

HM greetings conveyed to Pakistan President

Ambassador Fahd bin Sulaiman al Kharusi presented to Dr Arif Alvi, President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, his credentials as the Plenipotentiary and Accredited Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The ambassador conveyed the greetings of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and his wishes of good health and happiness to the Pakistani President and to the Pakistani people for continued progress and prosperity.



P11

THIRD BATCH
TICKETS OF ASIAN
CUP QATAR 2023 TO
GO ON SALE TODAY



P13

PUMPED HYDRO
POTENTIAL BUOYS
DUQM'S GREEN
HYDROGEN APPEAL



P19

CHOCOLATE
WARS AS ITALIAN
ARTISANS BATTLE
SWISS GIANT



HONOURABLE
LADY OFFERS
CONDOLENCES
IN KUWAIT

KUWAIT: The Honourable Lady, Spouse of His Majesty the Sultan, paid a visit on Tuesday evening to the sisterly State of Kuwait to offer condolences and sympathy to Their Highnesses the women members of the Kuwaiti Royal family and the brotherly Kuwaiti people on the passing of the late Emir of Kuwait Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmed Al Jabir al Sabah, Yamama Palace in the capital Kuwait.

The Honourable Lady, Spouse of His Majesty the Sultan, expressed her heart-felt condolences and sympathy praying to Allah the Almighty to bestow mercy on the deceased and grant his honourable family patience and fortitude.

The Honourable Lady, Spouse of His Majesty the Sultan, was accompanied by a high-ranking official delegation. — ONA

Omanis can get entry visa to Syria at border checkpoints

MUSCAT: The Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic in Muscat has announced that citizens of the Sultanate of Oman can obtain an entry visa to Syria at border checkpoints of the Arab republic.

This was revealed in a statement made to Oman News Agency (ONA) by Dr Idris Maya, Ambassador of the Syrian Arab Republic to the Sultanate of Oman. The ambassador pointed out that the step reflects the depth of fraternal relations and bonds between the peoples of Oman and Syria.

The move comes in implementation of recommendations of a joint government committee that convened in Muscat on July 12 and 13, said Dr Idris, noting that the step was a gesture to upgrade ties of economic cooperation, commercial exchange and tourism to the standard of the distinguished political relations.

Accordingly, Omanis do not need to visit Syrian embassies or consulates abroad to obtain an entry visa, said Dr Idris, who affirmed that the Syrian Embassy in Muscat is fully prepared to answer any query related to this issue and extend assistance to Omanis wishing to visit Syria for any reason. — ONA

SOHAR STUN AHLI SIDAB TO CLINCH HM CUP



Dark horses Sohar upset 12-time winners Ahli Sidab in penalties 4-2 to claim the 53rd His Majesty's Cup hockey crown in a pulsating final at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex on Tuesday night. Chief guest Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat, gave away the trophies in presence of Dr Marwan bin Juma al Juma, Chairman of Oman Hockey Association, and other dignitaries. DETAILS ON P10

11,000
registered
organ
donors in
Oman

KABEER YOUSUF
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The number of registered organ donors on Al Shifa portal, an online platform to register as donors, has reached more than 11,000, according to the Ministry of Health. The ministry has activated the programme to express desire to donate organs after death. This year alone, the ministry has carried out 17 kidney transplants for patients with

different kidney ailments.

Additionally, a programme to interview relatives of the brain-dead people to offer organs to deserving patients after the donors' death has been activated, a major step towards encouraging the noble deed.

This facility will align the brain-dead people and transplantation for eligible organ failure patients on national waiting lists in due course.

The details were revealed on the occasion of Omani Organ Donation Day, organised by the ministry, represented by the National Programme for Organ Transplant Department, under the auspices of HH Sayyid Kamil bin Fahd al Said, Secretary-General at the Secretariat-General for the Council of Ministers.

The event was attended by Dr Said bin Harib al Lamki, Under-Secretary of Health Affairs, and several officials from the Ministry of Health, ... TURN TO P2

6.2 earthquake
kills more than
100 in China

HM CONDOLENCES TO PRESIDENT XI JINPING

MUSCAT/BEIJING: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China, on victims of the earthquake which hit the northwestern province of Gansu. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his heartfelt sympathies to the President, families of the victims and the Chinese people, wishing the injured a speedy recovery.

The Sultanate of Oman also expressed its sympathies with the People's Republic of China's government and people on the earthquake which hit the northwestern province of Gansu.

In a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry, the Sultanate of Oman expressed its heartfelt condolences to families of the victims, wishing the injured a speedy recovery.

A magnitude-6.2 earthquake jolted a remote and mountainous region on the northern edge of the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau just before midnight on Monday, killing at least 118 people and injuring hundreds, according to Chinese state media.

Authorities have swiftly mobilised an array of emergency responses after the quake wrecked roads and infrastructure, triggered landslides, and half buried a village in silt. But rescue work has proved challenging in subzero temperatures, with most of China grappling with below-freezing conditions after a powerful cold wave swept across the country.

Earthquakes are common in western provinces such as Gansu, lying on the eastern boundary of the tectonically active Qinghai-Tibetan plateau. China's deadliest quake in recent decades was in 2008 when a magnitude-8.0 temblor struck Sichuan, killing nearly 70,000 people.

At 11:59 pm local time (15:59 GMT) on Monday, the latest quake struck Jishishan county in Gansu at a depth of 10 km, according to China Earthquake Networks Center (CENC).

The epicentre was 5 km from the border between Gansu and a neighbouring province, Qinghai, where strong tremors were also felt. In Gansu, 105 were killed as of 7:50 am on Tuesday (23:50 GMT on Monday), and of 397 injured as of 9:30 am, 16 were in critical condition, provincial authorities told a news conference. — Agencies

Israel bombs Gaza as UN weighs truce call

GAZA STRIP: Israel launched more deadly strikes on Gaza on Tuesday ahead of an expected UN Security Council vote on another ceasefire demand as concern mounted over the conflict's impact on global shipping. Israel maintained its bombardment and ground combat on Tuesday in the third month of the bloodiest ever Gaza war, which started on October 7. Gaza's health ministry says Israel's withering military response has killed more than 19,667 people, mostly women and children, while devastating large swathes of the coastal territory.

At least 20 more people were killed overnight in strikes on Rafah, the ministry said, bringing more suffering to the southern town that has



A child reacts while holding a person near the bodies of Palestinians killed in Israeli strikes at a hospital in Rafah on Tuesday. — Reuters

become a vast camp for displaced Palestinians.

In Tel Aviv, air raid sirens wailed as rockets fired from Gaza sent Israeli citizens running into air raid shelters before the incoming fire was intercepted by the Iron Dome system.

The army says 131 troops have been killed in Gaza since it launched its ground invasion in late October. United States has urged Israel to protect civilians in Gaza.

International alarm has spiralled over the suffering brought by the war for traumatised Palestinian families who have endured dire shortages of food, water, medical supplies and fuel as well as power and communications blackouts and biting winter cold. SEE P7



Rescue workers search a house for survivors after an earthquake in Kangdiao village, Dahejia, Jishishan County, on Tuesday. — AFP



Officials offer condolences at Kuwait Embassy

MUSCAT: A number of Omani officials offered their condolences today on the death of the late Emir of Kuwait Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah at the premises of the Kuwaiti Embassy in Muscat.

They were received by Mohammed Nasser Madhi Al Hajri, Ambassador of the State of Kuwait to the Sultanate of Oman, and members of the diplomatic mission.

The officials expressed their sincere condolences and sympathy to the Kuwaiti brethren. They commended the positive role of the late Emir in consolidating bonds of fraternity and developing relations between Oman and Kuwait. They reaffirmed the steadfastness of the two countries' ties that are deep-rooted in history.

The ambassador and other members of the Kuwaiti mission expressed their deep thanks and

appreciation for the valuable visit made yesterday by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to the State of Kuwait where he personally offered condolences to Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait.

The mission members cited the great impact that His Majesty the Sultan's visit made on Kuwaiti people.

They wished the Sultanate of Oman further progress and prosperity in the reign of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

At the conclusion of the visit, the Omani officials signed the Visitors' Register, in which they noted down expressions of condolence and commiseration. In their notes, they prayed to Allah the Almighty to have mercy on the deceased' soul and endow the State of Kuwait with further security and prosperity.

— ONA



The mission members cited the great impact that His Majesty the Sultan's visit made on Kuwaiti people. — ONA

Forum brings together seafaring committees in Dhofar Governorate

SALALAH: The General Directorate of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources in Dhofar Governorate on Tuesday organised a forum for members of Seafaring Committees in the governorate.

The event was held under the auspices of Eng Yaqoub bin Khalfan al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of

Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources for Fisheries.

The committees, tasked with regulating the activities of fishing, were formed in various wilayats in the Sultanate of Oman more than 20 years ago.

The forum saw the presentation of two working papers, the first dealt with the "regulatory system" of fishing and the second

focused on the "purviews and recommendations" of seafaring committees.

The event also included a visual display featuring the components of fish resources in Dhofar Governorate.

Outstanding members of the panels and top performers were honoured at the conclusion of the forum.

— ONA



The forum saw the presentation of working papers on regulatory system of fishing and purviews and recommendations of seafaring committees. — ONA

Oman, ICRC review areas of cooperation

MUSCAT: Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs met on Tuesday with Mamadou Sow, Head of the regional mission of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for the GCC countries.

During the meeting, the two sides reviewed areas of cooperation between the Sultanate of Oman and the ICRC. They also discussed matters related with assistance provided to Palestinian people in the Gaza



The two sides discussed matters related with assistance provided to Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip. — ONA

Strip within the context of the Israeli war waged on the strip.

The meeting was attended by Shaikh Humaid bin Ali al Maani, Head of the International Affairs Department at the Foreign

Ministry, Abdullah Mohammed Said, Head of the ICRC mission in Oman and Dr Abdullah bin Hamad al Badi, Adviser for Humanitarian Affairs at the ICRC mission. — ONA

11,000 registered organ donors in Oman

FROM P1

...civilian and military medical institutions, and medical personnel from various health institutions.

Speaking to the Observer, Professor Marti Miljanic, President of the Spanish Foundation for Donation and Organ Transplantation in Spain, said there had been positive signs from the potential donors towards this noble act, and the scenario in Oman is highly promising.

This celebration comes as a continuation of the efforts of the ministry, represented by

the National Programme for Organ Transplant Department, to raise awareness of the importance of organ donation through the launch of the national campaign, which was activated in all governorates this year in addition to developing organ transplant services in the country.

The event included a presentation by Dr Ahmed al Busaidy, Director of the National Organ Transplant Programme Department, who touched on what was accomplished during the year - a significant increase in kidney transplant operations. The ministry has also

activated the corneal transplant operations programme, and there is an increase in the number of registered people.

Many living organ donors and relatives of posthumous organ donors were honoured, and an organ donation training course was also launched in cooperation with the Spanish Foundation for Organ Donation and Transplantation, which will continue till December 21. Further, the Ministry of Health has activated a programme that allows the expressing of desire to donate organs after death by registering in the Shifa application.

