is something that is really needed in our world," he said.

"With the pandemic we have become a society where we want to separate, we want to build boundaries, we want to build walls, we want to highlight what makes us different, what makes us better or they worse than us."

"I wanted to show a simple story where all of us could find and celebrate this universal human quality."

In January the film was selected as one of five nominees for Best International Feature Film at the Oscars taking place next month.

- 'HAPPY COUNTRY' -

Bhutan is known for its concept of Gross National Happiness, prioritising well-being as well as economic development, and Ugyen wears a T-shirt emblazoned with the phrase in the film's opening scenes.

But growth has brought greater desire, and thousands of Bhutanese have left their Himalayan homeland in recent years in search of better financial and educational opportunities.

Australia is their favourite destination, so much so that Bhutanese now refer to the "Australian Dream", and the country opened an embassy in Canberra in October.

Teachers are highly respected in Bhutan and along with doctors are the highest-paid government employees, at most ranks earning more than civil servants of equivalent grade, but hundreds of them are resigning every year.

"There are so many Bhutanese who seem to be leaving this so-called 'happy country' to look for happiness elsewhere," said Dorji.

"There's nothing wrong with that," he added. "That's just how life is."

Lunana epitomises the changes Bhutan is undergoing: 3G mobile technology was installed in the village just as the film crew were wrapping up production.

Dorji says the local school's star pupil Pem Zam — who in the movie tells Ugyen that teachers "touch the future" — "messages me on Facebook". — **AFP**

FASHION

Armani pays tribute to Ukraine suffering with silent show



GIORGIO ARMANI switched off the music to hold his Milan fashion show in silence on Sunday out of respect for the people caught in the Ukrainian conflict.

Models strutted down the catwalk in an eerie quiet, interrupted by applause from the audience, wearing short jackets in pastel hues and shiny, sequined black and silver dresses.

"My decision not to use any music was taken as a sign of respect towards the people involved in the unfolding tragedy in Ukraine," read a post across a black banner on the fashion designer's Twitter account.

"The best thing to do is send a message that we don't want to celebrate because something very disturbing is happening around us," the 87-year-old designer, visibly moved, later said on the sidelines of the show.

Both male and female models sported black velvet coats, jackets and trousers for the 2022/23 fall/winter collection, sometimes with dabs of blue, or a red trim. There were also electric blue silk evening gowns and sleeveless blouses, embroidered tops, long white overalls and flowery prints.

Designs from Armani's main line traditionally bring down the curtain on Milan's fashion week, which this season hosted mainly in-person catwalk shows rather than digital presentations, including by the likes of Prada, Gucci and Dolce&Gabbana. — **Reuters**



TRAVEL TALES

In Bolivia, miners sacrifice llamas to appease 'Lord of the Underworld'



IN A DIMLY LIT MINE shaft in Bolivia, a man sharpens two knives next to a table laden with offerings: wine, beer and coca leaves. Waiting nearby are five white llamas.

The woolly animals' blood and hearts are the preferred food of El Tio (The Uncle), a horned deity Bolivian miners believe offers them protection deep in the bowels of the Earth.

Statues of El Tio — "Lord of the Underworld" — abound in mines, surrounded by offerings of alcohol and coca leaf, a stimulant the miners chew to get through the long, dark

colleagues looked on as the llamas, blindfolded and their coats decorated with pink ribbons, were pushed into the mine on a trolley to be slaughtered.

To the tune of trumpets, drums and cymbals they danced, sipping from bottles of beer and occasionally splashing some on the ground for the "Earth Mother."

Luciano Alejo, a yatri, or Andean healer, wielded his knives as miners crouched at the ready with bowls to be filled with llama blood, which some then smeared on their faces.



hours underground.

El Tio resembles the Christian devil, sporting fangs, goat's ears and, nearly always, a burning cigarette placed in his mouth by believers.

Once a year, miners from the Oruro region, on the high planes of western Bolivia, gather to offer sacrifices to appease El Tio.

He is, they say, a wrathful god.

"We bring the offerings... so that we can sleep well at night, to not have accidents" in the workplace, miner Miguel Valdez, 33, told AFP at one such sacrificial ceremony on Friday.

"If we don't give him this offering, many things can happen."

BLOODY OFFERING

The miners also believe El Tio controls the abundance of silver, tin and zinc they extract for a living.

Valdez and hundreds of his

The hearts — still beating — were cut out and placed in larger containers.

A chosen few in the crowd then brought the filled vessels to the lower levels of the mine, to place them before El Tio. With a burning cigarette dangling from his sinister grin, he was dressed in colourful woolen garments and miners' boots.

After the animal sacrifice, the miners set fire to the other offerings they had gathered on large tables, then made a rapid exit as the shaft quickly filled with smoke.

The ritual is performed once a year, in February or March, on the eve of the street parade of the Oruro carnival. One of Bolivia's biggest festivals, it is listed by Unesco as an "intangible cultural heritage."