Women professionals vital for tourism sector development

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A seminar titled 'Women in Tourism' emphasised women's pivotal role in advancing Oman's travel and tourism sector to become a significant contributor to the GDP, aligning with Oman Vision 2040 goals.

The one-day event, attended by experts, highlighted the need to prioritise empowering women in travel and tourism as Oman strives to attract more tourists and boost employment opportunities.

Dr Hashil al Mahrouqi, Omran Group CEO, stressed the crucial role of women in tourism, stating, "We must leverage all available tools to empower women in an industry with untapped potential in this beautiful country." Oman faces a growing challenge of youth unemployment, with over 65,000 young people without jobs, according to the Ministry of Labour. With about 600 hotels, the

tourism sector can significantly contribute to job creation, making it a vital aspect of Oman's economic landscape.

The seminar, held under the auspices of Her Highness Sayyidah Dr Basma al Said, witnessed discussions on encouraging women to exert greater efforts in the tourism industry.

Dr Lubna al Mazroei, Tourism Investment Manager at Oman Investment Authority, emphasised the proven contribution of women in the sector, urging faith in their abilities for overall development.

"We should push forward to fully develop the professional growth of women's potential in the tourism industry, and efforts are on to ensure more women's participation in all the areas of travel and tourism," she said.

In terms of GDP, tourism contributed 2.5 per cent in 2022, the highest in Oman's history. However, Oman Vision 2040 aims to elevate tourism's GDP to a minimum of



The one-day event, attended by experts, highlighted the need to prioritise empowering women in travel and tourism as Oman strives to attract more tourists and boost employment opportunities

8 per cent and increase tourist numbers to 16 million.

The 'Women in Travel and Tourism' seminar, organised by Al Safa Press and Publishing, featured seven speakers advocating for enhanced roles for women in tourism. Mariam al Araimi, Omran's Human Capital Business Partner, highlighted the crucial role

of women in putting Oman on the global map.

"Women's roles in the hospitality sector cannot be underestimated. They are more than capable to put Oman in the global map to promote our culture and heritage to impress international tourists to experience a memorable stay," she said.

The rising demand for women

tour guides, both domestically and internationally, was noted, with Dr Rokhshad Tavakoli highlighting the need to encourage more women in this profession.

Calls were made to focus on the academic role, preparing female students as future leaders in the tourism industry. Aisha al Shueili, Senior Lecturer at Oman Tourism

College, emphasised empowering students for their roles as future leaders.

Presenters also urged women's full participation in shaping the national strategy for tourism development. Naifeen al Bahrani, a Tourism Consultant, highlighted women's advantages in tourism management, citing their patience and attentiveness.

Cultural tourism, promoting local heritage and history, was stressed as an enduring part of any tourism campaign by Amelia German, a Tour Guide. Guests emphasised adventure tourism as a potential growth factor, with Zahra al Lawati, an adventure and outdoor tour specialist, highlighting the appeal of Oman's rugged terrains.

The seminar concluded with an address on the role of 'Sustainable Tourism' in realising Oman Vision 2040, government plans, community involvement, and the impact of local businesses on tourism development.





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Muttrah Square project to enter implementation stage next year

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The Muttrah Square project, which won first place in the Bilarab Bin Haitham Award for Architectural Design, will enter the tender stage for implementation in the first quarter of next year.

The detailed maps of the project have been completed, the Muscat Municipality revealed on last week.

There are also plans to merge the Qurm Reserve with the Qurm Park in coordination with the Environment Authority (EA) and offer facilities such as walking trails, boat rides, and a museum in 2024, while there is a project to turn the popular sinkhole park in Qurayat into a destination for camping lovers.

These details were revealed on the sidelines of the Muscat Dialogue Sessions - 'Towards a Sustainable and Prosperous Future.' The conclusion of the dialogue sessions was held in the



The detailed maps of the project have been completed

presence of Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat.

The sessions produced 26 initiatives, which included developing public markets and beaches, exploiting reserves and creeks, creating an electronic platform for volunteering, and establishing integrated tourist camps. It also discussed creating a factory for fish products.

Ahmed bin Hamad al Humaidi, Chairman of Muscat Municipality, said ideas presented by the youth

in sessions will be transformed into real opportunities.

"Some of the ideas presented were among existing projects and plans that will not be officially announced, but will be carried out by Muscat Municipality." Muttrah Square Project As per Royal Directives to assign Muscat Municipality to implement the Muttrah Square project, Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat, had earlier signed an agreement for the completion of

the project.

The project was prepared by Ahmed bin Mohammed al Ghadhami, Omaima bint Mahmoud al Hinaiyah, and Abdullah bin Saleh al Bahri.

Local businesses have been hoping for the completion of this project at the earliest. "A facelift with modern facilities is essential to get more tourists from all over the world to this iconic Muttrah Waterfront," according to the manager of a recently opened fast food outlet.

The Muttrah Square project is expected to raise the value of Muttrah with a unique landmark, where an iconic bridge in the middle of the square is designed in the form of a bird over the sea.

The bridge captures the famous landmarks of Muttrah in one frame and will be surrounded by a mixed-use plaza that includes a dancing fountain, retail stores, and cafes, with lights that blend with the waves of the sea.

Dhofar celebrates Arabic Language Day

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, DEC 19

The Directorate General of Education in Dhofar Governorate hosted on Tuesday a commemorative event marking the International Day of the Arabic Language at Sultan Qaboos Youth Complex for Culture and Entertainment in Salalah.

The event, underscoring the Arabic language's pivotal role in preserving Arab heritage and instilling Arab culture across generations, was held under the auspices of Dr Mezoun bint Bakheet bin Said al Shahri, Acting Director General.

Dr Fatima al Ghassani, Director of the Department of Educational Supervision in



The event underscored the Arabic language's pivotal role in preserving Arab heritage and instilling Arab culture across generations

Dhofar Governorate, spoke on the significance of the International Day of the Arabic Language, which falls on December 18 every year. Acknowledging the United Nations General Assembly's resolution No. 3190 of 1973 that designated this date for the annual celebration, she

emphasised the global recognition of Arabic as one of the official languages of the United Nations.

Reflecting on the richness of the Arabic language in its diverse forms, Dr Al Ghassani highlighted the critical roles that Arabic language teachers play

inside and outside the classroom. Emphasising their responsibility to adopt modern methods and strategies, she underscored the importance of fostering a positive learning environment that aligns with students' needs, abilities, and motivations.

The celebration also featured a literary session, where Dr Jameela bint Salem bin Abboud al Jaadiyah, Assistant Professor at the College of Arts and Applied Sciences, presented on "Poetic Workmanship Skills in Arabic Language Curricula." Additionally, Ishraq bint Abdullah bin Faris al Nahdi, Chairperson of the Eshraaq Cultural Council, shared her experience of writing and publishing a collective book titled "Bint Al-Baleed."

'Writing is regardless of awards'

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The writing journey is different from winning awards for International Booker Prize winner Geetanjali Shree. Her Hindi Novel Tomb of Sand earned her the Booker in 2022. Daisy Rockwell has translated the novel in English.

Shree is in Oman to attend 'Eighth Session: On Achievement' organised by Bait al Zubair featuring Dr Jokha al Harthi and Geetanjali Shree. To be held on Wednesday at Shangri - La Barr al Jissah, the event will be moderated by Azhar Ahmed.

"Two different trajectories... The writing journey is regardless of the awards. You may or may not get the awards and you will still write on because you are not writing for awards. You are writing because of some inner impulse and inner turmoil, which makes you want to unravel the world around you and the world inside you. And that is the impulse that takes me on the writer's journey," explained Shree.

Love for stories has definitely played its part in making her a writer and according to her, some go further in putting together the disorder stories into a creative experience.

"This is what I started doing and it became my expression and the medium for dealing with my confusion and my living. And that is how writing became my breath, although not my bread and butter," noted the writer who has authored many short stories.

She has a bilingual background with Hindi being informal and English formal mode of education, but she feels Hindi chose her.

"I don't have a prejudice with languages, it is just that Hindi is closest to my bone," she explained.

"It is an important moment but it is not about me or my achievement alone. It is about lighting up a rich area of literature which many people outside it has not known about. So certainly it is a moment full of potential and with Booker shining its light on this linguistic area, there is a lot more interest in what is going on here," she said.

There is a trend in picking up translations but this kind of



International Booker Prize winner Geetanjali Shree

excited interest is not enough, she pointed out, "We need serious, practical steps, we need funding of translations and publishing, we need publishers to change their way of working and actually pick up these translations and bring them out and publicise them. That is something at the moment we cannot see it happening in a big way, it has begun but the real scenario would be when we see a profusion of translation in the world market in a huge way with big publishers and funders. It is happening gradually but I hope it moves forward." Her books cover various subjects from history, communalism, terrorism but most importantly life. In 'Tomb of Sand', it is the loneliness of an elderly lady who is engulfed with loneliness after her husband's death. But her life takes up new perspectives and experiences.

"Women as a subject, I don't have to try, it is not a deliberate choice, I am sensitive to women, I happen to be a woman myself, I can see a lot of things happening to women, my mother's generation of women and the generation before that. And I think it is very natural for writers to pick up stories which are lying on the margins not necessarily brought to the centre stage or may not even be heard or noticed. So I think it was a very natural and organic process. I don't have to try," she reflected.

Reflecting on her visit to Oman she said, "Oman is a fascinating country and I have just touched the tip of Oman. It enlivened my curiosity and my desire to know more about it," said Geetanjali.

SQU research study wins 2023 National Research Award

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, DEC 19

Omani researcher Marwa bint Nasser al Rajhiyah of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) has been named the winner of the 2023 National Research Award in the Education and Human Resources sector, announced here recently.

Marwa's winning research project, titled 'The role of cultural intelligence and adaptation methods for the level of problems faced by Omani scholarship students,'

won the top award in the 'Young Researcher's category. The research paper unveils critical insights into the challenges confronting Omani students studying abroad, emphasising the indispensable role of cultural intelligence in surmounting these obstacles.

Al Rajhi's study addresses the spectrum of issues encountered by scholarship students: academic and cultural dilemmas, psychological stressors, and economic hurdles. The research, conducted on a diverse sample of 3331 male



Omani researcher Marwa bint Nasser al Rajhiyah receiving the award.

and female students across various international universities,

spans both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, encompassing

academic years from the first to the seventh.

Notably, a significant portion of the sample represents students in the UK and USA. The study's findings unveil an intricate network of direct and indirect relationships between cultural intelligence, adaptation methods, and the diverse challenges faced by students.

A higher level of cultural intelligence emerges as a direct correlate to reduced academic, cultural, and psychological problems. Cultural intelligence also

exerts an indirect influence through positive adaptation, leading to a decrease in psychological issues. Conversely, a high level of negative coping methods is linked to an increase in various challenges faced by students.

The research further highlights the nuanced interplay between student gender and academic year, particularly in the realm of economic challenges. Females consistently grapple with higher economic problems compared to males.

Bausher, an archaeological and recreational hub



Spring Water boast medical tourism



A Model of Old Houses



Bait Al Maqham



Water flows in the canals throughout the year

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY YAHYA AL SALMANI

Over the years, the Wilayat of Bausher has evolved into a significant administrative and commercial hub within the Muscat Governorate. Stretching from the shores of the Oman Sea in the south, Bausher is strategically positioned between the wilayats of Muttrah in the east and Seeb in the west.

It has over 40 villages and residential enclaves. The key areas include Bausher Town, Al Khuwair, Madinat As Sultan Qaboos, Al Ghubra, Al Athaiba, Ghala, Al Ansab and Al Qurum.

Situated at the heart of Muscat Governorate, Bausher bustles with government institutions and contemporary commercial hubs, fostering economic vitality in the Sultanate of Oman. Beyond its urban infrastructure, the wilayat boasts numerous recreational facilities such as the Royal Opera House, public parks, and prominent sports complexes, notably the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex.

On a different note, Bausher showcases distinctive natural, historical and archaeological treasures. Embarking on an exploratory journey reveals breathtaking beaches and perennial water canals (Aflaj).

Historical records trace the roots of this region back to the second millennium BC, with significant events shaping Omani history.

Among the noteworthy landmarks is Bait Al Maqham, meticulously restored in 1991 by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism. Other historical gems include Al Fatah Fort and various

towers at sites like Al Hammam, Sanab, Harat Al Awraa, and Bausher Souq.

The venerable Al Najjar Mosque, erected in the thirteenth century AH, stands as one of Bausher's oldest mosques.

Meanwhile, the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque inaugurated in 2001, takes pride as a cultural beacon in the Sultanate of Oman.

Bausher's landscape features circular cemeteries crafted from stones, dating back to the second and first millennium BC. Archaeological excavations unearthed 'honeycomb burials,' with artifacts such as iron swords, bronze arrows and soapstone utensils from the Early Iron Age period.

Agriculture emerges as a pivotal craft for Bausher's residents, who harness Aflaj water from mountain slopes to irrigate vast plains. With approximately 43 Aflaj, predominantly characterised by hot and warm water, the villages flourish with diverse crops. Palm trees, offering dozens of varieties, dominate the agricultural scene, along with citrus fruits, especially lemons, seasonal produce, and fodder. Fishing, herding, and traditional industries like gold and silversmithing also contribute to the region's economic tapestry.

Renowned for its therapeutic water springs, such as Ain Ghala and Ain Al Hamam, Bausher attracts visitors seeking relief from skin ailments. These hot and warm springs not only contribute to the local charm, but also play a role in fostering medical tourism in Muscat Governorate.

Bausher is a multifaceted destination, blending modernity with a rich historical and natural tapestry, making it a compelling choice for archaeological enthusiasts and recreational seekers.



Circular cemeteries built with stones



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Fake ‘online job offer’ making rounds

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

Several citizens and residents have been coming across ‘scam’ messages that tempt them to earn not only some but big money in a short time with little or no effort.

Messages received from unknown numbers generally about job offers like doing simple tasks such as watching a few videos and liking them.

Some examples are listed below: One such message (from +963 981748870) read: “Nice to meet you. My name is Amelia and I would like to offer a job for you that is simple and interesting, I am a market researcher at our company. Here I have two simple survey questions and a YouTube Subscribe channel task. It only takes 3-5 minutes to complete and we will pay RO 6 as the task reward. You can earn between RO 90 to RO 200 per day through this task. If you are interested please reply with (OK).”

Another message from the same number read: “Hello! Good Afternoon, How are you? Nice to meet you, My name is Amanda. Currently, our company is looking for a lot of part-time YouTube subscribers. Depending on your ability, you can earn from RO 60 to RO 300 per day. Can I share these job details? Our job is very easy and flexible. I will give you two simple market survey questions and one YouTube channel subscription. When you finish, you will receive RO 6 first. It only takes a time 3-5 minutes.



Messages received from unknown numbers generally about job offers like doing simple tasks such as watching a few videos and liking them

Our job can be done in your spare time and not affect your current job. If you want to try, Please reply with (OK). “

According to cybersecurity experts, the scammers could ask to like YouTube Videos for a certain period. Initially, they will ask you to transfer some token amount to them. The process will then start by creating an online account to credit the earnings and initially, the credits will be shown in the account. It may be later noticed that money cannot be transferred from the virtual account to the bank. The process continues with requests to reinvest the virtual amount and the real money in return for an attractive earning from a relatively small task.

Scamsters seem to be working on the greed of a person by forcing him or her to invest a considerable amount. What TRA says When this issue was brought up by the Observer with the Telecom Regulatory Authority (TRA), the top officials said that only awareness campaigns can stop scams via social media till we

have proper unified regulations in place, especially at the regional level.

Replying to a query from Oman Observer during a media event, Omar al Ismaili, the CEO, TRA said, “The social media companies, unfortunately, though popular, do not comply with requirements of the local authorities in the region and till we have a joint regulation in place, awareness campaigns are the only way to protect the end users in the country.”

A word of caution TRA urged users to be cautious not to give personal information to scammers, including ID details, OTP, and bank account numbers. Be vigilant regarding gift card scams which are done when purchasing iTunes Gift & App Store as you have to avoid sharing your info in case someone requests you to do so. Avoid phone scams which usually come from unknown callers or messages who claim you are a winner in a contest or a draw.



OMAN-PAKISTAN JOINT NAVAL DRILL CONTINUES

MUSCAT: The Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) continues conducting the joint naval military drill “Al Thamar Al Tayeb” (or Good Fruit) with naval vessels of Pakistan’s navy. The drill is also participated by the Royal Air Force of Oman (Rafo). The exercise comes within the context of annual training programmes conducted by the RNO, in cooperation with friendly countries to exchange experiences and maintain the RNO fleet’s preparedness. – **ONA**

OWA forum seeks to foster supportive setting for community



This gathering brought together 43 associations from across the country, with the primary objective of harmonising efforts, fostering cooperation, and establishing partnerships

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
@Afrahalbalushia

Omani Women’s Associations convened a forum titled ‘Between Reality and Aspirations’ under the auspices of Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation. This gathering brought together 43 associations from across the Sultanate of Oman, with the primary objective of harmonising efforts, fostering cooperation, and establishing partnerships to elevate programmes amid the technological and artificial revolution.

Initiated by the Cultural Committee of the Omani Women’s Association, the forum aimed to tackle challenges with determination and persistence. Maryam al Zadjali, Chair of the Board of Directors, emphasised the association’s commitment to clear vision and specific goals. An initiative titled ‘Elaf’ aimed to address the impact of

divorce, while ‘Environment, Health and Beauty Winter’ promoted awareness of lifestyle changes. The event also highlighted the association’s dedication to societal well-being.

Innovative programmes included interactive workshops, arts education for children, and economic empowerment courses, showcasing the association’s focus on discovering and nurturing talents. The forum, inspired by Oman Vision 2040, aimed to integrate Omani women into development fields, emphasising the crucial role of community participation in achieving this goal.

The forum programme featured working papers, success stories, and a dialogue session to shed light on associations’ efforts, aptly capturing the essence of “Omani Women’s Associations between Reality and Aspirations.” Recommendations for improvement and empowerment were discussed, aligning with the

overarching vision of advancing Omani women and integrating them into sustainable development.

Omani women’s associations extended their outreach by building cooperation with societal support institutions, providing juvenile training programmes, and actively participating in events like the Muscat International Book Fair. The Knowledge Integration initiative, which involved collecting and redistributing used books, aimed to enhance knowledge dissemination.

The Omani Women’s Associations Forum seeks to establish a balanced partnership with local community institutions, empowering Omani women as pivotal contributors to Vision 2040. Positive relationships between associations, cultural forums, and skills development initiatives underscore the commitment to citizenship and Omani cultural identity, fostering a supportive environment for the entire community.

Over 7,000 use Abu Dhabi service

MUSCAT: The public transport company, Mwasalat said its bus route 202 (Muscat-Buraimi- Abu Dhabi via Al Ain) has been operating with nearly 118 per cent occupancy.

The service, which was started in October 2023, has ferried more than 7,000 passengers, including 5,000 in just November.

Mwasalat had earlier stopped its services to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates due to the pandemic. The service to Abu Dhabi allows check-in baggage of 23 kilogrammes and hand



The service has ferried 5,000 passengers in November

baggage of 7 kilogramme.

Buses leave Mwasalat Bus Station Athaiba at 6.30 am and arrive at Abu Dhabi Bus Station at 3.40 pm. The bus travels via Al Ain and has several stops for breaks along

the way, including at Barka Bridge, Al Buraimi, and Al Ain Central Bus Station.

The return bus leaves Abu Dhabi Bus Station at 10:45 am, arriving at Athaiba at 8:35 pm.

SULTANATE OF OMAN
MINISTRY OF HEALTH
ANNOUNCEMENT

The Directorate General of Khoula Hospital invites specialized companies to participate in the following Tenders:-

Tender Ref.	Description	Last Date for Collection of Tenders Document	Bid Submission Closing Date on/ Before 10:00 am Sunday	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable) Per set
MOH/DGKH/4614/2023	Supply, Installation, Commissioning and End - User Training of Medical Equipments for Endoscopy at Al Nahdha Hospital, Directorate General of Khoula Hospital.	24/Dec/2023	14/Jan/2024	Specialized Companies registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board	- SME : 10.000 - LO : 25.000

- Tenders should be submitted online on <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>.
- Ministry is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accepts or reject any tender.
- For any Clarification, you may contact via Telephone: 24402200, Email id etenderhd@ita.gov.om

Pact inked to enhance digital transformation in Musandam

AHMED AL SHUHI
BUKHA, DEC 19

The Governorate of Musandam signed an agreement with Microsoft to support the governorate’s digital transformation efforts, on Tuesday.

The agreement was signed by Khalfan bin Harib al Jabri, Director-General of Administrative and Financial Affairs at the Office of Musandam Governor and Shaikh Saif bin Hilal al Hosni, Country Manager for Microsoft in the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Bahrain.

Al Jabri said: “The governorate has adopted several digital solutions to improve internal and external user experience, adding that this partnership complements previous

The agreement was signed by Khalfan al Jabri and Shaikh Saif al Hosni

projects and would contribute to boosting productivity and automating day-to-day work. We hope, through our partnership with Microsoft, to benefit from artificial intelligence and the solutions provided by the company to analyse data and use it in making strategic decisions.”

Shaikh Saif bin Hilal al Hosni, Country Manager for Microsoft in the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of

Bahrain, said this cooperation reflects Microsoft’s firm commitment to promoting the principle of digital inclusion in the governorate, enhancing digital transformation and providing the governorate with all the tools and resources to open up unlimited horizons of efficiency and productivity and spreading the spirit of teamwork among its employees in a way that accelerates innovation.



A volcano spews lava and smoke as it erupts in Grindavik, Iceland. – Reuters

ICELAND VOLCANO ERUPTION CALMS AS LAVA FLOW EASES

REYKJAVIK: An Icelandic volcano that erupted and spewed lava into the sky overnight near a power plant was less active on Tuesday, after weeks of intense seismic activity southwest of Reykjavik.