The carnival resumed this year after being skipped in 2021 due to the coronavirus epidemic. — **AFP**



Inspiring a nation to embrace the culture of playing tennis

By Yeru Ebuena
Insta: @yru_here

Invited to the Sultanate of Oman for a four-month tennis ambassadorship and coaching, Italian professional tennis player Horst Reid is quite surprised to discover that there's not a lot of movement happening on the national front for tennis as a sport.

He finds this a missed opportunity commending Omani tennis player Fatma al Nabhani for doing so much for the promotion of the sport and tennis to even have a footprint in a country like the Sultanate of Oman.

Over the last two months, Horst had been organising matches and coaching left and right in Salalah and since there are no established tennis academies in the Sultanate of Oman, the tennis courts of Al Baleed Resort Salalah by Anantara have become front and centre of the growing tennis community in Dhofar Governorate.

At 24, as per the Association of Tennis Professionals Ranking, Horst's career-high ranking is at 1326 while his International Tennis Federation Singles Ranking is at 1131.

As a professional tennis player, Horst has taken a four-month break from professional playing to serve as a tennis ambassador for Lux Tennis – a leading tennis management company for the finest luxury resorts globally. Used to jet setting lifestyle flying to different countries to professionally compete, Horst is trying to use his time in the Sultanate of Oman to make a little difference in how the community looks at tennis as a sport.

His landing in the Sultanate of Oman over two months ago, a stopover in the UAE and his previous reviews of different tennis standing in the Middle East, he said that there is a huge potential for Arab players including the Omani to make it big in international games especially that there are plenty of opportunities to get support and sponsorship which is very important when one is playing professionally.

"Tennis is a very complex sport. It's not only physical, but it's also tactics and technique. It's all about mental strength and coordination. You have to be fast, you have to be mobile and flexible. You need to be quick in reacting," he said.

"The reality of tennis right now is that there's no one in the Middle East that's part of the top 500 international rankings. Few have earned high points. I know there's one player from Kuwait and another from Jordan. The Middle East definitely needs expertise," he explained.

He added, "So what's happening now, there's already a Rafa Nadal tennis academy in Kuwait and this is good because this will help elevate the players within that particular country. I hope that it happens in Oman, too," he said.

"To have a tennis academy would really help grow the sports within Oman. But I think personally, the culture has to change a little bit athletics wise, people need to be more active. The sport needs to be accessible too. Most of the courts here are found in hotels," he noted.

Horst clarified that tennis is a game for everybody. It's not just a game for Europeans or expats. Everybody can play the game given the right training.

"I started playing in 2002. I live near a tennis club in Italy. My parents started playing tennis when they were 30+ years old but did not pursue it professionally. They were passionate about the game that when I was born, they introduce me to it. They made me play other sports too including skiing and football but tennis became my favourite," he said.

"For those starting in the sport, you can begin by getting a good pair of tennis shoes. If they want to try it out, they can visit some local tennis courts and talk to the coaches. For instance, for those who come to me, I lend them the equipment. All they have to bring is their shoes and a good athletics wear," he urged.

Asked what is usually his biggest challenge as a coach, Horst explained, "Usually, it's even better if someone hasn't played tennis at all. Sometimes I have

guests here who already played tennis for 10 years. They always learn it in their own style. They never learn it from a coach. They just played for the sake of playing. It's harder to re-organise their techniques in playing. Getting a coach early on is better as for my case, I can already teach them the right ways and bring them to the right direction of playing the game," he said.

Horst believes that Italy has one of the best tennis education systems in the world right now and can only get better.

"I have the Italian tennis education system as part of me and my teaching. I am a certified tennis coach by the Italian Tennis Federation, that's why I think, while I am here, it's a huge opportunity for Omani tennis fans or even non-Omanis who love tennis to get their lessons first hand. I will teach them the way that I was taught tennis and in a sense, it is getting the world's best practices. I hope to bring professional tennis expertise to the Middle East," he shared.

"For those starting late, like people in their 30s or older but still wanting to learn tennis, it's not too late. Training wise, I will not be able to bring you to a professional level for sure but you will learn all the necessary techniques to play a good game," he said.

To be clear, Horst explained that competition in tennis is very high. But the country has to start somewhere.

"Fatma (al Nabhani), I don't know her personally but I watched her from the Doha Open. She's a professional player and ranks around 200 in the league [if I'm not mistaken]. I think there should be more Fatma in the Middle East. I don't know how Arabian women do in other sports but in tennis, there's not a lot who plays. Fatma is the only one I know of and she is doing massively for the popularity of the sports in Oman," he noted.

Before his visit ends in April,

Horst was hoping someone can organise a friendly match that would include as one of the highlights a game between him and Fatma, something he said will create more buzz for the game in the Sultanate of Oman.

He said he already talked to a few people and even Anantara Salalah has already reached out to Fatma for a match to be made. He explained that for any development, they would definitely do a good promotion for it.

But while the match isn't set yet, Horst said he will continue organising some smaller tournaments for amateurs in Salalah. He already organised a few and the latest tournament had been participated in by nearly 30 competitors from Salalah.

Horst offers private lessons based at the court of Al Baleed Resort Salalah by Anantara. To join one of Horst's classes, you can reach him through his Instagram: @horstrieder144 or through @anantarasalalah.