The eruption, only 3 km from the evacuated fishing port of Grindavik on the Reykjanes peninsula, began on Monday at around 10:17 pm after a “swarm” of small tremors, the Icelandic Meteorological Office (IMO) said.

The volcano opened a fissure in the ground about 4 km long, with the southern end just 3 km from Grindavik.

In an update on Tuesday at 1430 GMT, the IMO said the lava flow was “estimated to be about one-quarter of what it was at the beginning of the eruption on December 18, and a third of the original fissure is active.”

“The lava fountains are also lower than at the start of the eruption, reaching about 30

meters at their highest.”

Amid weeks of warnings from scientists, the authorities built reinforcements around the Svartsengi geothermal plant, which is just 2 km from the eruption. It supplies electricity and water to 30,000 people on the peninsula.

Live-streamed footage of the eruption showed glowing orange jets of lava spewing from a gash in the ground, surrounded by billowing clouds of red smoke against the dark winter sky. In December, the sun rises around 11:00 am in the area just south of the Arctic Circle, and sets around 3:00 pm.

For weeks, experts had been anticipating an eruption in the area some 40 km from the capital Reykjavik, prompting the authorities to evacuate thousands of people.

The nearby Blue Lagoon geothermal spa, famed for its turquoise waters, is closed to visitors. — **AFP**

Troops to carry guns on S Korea side of border area: UN Command

SEOUL: Troops on the South Korean side of the Joint Security Area on the border with the North have been authorised to carry guns, the UN Command said on Tuesday, after Pyongyang’s soldiers reportedly started carrying weapons there last month.

Soldiers from both countries face off at the JSA north of Seoul, which is overseen by the US-led United Nations Command.

North and South Korea agreed to disarm their troops on the JSA in line with a 2018 military pact, but the North’s troops have been reported to carry guns since November after the deal began to crumble.

Last month, Seoul partially suspended the five-year-old accord following Pyongyang’s launch of a spy satellite.

North Korea responded by scrapping the pact in full, pledging to deploy stronger armed forces and new weapons along the border.

The decision to allow the UNC troops to carry guns came after North Korean soldiers resumed “an armed security posture”, the UNC said in a statement.

“The UNC has authorised trained and qualified members of the guard forces on the UNC side of the JSA to re-arm to protect both civilian and military personnel,” it added.

“This action is being taken out of an abundance of caution, but UNC has also informed the ROK (South Korean) government and KPA of its position that a disarmed JSA is safer and more peaceful.”

Most of the border between



South Korean soldiers stand guard during a media tour at the Joint Security Area (JSA) on the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) in the border village of Panmunjom in Paju, South Korea. – Reuters file photo



A Hwasong-18 intercontinental ballistic missile is launched during what North Korea says is a drill at an unknown location. – Reuters

The UNC has authorised trained and qualified members of the guard forces on the UNC side of the JSA to re-arm to protect both civilian and military personnel

the two Koreas is heavily fortified. But at the JSA, the frontier is marked only by a low concrete divider and is typically peaceful despite ongoing hostility between the two sides.

It has also been a popular tourist site, with hundreds of visitors touring the South Korean side each day.

But South Korean tours were suspended after a US soldier ran across the border into the North in July. Travis King was released by North Korea in September and later charged with desertion by the US Army.

Meanwhile, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has vowed to accelerate his country’s nuclear build-up and warned Washington against making a “wrong decision” after overseeing the launch of the country’s most powerful ballistic missile, state media said on Tuesday.

Monday’s test launch of the solid-fuel Hwasong-18 came a day after the nuclear-powered submarine USS Missouri made port in Busan and followed a US-South Korea warning that a nuclear attack by Pyongyang would mean “the end of the Kim regime”. — **AFP**

Ukraine says fight in eastern Kharkiv region ‘complicated’

KYIV: Ukraine said on Tuesday its military was outgunned in the eastern Kharkiv region, where Russian forces have been pushing for months to capture the regional hub of Kupiansk.

Russian troops initially captured large swathes of the eastern Kharkiv region early in the attack but Kyiv’s forces pushed them back in a lightning offensive around one year ago.

“The situation is complicated. We have to fight in conditions of superiority of the enemy both in weapons and in the number of personnel,” said Oleksandr

Syrsky, the head of Ukraine’s ground forces.

But Syrsky said Ukrainian forces were adapting to the situation on the front and ultimately holding the line.

The Russian defence ministry said on Tuesday it had repelled eight Ukrainian attacks around Kupiansk with artillery support.

He said that Russian forces comprising units recruited from prisons were also pushing further south around the war-battered city of Bakhmut, taken by Moscow in the summer.

The Institute for the Study



People watch as smoke billows from an apartment building damaged by recent shelling in the course of Russia-Ukraine conflict in Donetsk. – Reuters

of War, a US-based military observation group, said in a recent explanatory note that Ukrainian forces were having to ration ammunition due to shortages.

“A combination of artillery ammunition shortages and delays in the provision of Western security assistance is likely causing Ukrainian forces to husband materiel and may delay future Ukrainian counteroffensive operations,” it said. Meanwhile, Russia said on Tuesday that Ukrainian forces had attempted to attack Moscow

with a drone, but said defences destroyed the unmanned aerial vehicle with debris falling outside the centre of the capital.

Moscow mayor Sergei Sobyenin initially announced the drone attack over the Russian capital without claiming whether Kyiv was responsible or saying where the drone had been launched from.

The defence ministry later blamed Kyiv and said air defence systems had downed the drone it said was targeting “facilities” in Moscow, with elaborating. — **AFP**

COPENHAGEN

Denmark, US reach defence agreement

Denmark has reached a defence agreement with the United States that will allow US soldiers and military equipment to be based on Danish soil, the country’s Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said on Tuesday.

The 10-year agreement was announced after the United States signed similar agreements with Finland and Sweden this month. “This means that American soldiers and equipment can be permanently stationed on Danish soil,”



Frederiksen told reporters at a press conference. The agreement will be signed later this week and will enter into force when necessary legislation has been adopted. — **Reuters**

BELGRADE

Opposition calls for protest over election results

The main opposition camp in Serbia called for fresh demonstrations on Tuesday to protest the country’s election results that the group has accused of being tainted by fraud.

The announcement comes after thousands rallied in front of Serbia’s election commission following weekend’s polls that saw President Aleksandar Vucic claim his party had secured a commanding victory.

“We invite all opposition



parties and movements, citizens and civil society to join us,” said Miroslav Aleksic, a leader from the Serbia Against Violence (SPN) movement. — **AFP**

KARLSRUHE

Court orders partial repeat of 2021 election

Germany’s constitutional court on Tuesday ordered a partial repeat of the 2021 federal election in Berlin in a ruling that could slightly impact the composition of parliament.

The court ordered new elections in 455 of Berlin’s 2256 electoral districts due to irregularities.

Parliament had already ordered a repeat in 431 districts but the opposition conservatives wanted a much broader repeat, prompting them to lodge a



complaint at the court.

The constitutional court’s decision came around a month after another major ruling that overturned the government’s financial plans. — **Reuters**



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Gaza war is world’s ‘moral failure’, says Red Cross chief

GENEVA: The head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on Tuesday deplored the conflict in Gaza as a “moral failure” of the international community and urged Israel and Palestinians to reach a new deal to halt the fighting.

“I have been speaking of moral failure because every day this continues is a day more where the international community hasn’t proven capable of ending such high levels of suffering and this will have an impact on generations not only in Gaza,” ICRC president Mirjana Spoljaric told journalists in Geneva following trips to the Gaza Strip and Israel.

“There’s nothing without an agreement by the two sides, so we urge them to keep negotiating...” she said, referring to the release of Israeli captives taken to Gaza by gunmen during their rampage in southern Israel on October 7.

“The releases in themselves are highly complex, highly sensitive missions.”

A truce mediated by Qatar and Egypt held for a week at the end of November and brought about the release of 110 captives in Gaza in exchange for 240 Palestinian women and teenagers from Israeli jails.

Heavy fighting resumed on December 1 and some

of the remaining captives have been declared dead in absentia by Israeli authorities.

Although the ICRC facilitated the release of hostages during the truce, the group has been criticised by some Israelis for not doing more to have the captives freed. Some social media users have equated the ICRC to a taxi service to drive hostages out of Gaza.

“You don’t just go there and take the captives and bring them out,” Spoljaric said, saying that any analogy with an Uber or taxi service was “unacceptable and outrageous.”

“Our colleagues risked their lives and their safety and security during these operations and the hostages are highly exposed while these things are ongoing,” she added.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared to confirm last week that new negotiations were under way to recover captives still held in the enclave, after a source said Israel’s intelligence chief met the prime minister of Qatar.

Spoljaric said the ICRC would stand ready to assist again once the parties arrive at an agreement.

“We continue to talk to all sides to then be ready to operationalise the agreement that they reach.”

— Reuters

A smoke plume rises during Israeli bombardment at a position along the border with the northern Gaza Strip. — AFP



Gaza hospital out of action after Israeli army assault



Excavators dig through the rubble of a building destroyed by Israeli bombardment in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. — AFP

GAZA: One of the last remaining hospitals in the northern Gaza Strip stopped operating on Tuesday after being stormed by the Israeli army, its director said.

Fadel Naim said that Israeli troops had attacked the Al Ahli hospital and arrested doctors, medical staff and patients, destroying part of the building’s grounds.

Israel’s attack has “put the hospital out of action,” he said. “We can’t receive any patients or injured.”

At least four people who were wounded by Israeli fire on Monday died on Tuesday after being injured in the Al Ahli assault, he said.

“According to our information, there are dozens of wounded in the surrounding streets,” he said.

Al Ahli, also known as the Baptist or Ahli Arab hospital, was already heavily damaged by an explosion in its car park on October 17, resulting in at least dozens of deaths.

Palestinian groups accuse Israel, which denies



Women mourn the loss of loved ones who were killed overnight during Israeli bombardment, at a hospital in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. — AFP

responsibility and blames a misfired rocket by fighting groups for that blast.

Hospitals, protected under international humanitarian law, have repeatedly been hit by Israeli strikes in the Gaza Strip since the start of the war between Israel and Palestinians on October 7.

Israeli troops have previously raided other medical facilities in Gaza, including Al Shifa, the territory’s largest hospital,

which is now functioning at minimal capacity with a very small team.

On Sunday, the World Health Organization said the Al Ahli hospital was receiving “critical patients” from Al Shifa for surgery.

Al Shifa emergency department, devastated by Israeli bombardments, is “a blood bath” and “in need of resuscitation”, the WHO said.

Ashraf al Qudra, spokesman

for the health ministry in the Palestinian territory, said on Tuesday another hospital in northern Gaza, Al Awda in the Jabalia area, had been turned “into a barracks” by the Israeli army.

He said the army was holding 240 people in the hospital, “including 80 medical staff and 40 patients,” and had arrested its director, doctor Ahmad Mhanna.

Israel is facing mounting international pressure over the rising civilian death toll and destruction of hospitals in Gaza.

The Israeli offensive has killed at least 19,453 people in Gaza, also mostly civilians, according to the territory’s health ministry.

The death toll out of Gaza has earned Israel international rebuke including from close allies. US President Joe Biden has warned Israel was at risk of losing international support due to its “indiscriminate” bombing of the Palestinian territory.

“I want them to be focused on how to save civilian lives,” Biden said. — AFP

UNICEF spokesperson ‘furious’ over situation in the strip

GENEVA: Gaza is “the most dangerous place in the world” for a child, the UN children’s agency spokesperson said on Tuesday, expressing his rage at the situation there after returning from the Palestinian territory.

“I’m furious that those with power shrug at the humanitarian nightmares unleashed on a million children,” UNICEF spokesperson James Elder told a press briefing after spending nearly two weeks in Gaza.

He spoke of children having undergone amputations and who were then “killed in those hospitals” as the Israeli army bombardment of the Gaza Strip continues after the unprecedented October 7 attack.

“I’m furious that there are more children hiding as we

I’m furious that there are more children hiding as we speak who will no doubt be hit and have amputations in the coming days

JAMES ELDER
UNICEF spokesperson

speak who will no doubt be hit and have amputations in the coming days,” he said.

He said the Nasser hospital in southern Gaza’s main city Khan Younis -- the largest facility



Firewood is placed at the entrance of a tent where children are sitting, at a camp housing Palestinians displaced by the conflict in Rafah. — AFP

still functioning -- “was shelled twice” in the last 48 hours.

This hospital “not only shelters large numbers of children who had already been badly injured in attacks on their homes, but hundreds of women and children seeking safety,” he said.

Gaza’s health ministry said Israel’s retaliatory assault has killed at least 19,667 people, mostly women and children, while devastating large swathes of the coastal territory.

“I’m furious that Christmas is likely going to bring increased savagery and attacks as the world is distracted with its own love and goodwill,” Elder said, deploring the deaths of thousands of children in Gaza who are “becoming statistics”.

“I’m furious that hypocrisy is crushing empathy,” he said of the situation, adding, “I’m furious at myself for not being able to do more.”

International alarm has mounted over the plight of 2.4 million Gazans forced to endure daily bombardment, food and water shortages and mass displacement.

The EU’s top diplomat Josep Borrell accused Israel on Monday of displaying an “appalling lack of distinction” in its campaign in Gaza, highlighting the deaths of Israeli hostages, worshippers and other Palestinian civilians.

Human Rights Watch said on Monday Israel was “using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare”. — AFP

Radio sets make a comeback in Gaza!

MAI YAGHI

Before war broke out in Gaza, Mahmud al Daoudi could never have imagined the radio sets gathering dust in his shop would be in such high demand, offering his customers a precious link with the outside world. Power cuts have long been a part of everyday life, but the besieged territory's 2.4 million people are now enduring long blackouts after Israel cut off electricity and fuel supplies.

Its relentless assault has killed more than 19,450 Gazans, mostly women and children, according to the territory's health ministry. Israel began its devastating air and ground offensive following the October 7 attacks, which killed around 1,140 people in southern Israel, according to a tally based on Israeli figures.

It is now impossible to plug in computers or television sets, recharge phones or access the Internet without generators or solar panels, a luxury few Gazans can afford.

But to keep up with the news, there's always the battery-powered radio.

"We had a full stock but we've been completely out of them since the first week" of the war, Daoudi said. With the phone and Internet cuts, "radio is the only way to find out what's going on," he said.

The long battery life is another plus, he said from his store in Rafah, at the southern end of the territory. Before the war, a radio cost around 25 shekels (\$7) — now, they go for around 60 shekels (\$16).

"We've even resold the broken radios people returned to us," the 33-year-old said.

When the radio sets disappeared from the shelves, customers asked for old telephones with built-in radios and torches, a welcome help when night falls.

"Now we're running out of phones," Daoudi said.

It's impossible to order new stock, with only limited humanitarian aid trickling into the territory.

"People want to follow the news, hear where the shelling is taking place and find out about the fate of their families," said Hussein Abu Hashem, who has run out of radios at his shop too.

According to the UN, 1.9 million Palestinians have been displaced since the start of the war, around 85 per cent of the population. Many of them are now living in makeshift camps in the south of

TO KEEP UP WITH THE NEWS, THERE'S ALWAYS THE BATTERY-POWERED RADIO

the territory where they lack basic supplies. "I don't know what's happening around us, where the strikes are, which houses are targeted, who's alive, who the martyrs are," Umm Ibrahim said in the southern city of Khan Yunis.

"We want to receive news from anywhere in Gaza," she said.

"When my battery runs out, I walk around the camp and listen out for other people's radios."

Stations such as BBC Arabic and Al Jazeera have launched special channels to help keep displaced people up to date with the news.

Some Gazans, like 75-year-old Hebrew-speaker Mohammed Hassouna, manage to pick up the news from Israeli radio stations. He said it allows him to keep up with the latest "from the Israeli side".

"I keep my children and neighbours informed," he said. Outside his tent, Salah Zorob, 37, spends his time flicking through radio stations on his mobile phone.

"The world is moving forward with modern technology but here in Gaza we're moving backwards," he said. "They're going to take us back to the Stone Age." — AFP

Rohingyas in Indonesia face uncertain future

ALFATH ASMUNDA AND ZIKRI MAULANA

On a remote island in northwestern Indonesia, just miles from the white sand beaches where more than a thousand Rohingya refugees have arrived since mid-November, throngs of residents marched outside a temporary shelter housing the newcomers. "Shoo them away!" a protest leader chanted, met by cheers.

As sailing conditions have improved in recent months, more than half a dozen flimsy wooden boats have made the dangerous sea crossing from Bangladesh, where about a million Rohingyas have settled after fleeing persecution in Myanmar. Their arrival marks the biggest influx to Indonesia since 2015, according to the UN refugee agency.

But after weeks at sea, the refugees face new obstacles on land: locals trying to turn their boats around, protesters attempting to raze their tents, and an Indonesian government that has left their future an open question.

Jakarta has agreed to assist the new arrivals temporarily, sheltering and feeding them over the objections of some local authorities, but it has called on neighbouring countries to offer the Rohingyas a permanent home.

As a result the refugees have been left in limbo, shuffled from place to place as authorities and aid groups struggle to find adequate shelter or left to live in tents by the sea.

"I think our future will be better in Indonesia if the government of Indonesia and the people of Indonesia allow us to stay," Manzur Alam, a 24-year-old who arrived last month, said at a shelter in Lhokseumawe city in Aceh province. "If they do not allow us to stay, we do not know where to go."

The arrival of Rohingyas by sea has become an annual event in Aceh.

As conditions in Bangladesh's refugee camps have deteriorated, amid rising crime and diminishing educational prospects, some refugees have opted to set sail for Indonesia or Malaysia.

Many Acehnese, who themselves have memories of decades of bloody conflict, are sympathetic to the plight of their fellow Muslims. Some wish to welcome the refugees and offer them clothes, supplies and medicine upon their arrival. But others say their patience has been tested, claiming the Rohingyas consume scarce resources and occasionally come into conflict with locals.

At least one boat has been turned away, with exhausted refugees swimming ashore to plead their case. They were forced to sail elsewhere in Aceh to find a place to land. — AFP

Chileans reject conservative draft constitution as too extreme

NATALIA A RAMOS MIRANDA AND ALEXANDER VILLEGAS

Chile's two failed attempts at rewriting a constitution have signalled a desire for moderation among voters, who once again rejected a proposal drafted by right-wing legislators on Sunday considered too extreme, according to analysts and voters.

"Neither of the two political sides showed the unity needed to move the country forward," said Rodrigo Oyarzun, a 41-year-old social worker after voting in Sunday's referendum in the coastal city of Valparaiso.

"That's how we get nowhere." A new constitution was a key government promise that helped end widespread fiery protests against inequality in 2019, but the process has since stalled. The first attempt was voted down in a September 2022 referendum, and a second on Sunday as voter apathy towards a rewrite grows.

Polls show Chileans are more concerned about security and a struggling economy rather than drafting a new constitution. Sunday's vote was also seen as a bellwether for the country's right-wing ahead of the 2025 election, but now texts from both political aisles have been widely rejected, leaving the outcome of the race uncertain.

The first proposed text was drafted by leftist legislators and focused on social, gender, Indigenous and environmental rights while the second reinforced the country's free-market policies and emphasised property and religious rights.

The second rewrite was dominated by the right-wing Republican party, led by Jose Antonio Kast, who lost against leftist President Gabriel Boric during the last election.

"Most Chileans prefer a modernised charter that tilts sharply neither to the ideological left nor the right, but which actually addresses the public-policy issues that are not getting resolved," said Arturo Porzecanski, a fellow with



A woman sells newspapers whose front page covers the story of the referendum on a new Chilean constitution, in Santiago, Chile, on Sunday. — Reuters

the Woodrow Wilson International Center, a Washington-based think tank, adding that there's "generalised exhaustion" with the process.

President Boric said his government would now attempt to push through tax and pension reform through the legislature and hoped to do so with consensus.

POLLS SHOW CHILEANS ARE MORE CONCERNED ABOUT SECURITY AND A STRUGGLING ECONOMY RATHER THAN DRAFTING A NEW CONSTITUTION

Chile's move towards moderation comes in stark contrast to increased polarisation seen in many of its neighbours, including Argentina, which last month voted in radical right-wing outsider Javier Milei as president. He has promised to upend the country's economic system after years of decline.

Claudia Heiss, a researcher and political scientist at the University of Chile, said Chile's result could stop the country's right-wing from pulling further right.

"(The Republican right) is damaged, without a doubt," said Heiss, adding that its less clear who benefits, since distrust for the government is high and centrist parties haven't fared well either.

"Centre parties should be booming but they're not, the centre is weaker than ever," Heiss said, adding that the vote also reflects a rejection of the political class in general.

"And that's worrying because it's not just a moderate vote, but a vote against everything."

While Boric said his government wouldn't pursue a third rewrite, both Heiss and Porzecanski say the constitutional debate is not over. The current constitution, enacted during the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship has gone through several reforms, but it remains a key point of tension for many voters. Law student Nelson Palma said he hoped another attempt would "emerge" through mass mobilisation, "that will really satisfy the people's needs." — Reuters

Building future based on history

It was yet another historic day in the relations between India and Oman as His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik undertook a state visit to India last week. This is also the first visit by an Omani ruler in 26 years.

His Majesty's visit comes four months after India hosted the G20 summit, to which the Indian leadership invited the Sultanate of Oman, which is a non-G20 country, to be a special guest at the event.

Oman and India share a long-standing history of friendship and cooperation, built on the foundation of mutual trust and respect and strong people-to-people ties.

The relations between Oman and India are embedded with millennia-old commercial, cultural, religious, and economic linkages owing to geographical proximity and personal ties.

While it is common knowledge that there is a historical as well as continuing presence of Indians in Oman, the Khaliji (Gulf) presence in India is less well-documented but not less impactful.

"A large number of people of Indian origin consider Oman their second home. These people are living examples of our close ties and our friendship," Prime Minister Narendra Modi remarked during his talks with the Omani delegation which accompanied His Majesty the Sultan.

Since the time Omanis started navigation activities and reached Indian seaports, there has been a protracted history of interactions between the two countries, which has contributed to a lasting imprint on both cultures.

Thanks to its strategic location in the Arabian Peninsula, Oman was a trading and commercial hub even before the First Century CE, and it is this history as a citadel of trade, especially by sea, that has shaped its culture.

The prime minister stressed that India and Oman have had an unbreakable bond of deep friendship for centuries.

"Our mutual closeness is not limited to geography but is also reflected in our trade spanning thousands of years, our culture, and our common priorities. On the strength of this glorious history, we are building a bright future ahead", he added in his address.

During His Majesty's visit, both



Samuel Kutty
@samkuttyp

The writer is a senior journalist, author and columnist

THE SHARED INTEREST BETWEEN INDIA AND OMAN UNDERLINES THE IMPORTANCE OF JOINT EFFORTS IN SPACE EXPLORATION, WITH A SPECIFIC FOCUS ON SATELLITE TECHNOLOGY, AND THE PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS THAT CAN BENEFIT BOTH COUNTRIES

countries adopted a Joint Vision document titled 'A Partnership for the Future' encompassing a shared vision of Oman and India while acknowledging the remarkable synergy between Oman Vision 2040 and India's development objectives under 'Amrit Kaal'.

The document focuses on building partnerships in a wide range of areas, including maritime cooperation and connectivity, digital payments, space, green energy, tourism, agriculture, food security, and cricket. The cooperation in clean energy will also focus on green hydrogen.

The India-Oman Joint Vision was an outcome of the Indian prime minister's visit to Oman in 2018.

According to a joint statement issued on the occasion, during their discussions, "the leaders expressed appreciation for recent bilateral interactions, recognising the vast potential for collaboration."

The shared interest between India and Oman underlines the importance of joint efforts in space exploration, with a specific focus on capacity building, satellite technology, and the practical applications that can benefit both nations.

This cooperative approach signifies a significant step towards mutual growth and advancement in space capabilities for India and Oman, fostering a stronger bond in the exploration and utilisation of outer space.

Of course, the most notable initiative in this regard is the training provided by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to scientists from multiple countries, including Oman.

As part of India's Space Diplomacy, initiated in 2019, this programme has empowered professionals from 45 countries, fostering skills in building nanosatellites.

Oman, alongside other nations like Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Panama, Egypt, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Morocco, Myanmar, and Portugal, has actively participated in enhancing its space capabilities.

Partnering with India will allow Oman to leverage India's experience and benefit from established capabilities in satellite development, launch services, and space applications. It will also help Oman to potentially reduce costs and accelerate its progress in space exploration.

COLOURING THE SKY



Local residents watch smoke billow as the lava colour the night sky orange from an volcanic eruption on the Reykjanes peninsula 3 km north of Grindavik, Iceland, on Tuesday. – AFP

Can generative AI help bridge learning gaps in Indian schools?

In a classroom in the southern Indian city of Bengaluru, half a dozen young students sit at a desk, listening intently to a small black device as a woman's voice calls out simple sentences in English, that they then repeat carefully.

The device, an Amazon Echo Dot speaker, uses artificial intelligence-enabled voice recognition technology to help the students improve their reading, listening and speaking in English - for some their second language, for others their third. In the municipal-funded school, the English language tool has helped dozens of first-generation learners gain in confidence and ability, said teacher Linges K, who goes by his first name.

"It is a new way of learning - the technology is novel for the kids, and they also find it entertaining," said Linges, who has taught English in the school for two years, and has used the AI-enabled system, Tara, for the past year in his classes. "Every child gets a chance to interact with the device.



Rina Chandran is Tech Correspondent for the Thomson Reuters Foundation

AI-ENABLED VOICE RECOGNITION TECHNOLOGY IS HELPING STUDENTS IMPROVE THEIR READING, LISTENING AND SPEAKING IN ENGLISH

The technology is not a substitute for lesson, but it is a good complement," he said.

As advances in AI gather pace and the technology is increasingly used in areas from marketing, to law and surveillance, there is a big push by the Indian government and by tech firms to more firmly entrench it in education. From helping teach English, to assisting teachers with lesson plans, to identifying pupils at risk of dropping out, AI tools are helping bridge learning gaps that widened in schools during the Covid-19 pandemic, tech and education experts said.

"The majority of schools in India don't have the resources for high-tech solutions, and parents cannot afford additional tutoring support," said Gowri Mahesh, a co-founder at Learning Matters, the edtech firm in Bengaluru that built Tara, which is used in about 200 schools in three Indian states.

"English language ability is one such gap. The solution needed to be light on hardware, accessible, affordable, non-judgmental and suitable for a range of requirements," she said.

India's landmark Right to Education Act, 2009 made education a fundamental right of every child aged six to 14, yet spending on education as a share

of total GDP (gross domestic product) is less than 3 per cent - among the lowest of developing nations.

There were some 267 million children enrolled in about 1.5 million schools nationwide last year, according to official data. Less than half the schools had a computer and just over a third had internet access.

So startups, non-profits and big tech firms are customising AI tools for specific environments and learning needs.

Faced with a large number of students dropping out, the southern state of Andhra Pradesh used a Microsoft AI system that compiled data on gender, academic performance and socio-economic metrics to predict potential dropouts, so they and their parents could be counselled.

While Sikshana Foundation, a nonprofit that aims to improve India's state school system, focuses on easing the load of teachers who often handle several subjects and grades.

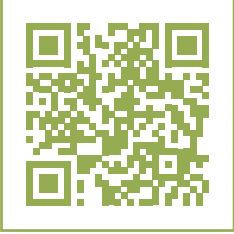
Last month, it introduced an AI-enabled bot named Shiksha - meaning education in Hindi - developed by Microsoft Research, which helps teachers create lesson plans, student activities and assessments. It also responds to queries.



The technology is not a substitute for lesson.

sport

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Sohar club left second HM Cup

SOHAR STUN AHLI SIDAB TO CLINCH SECOND HM CUP

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, DEC 19

Dark horses Sohar upset 12-time winners Ahli Sidab in penalties 4-2 to claim the 53rd His Majesty's Cup hockey crown in a pulsating final at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex on Tuesday night.

Ahmed al Noufali put Sohar in the lead in the 47th minute from a penalty corner which was cancelled out by a last-gasp strike from a rebound by Ahli Sidab captain Rashad al Fazari.

In the penalty shoot-out, Ahli Sidab brothers Khalid al Shuabi and Ammar al Shuabi both missed their attempts.

Sohar were determined to clinch their second HM Cup as they scored from all their four attempts with Argentine player Martin and Indian player Sanjay among scorers.

Chief guest Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat, gave away the trophies in presence of Dr Marwan bin Juma al Juma, Chairman of Oman Hockey Association, and other dignitaries.

Ahli Sidab started off the match with a nice build-up which earned them the first penalty corner of the final. Ahli Sidab were not sharp in taking the penalty corner that was easily defended by the agile Sohar defence.

In the sixth minute, Sohar organised a good move and got their first penalty corner. Ahli Sidab goalkeeper Ibrahim al Farsi was on his task to evade a good shot from the Sohar player.

In the 10th minute, Ahli Sidab captain Rashad al Fazari gave a good long pass to his team-mate who couldn't handle it the first time with only the goalkeeper to beat.

In the 13th minute, Sohar defence stood strong to thwart a well-



from final match between Sohar and Ahli Sidab club



organised attack by Ahli Sidab. In the same minute, Ahli Sidab got their second penalty corner but misfired the shot.

In the opening minute of the second quarter, Sohar players had a close call with Ahli Sidab goalkeeper Ibrahim al Farsi but couldn't find the target. The counter-attack by Ahli Sidab was padded away by an agile Sohar goalkeeper Fahad al Noufali.

In the next minute, Sohar pushed ahead through their Argentine player Martin but Ahli Sidab goalkeeper Ibrahim al Farsi stood strong under the bar. Further attacks in the quarter by both teams lacked precision as they went 0-0 into the break.

STUNNING EQUALISER

In the second half, Sohar started with some dangerous moves that threatened the Ahli Sidab goalmouth. They earned a penalty corner and got another after the shot hit an Ahli Sidab player's leg.

Ahmed al Noufali struck the crucial goal for Sohar in the 47th minute from their third penalty corner of the match.

In the 48th minute, Ahli Sidab got back-to-back penalty corners but could not utilise both as shots missed the target.

Another penalty corner in the 51st minute just went beyond Rashad al Fazari's reach to keep the Sohar slate clean.

When it seemed that Sohar would go away with the 1-0 win, Rashad came running in to strike the equaliser after a frantic last-minute attempt by Ahli Sidab.

FIH referees Khamis al Balushi and Shaik Javed from India officiated the final.

In the third place play-off on Monday, defending champions Al Nasr edged a fighting Salalah 3-2 in a Dhofar Governorate derby.



Mitchell Starc and Pat Cummins.

Australian stars Starc, Cummins set salary records at IPL auction

DUBAI: Australian fast bowlers Mitchell Starc and Pat Cummins became the most expensive players in Indian Premier League history on Tuesday, with franchises dishing out millions of dollars for their services at the glitzy Twenty20 tournament.

Starc, who last played in the IPL eight years ago, made a smashing comeback when he was snapped up by Kolkata Knight Riders for 247.5 million rupees (\$2.98 million), setting an all-time IPL auction record.

"We won, Mr Starc!" the franchise posted on X, formerly Twitter.

Starc, 33, broke the record set by Cummins earlier in the day when Sunrisers Hyderabad paid 205 million rupees (\$2.47 million) for the World Cup-winning skipper.

Before Tuesday, England all-rounder Sam Curran was the most expensive player after being bought for \$2.23 million last year by Punjab Kings.

"Pumped to be joining SRH for the upcoming IPL season," Cummins, who skipped this year's IPL because of a packed calendar, said in a video posted by the franchise on social media.

"I have played in Hyderabad a few times and always loved it so can't wait to get started."

Hyderabad beat Royal Challengers Bangalore in a fervent bidding session

for Cummins, to claps and cheers from other franchises participating in the auction, held this year in Dubai.

The 30-year-old made a previous auction record of \$2.17 million when he signed with the Kolkata Knight Riders in 2019.

Both Starc and Cummins had entered this auction with a base price of \$240,000, the top tier at which players can start the bidding for their services.

New Zealand all-rounder Daryl Mitchell was the third-top player at the auction, grabbed by Chennai Super Kings for \$1.6 million. Mitchell, 32, was also one of the breakout stars at the World Cup, scoring two centuries against India — in the group stage and in the semifinal.

BUMPER SALARIES

Chennai coach Stephen Fleming said Mitchell's performances over the last 18-24 months had "warranted this type of a price".

"He is an unfashionable player, often goes under the radar. With his ability to play spin he is competitive and he is also a handy bowler."

West Indies star Rovman Powell went to Rajasthan Royals for \$890,000 and Travis Head of Australia will play alongside Cummins for Hyderabad after being sold for \$818,000. South African paceman Gerald Coetzee was sold to Mumbai Indians for \$602,000. — AFP

Old heads lead Fluminense into Club World Cup final

JEDDAH: Fluminense coach Fernando Diniz credited his side's experience for riding out an Al Ahly storm to reach the final of the Club World Cup with a 2-0 win on Monday.

Two goals in the final 20 minutes in Jeddah by Jhon Arias, from the penalty spot, and then John Kennedy carried the Brazilians into Friday's final against European Champions League winners Manchester City or Japanese side Urawa Reds.

Al Ahly were left to rue a number of missed chances as the African champions failed to find a way past 43-year-old Fluminense goalkeeper Fabio.

But he was not the only veteran to shine for the Copa Libertadores champions.

At the age of 40, Felipe Melo became the oldest outfield player in Club World Cup history, while ex-Real Madrid captain Marcelo, 35, won the decisive penalty.

Former Brazil international Ganso, 34, and striker German Cano, 35, also played their part.

"Did the age of our players help? I think it absolutely did," said Diniz, who has combined his roles as Fluminense boss with a spell as interim Brazil manager. "Marcelo was decisive, especially for the penalty."

Marcelo also believes it is a mix of youth and experience that has led Fluminense to an all-time high this year as they won the Copa Libertadores for the first time. "They call us the 40-somethings, but we aim to help the younger players with this experience," said the left-back.

"I think it is this mix of young players and experience that has helped Fluminense a lot."

The last 10 Club World Cups have been won by European sides. But if the gulf is growing between Europe's elite and the rest of the world at club level, the gap between South America's best and the rest of the world has narrowed significantly.

Al Ahly had dumped out a



Fluminense's Brazilian defender Marlon (top) fights for the ball with Al Ahly's Tunisian defender Ali Maaloul during the FIFA Club World Cup semifinal in Jeddah. — AFP

star-studded Al Ittihad featuring Karim Benzema, N'Golo Kante and Fabinho on their home patch in the previous round.

And roared on by thousands

of travelling fans from just across the Red Sea, they were the more energetic and enterprising side throughout. "We should have conceded goals, they played

really well and our goalkeeper saved us several times," added Diniz. "But we have a very strong characteristic: we never give up." — AFP

Third batch tickets of Asian Cup Qatar 2023 to go on sale today

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 19

The Local Organising Committee representatives of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 announced in Muscat that the third batch of tickets will go for sale to public on Wednesday. This was informed in Muscat on Monday night in presence of Hassan Rabia al Kuwari, Director of Marketing and Communications for the Local Organising Committee of the 2023 AFC Asian Cup, Shaikh Hamad bin Abdulaziz al Thani, Media Director of the Organising Committee, Mohammed al Yahmadi, Executive Director of OFA and Salim al Habsi, Vice-Chairman of Sports Media Committee in Oman Journalists Association and moderator of the media session.

Hassan al Kuwari thanked the Omani fans for their enthusiasm to purchase the tickets of Oman matches in AFC Asian Cup



The Local Organising Committee representatives of the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 during a press meeting in Muscat.

Qatar 2023. "A third batch of tickets for the AFC Asian Cup Qatar 2023 will be available to the public as of Wednesday at 5 pm (Oman time). I would like to thank Oman's fans for their continuous support to their national team. This confirms Oman fans full support to their national team even in significant

aboard events," he added.

Shaikh Hamad al Thani announced Qatar's full readiness to host the AFC Asian Cup for a record third time. "As many as 2,000 media personnel will attend to cover this major event from different parts of Asian continent. The media centre which is located in Meshrib,



The iconic Lusail Stadium will host both the opening and final matches.

Doha city will be opened to all the media representatives from beginning of January," he added.

The media director of the organising committee confirmed to Omani media representatives that 'Hayya' card is not mandatory for the GCC nationalities and it is not linked to the match tickets.

Qatar is set to host the AFC Asian Cup from January 12 to February 10, 2024 and the Asian prestigious event will see Asia's top 24 teams which will compete for glory in the Fifa World Cup stadiums. A total of 51 matches are set to be played across nine stadiums during the tournament period. The iconic

Lusail Stadium will host both the opening and final matches.

As many as 24 teams will participate in this 18th edition of the continental tournament. The top two teams from each group besides the four best third-placed teams will secure tickets to the Round of 16. Qatar is the first country to host the tournament three times in its history as they had hosted previously in 1988 and 2011 editions.

Besides the huge fans attendance to this major football event, it was announced that 6,000 volunteers between the ages of 18 to 72 from 107 nationalities have been recruited to provide support for a wide range of tasks, covering 20 functional areas of the tournament. Many of them have experience gained through their participation in previous major sporting events hosted by Qatar, while five per cent of those recruited will be volunteering for the first time.



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• Recently, the User Committee of the CAQ (China Association for Quality) announced the results of the "2023 CAQS", with the Tiggo 8 topping the sub-segment rankings. • Recently, Kantar and Google jointly released the 2023 Chinese Global Brand Builders Top 50. Chery is ranked as the best Chinese global brand builder in cars and 14th in the overall list and its brand power has achieved strong growth. • Chery Automobile took the first spot among all Chinese automobile brands in J.D. Power 2023 China Initial Quality Study (IQDS). For more details, please visit <https://china.jdpower.com/press-release-2023-iqds>



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Oman’s green hydrogen production key to carbon neutrality plan

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 19

The Sultanate of Oman is embarking on a transformative journey towards carbon neutrality and renewable energy sources. Mohsin bin Hamad al Hadhrami (pictured), Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, unveiled in a recent interview with CNN the country’s strategy for energy transition and carbon neutrality, highlighting its ambition to establish a leading global position in exporting green hydrogen.

As the world moves towards a more sustainable future, Oman aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050.

Central to this goal is the utilisation of green hydrogen, which will play a pivotal role in diversifying the country’s energy sources.

Al Hadhrami highlighted Oman’s aspiration to export green hydrogen to European and Asian markets while also promoting its use in domestic industries.

Oman is implementing various other methods to reduce emissions, such as improving energy efficiency, rationalising consumption, and accelerating the transition to renewable energy in electricity production.

Al Hadhrami emphasised that by 2030, Oman aims to generate 30 per cent of its electricity from renewable sources and plans to leverage green hydrogen for local industries while exporting it and its derivatives.

In terms of attracting investments and financing



A technician is seen on top of a wind turbine in Oman, in this illustration photo.



OMAN IS IMPLEMENTING VARIOUS OTHER METHODS TO REDUCE EMISSIONS, SUCH AS IMPROVING ENERGY EFFICIENCY, RATIONALISING CONSUMPTION, AND ACCELERATING THE TRANSITION TO RENEWABLE ENERGY IN ELECTRICITY PRODUCTION.

environmentally friendly projects, Oman has established a clear regulatory framework to lure investors and encourage funding for renewable energy projects. Both local and international banks have exhibited a growing interest in supporting clean energy ventures in Oman, reflecting a positive trend towards sustainable financing.

However, Al Hadhrami also outlined the challenges Oman faces on its path to carbon neutrality. Achieving a balance between supply and demand, policy regulation and improving the infrastructure to support renewable energy growth are among the key hurdles.

He stressed the importance of readiness before initiating projects, emphasising that production chains, expertise, equipment, tools and technologies need to be in place, particularly considering the expected \$38 billion investment in these projects. Oman’s commitment to sustainability extends beyond energy production.

The country is actively working towards fostering a green economy by embracing renewable energy initiatives. By embracing green hydrogen and renewable energy, Oman intends to position itself as a regional leader and contribute significantly to global efforts in combating climate change.



Reggy Vermeulen, CEO - Port of Duqm, speaking at the GHSO Forum last week.

Pumped hydro potential buoys Duqm’s green hydrogen appeal

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 19

Rolling headlands along parts of the Duqm coastline afford opportunities for investment in pumped hydro storage — a cost-effective solution to intermittency issues associated with large-scale renewable energy resources planned for development in the wider Al Wusta Governorate.

According to a key official, the potential for pumped hydro storage will complement Duqm’s robust appeal as a hub for green hydrogen investment in the Sultanate of Oman.

Billed as a sustainable and cost-competitive energy storage solution, pumped hydro storage typically involves two interconnected reservoirs with one built at a higher elevation than the other. In times of surplus renewable energy supply, water from the lower reservoir is pumped to the higher one.

In times of energy demand, such as during night-time, the stored water is released back into the lower reservoir, generating hydroelectricity in the process.

Opportunities for pumped hydro storage abound along Duqm’s lengthy coastline, punctuated by 80-metre high cliffs in places that are suitable for such investment, says Reggy Vermeulen, CEO – Port of Duqm.

Speaking at the Green Hydrogen Summit Oman (GHSO) 2023 forum, which took place in Muscat, Vermeulen said Duqm, with its natural and environmental characteristics, was advantageous for green hydrogen investment.

“Very few locations in the world have the combination of (ample land), wind, sun and cliffs as Duqm,” said the CEO. “What people do not always know, when it comes to Duqm, is that not only do we have the sun, the wind and the space, but we actually have possibilities for alternative ways of storing energy.”

TURN TO PAGE 15

Cooperatives to transform Dhofar’s economic landscape

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, DEC 19

Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry’s Dhofar branch hosted on Tuesday, December 19, 2023, a gathering of experts and intellectuals to discuss the potential role of consumer cooperative societies in fuelling Dhofar’s economic growth.

Majlis Ash’shura members, Municipal Council representatives, and business leaders deliberated on cooperative societies can become pillars of local prosperity.

Shaikh Nayef bin Hamid Fadel, Head of OCCI’s Dhofar branch, set the tone with a clear vision.

He outlined the potential of these cooperatives to not only offer affordable essentials and generate jobs, but also weave

themselves into the very fabric of Dhofar’s economic resilience. The Chamber, he pledged, would offer unwavering support — financial and strategic — to pave the way for this national project.

Muhammad al Ansi, Majlis Ash’shura member representing Salalah, envisioned these societies as agents of transformation, not just for the economy, but also for Dhofar’s cultural identity, championing local produce and the families who cultivate it.

Pointing to successful cooperative models in neighbouring Gulf states and the supportive framework provided by Ministerial Resolution No (265/2023), he emphasised the fertile ground for these societies to flourish.

The ensuing discussion explored various facets of this



OCCI’s Dhofar branch holding discussions on the growth of cooperative societies in Dhofar.

potential:

- Growth Harmony: How consumer cooperatives can orchestrate a symphony of local economic growth and sustainable development.

- Operational Efficiency: Optimising the functioning of these societies for maximum impact.
- Navigating Challenges: Proactively identifying and

addressing potential roadblocks to ensure progress.

Following these discussions, a joint committee was established with a mandate to craft a comprehensive action plan to

integrate consumer cooperative societies into the heart of Dhofar’s economy.

Their vision: a future where Dhofar thrives, powered by the collective strength of community and cooperation.

Earlier during the year, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion has issued new regulations for consumer cooperatives in Oman (Ministerial Resolution No 265/2023).

Cooperatives are obliged to provide goods at reasonable prices to members and society, as well as prioritise Omani agricultural and industrial products.

Operating under three-year licences (renewable), cooperatives must be set up as closed joint-stock companies with a suitably qualified Omani as its director.



A boy poses with Santa Claus at Snow Oman's winter wonderland.

Experience the holiday season with Snow Oman's winter wonderland

MUSCAT: There's 'snow' better place to experience the holiday season than Snow Oman. For the first time, the region's largest indoor snow park will be transformed into a winter wonderland so guests can enjoy a unique and immersive experience together in real snow and create long-lasting memories.

Santa Claus is coming to cold town Muscat, and guests will have the chance to meet him and his elves throughout the festive period (December 9-25).

Experience Snow Oman's first-ever winter wonderland – the Santa-approved way! The Meet Santa & Snow Park package (RO 16) includes a special meet-and-greet and printed photo with Santa Claus, a surprise gift made by Santa's elves, signature hot chocolate, fleece gloves, and one-time access to the Snow Park.

Choose from over 20 desert blizzard-themed rides and attractions including cold town Muscat, mountain thriller, snow bullet, frozen shipwreck, and zorb ball.

You can also upgrade to the Meet Santa and Snow All Access package (RO 19) to get an additional ice skating pass, or go all out with the Meet Santa and Snow Premium package (RO 23) which comes with a heart-warming meal served at the on-site restaurant, Winter Terrace.

Treat all your loved ones with the Meet Santa and Snow All Access Family package (RO 76), which includes four tickets to a special meet-and-greet with Santa Claus, four surprise gifts made by Santa's elves, a printed family photo to capture the special moment, and one-time access to the Snow Park.

For families of five, upgrade to the Meet Santa & Snow Premium package (RO 90) and enjoy the full family package plus a heart-warming family meal served at the on-site restaurant, Winter Terrace.

Sohar International CEO wins CEO of the Year at Le Fonti Awards

MUSCAT: In a remarkable testament to his unwavering commitment to excellence, Ahmed al Musalmi (**pictured**), the Chief Executive Officer of Sohar International, has been honoured with the prestigious 'CEO of the Year — Banking & Leadership' Award at Le Fonti International Awards 2023 Middle East.

Notably, this marks his fourth 'CEO of the Year' accolade — with three national, and a regional recognition.

Al Musalmi's remarkable capabilities are rooted in his extensive leadership tenure and exceptional accomplishments within the financial and banking domain. His visionary guidance not only propels the bank's growth but also champions the development of individuals, both within the institution and in surrounding communities.

Under his leadership over the past five years, Sohar International has undergone a remarkable metamorphosis, emerging as the fastest-growing bank in Oman. This exceptional growth trajectory successfully



propelled the institution to become the second-largest bank in the Sultanate of Oman.

In acknowledging Al Musalmi's outstanding leadership, Mohammed bin Mahfoodh al Ardhi, Chairman of Sohar International, highlighted his exceptional impact on Oman's financial landscape, stating, "Venturing beyond the intricate landscapes of an ever-evolving market, Sohar International stands as a pioneer within the financial sector.

At the helm of this transformative journey is Ahmed al Musalmi, spearheading the bank towards unprecedented

heights.

His remarkable ability to imbue purpose and crystallise objectives within the organisation has been instrumental in Sohar International's extraordinary pursuit of excellence.

Under his guidance, the bank has embarked on an exceptional trajectory, charting a course defined by innovation, resilience, and unwavering commitment to unparalleled achievement."

Guided by Ahmed al Musalmi's astute leadership, Sohar International has undertaken a transformative journey, achieving significant milestones and notable successes.

Notably, the milestone merger with HSBC Oman in 2023 stands out as a pivotal moment, signifying a substantial consolidation within Oman's financial landscape.

This strategic move propelled Sohar International to an unprecedented status, cementing its position as a preeminent financial entity in the nation.

The fusion of Al Musalmi's leadership with the bank's strategic initiatives not only resulted in impressive financial gains but also fostered a vibrant corporate culture and a robust community-focused approach.

This powerful synergy has propelled the institution to unparalleled heights, cultivating an environment conducive to both organisational advancement and societal progress.

Expressing his gratitude, Ahmed al Musalmi stated, "These accolades inspire us to propel forward, spearheading transformative initiatives within the banking industry. I want to emphasise the invaluable contribution of the Board members and the entire team in achieving this milestone."

Helping Hands achieves ISO, HACCP certifications

MUSCAT: Helping Hands, a catering service from the Khimji Ramdas Group, has recently obtained the prestigious ISO 9001, ISO 22000, and HACCP certifications from Intertek.

Accredited by the UKAS (United Kingdom Accreditation Service), Intertek is a leading total quality assurance provider for industries worldwide.

The ISO 9001, ISO 22000, and HACCP certifications were handed-over to Moosapeta Sridhar, CEO, Khimji Ramdas by Earnest Stephen, Business Development Manager, Business Assurance, Intertek Oman and UAE; during a special ceremony held at Khimji Ramdas Head Office.

Earning these internationally recognised standards signifies

Helping Hands' commitment to delivering top-tier services with an emphasis on quality management, and safety of all the food prepared and packed at their Mutrah facility.

Moosapeta Sridhar stated: "The accreditation is a testament to Helping Hands' dedication to meeting customer satisfaction through a robust food safety and quality management system.

By attaining these certifications, the company has established itself as a leader in the catering industry, operating at global standards and guaranteeing quality at every step."

David Christudoss, Head of Retail, Khimji Ramdas Group averred: "We are pleased to witness Helping Hands achieve ISO 9001, ISO 22000, and



Helping Hands officials show their HACCP certifications from Intertek.

HACCP certifications.

This milestone reinforces their commitment to delivering unparalleled quality in the catering industry, setting new benchmarks for excellence and ensuring customer satisfaction at every level."

"We take pride in our ISO 22000, ISO 9001 and HACCP accreditation that ensures our services are delivered to meet

customer satisfaction through a globally renowned food safety and quality management system.

These certifications underscore our commitment to providing dependable and uniform services to our clientele, as well as our ongoing commitment to continuously raising the bar in our operational practices," mentioned Ashish Sampat, Head — Helping Hands.

Meethaq offers exclusive rates on retail financing, deposits and credit cards

MUSCAT: Meethaq Islamic Banking from Bank Muscat has announced exclusive offers for its customers on retail financing, deposits and credit cards. Meethaq has always been at the forefront in catering to customer's financial needs through attractive rates and offers.

The current offers include a 53% discount on all finance application processing fees and a 4.99% per annum profit rate on all financing products, along with a very attractive rate for takeover cases of housing and personal finance.

In addition, customers will be able to enjoy a 53% discount on issuance fee on all credit cards issued during the promotion period. For customers who spend RO 100 or more in a single credit



card transaction, they will get a cashback of 5.3% (max cashback RO 10 per month).

The offers will continue till December 31, 2023.

Customers will also enjoy special offers on deposit products, which includes cash bonuses on all standard fixed deposit bookings of 18 months and above with amounts of RO 5,000 and higher,

and a separate offering on fixed deposit bookings with a higher profit rate of 5.53% per annum on all bookings of 18 months and above with amounts of RO 30,000 and higher.

In addition to a 53% discount on Safe Deposit Lockers annual rent for the first year on all locker sizes. On this occasion, Sami Bait Rashid, Assistant

General Manager, Retail Banking — Meethaq, said: "Meethaq is keen on delivering world class innovative Islamic banking products and services in the Sultanate of Oman driven by its strong customer-centric vision.

We hope to provide a variety of choices to meet the different financial needs of our customers through these offers.

Meethaq is relentlessly working to simplify procedures and provide custom options to meet the individual needs of customers.

I would like to thank all our customers for their continuous confidence and would like to invite them to benefit from these special offers."

Since its inception, Meethaq

has established the largest Islamic branch network in Oman with 27 branches, a dedicated network of over 50 ATMs/CDMs, and free access to more than 750 ATMs and CDMs of Bank Muscat across the country.

Every Meethaq product goes through the process of Shari'a compliance certification by its Shari'a Supervisory Board and is created in line with the guidelines of the Central Bank of Oman.

Meethaq's adoption of AAOIFI standards (Accounting & Auditing Organisation for Islamic Financial Institutions) further distinguishes Meethaq Islamic banking practices in terms of standardisation of its products and services complementing its world-class Islamic banking experience.

Omani team to compete at the Huawei ICT competition 2023-2024

MUSCAT: The Regional Final of the Huawei ICT Competition 2023-2024 Middle East & Central Asia is scheduled to kick off in the Kingdom of Bahrain in partnership with Bahrain Polytechnic and the University of Bahrain, from December 19-21, 2023.

The event will bring together exceptional young talents from across the region, inspiring them to embrace digital technology and become future industry leaders in the rapidly evolving digital landscape, hence bridging the digital gap and paving the way for vibrant digital economies in their countries.

The seventh edition of Huawei's long-standing flagship ICT talent development initiative will witness 22 teams from 11 Middle Eastern & Central Asian countries, including Oman, Bahrain, Pakistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Qatar, Kuwait, and UAE. Since its launch in 2017, Huawei's ME & CA ICT Competition has become the largest and most influential initiative in the region, a powerful programme for cultivating ICT talent and improving ME & CA countries' national competitiveness with ICT future leaders.

More than 100,000 college students have signed up for the first six competitions.

Shunli Wang, Vice-President of Huawei Middle East & Central Asia, said: "ICT talents form the crucial backbone of Middle East and Central Asia's digital economy and Huawei is dedicated to providing students with a platform for knowledge transfer, healthy competition, and exchange of innovative ideas, focusing on enhancing their ICT knowledge and practical skills. The Huawei ICT Competition underlines our commitment to nurturing young minds across the region while being a focal platform that brings together visionary government leaders, forward-thinking academia, and enthusiastic students."

The Huawei ICT Competition 2023-2024 Middle East & Central Asia chapter kicked off in August this year and covered 21 countries in the region. With the support of Unesco, and more than 20 ministries, operators, and industry partners, Huawei has attracted more than 27,500 students from over 600 universities across the region.



In brief

■ TOKYO

**BANK OF JAPAN KEEPS
ULTRA-LOOSE POLICY**

The Bank of Japan (BoJ) maintained ultra-loose policy settings on Tuesday in a widely expected move, as the bank opted to await more evidence on whether wages and prices would rise enough to justify a shift away from massive monetary stimulus.

The central bank also made no change to its dovish policy guidance, dashing hopes among some traders it would tweak the language to signal a near-term end to negative interest rates.

BOJ Governor Kazuo Ueda said prices and wages appeared to be moving in the right direction with labour unions and big firms signalling the chance of sustained wage gains next year. But he warned conditions remained uncertain.

“The chance of trend inflation accelerating towards our price target is gradually heightening,” Ueda said in a press conference after the meeting. “But we still need to scrutinise whether a positive wage-inflation cycle will fall in place.”

At the two-day meeting that ended on Tuesday, the BOJ kept its short-term rate target at -0.1% and that for the 10-year government bond yield around 0%. It also left unchanged a pledge to ramp up stimulus “without hesitation” if needed.

The yen tumbled and Japanese stocks gained after the BOJ’s decision to hold off on phasing out stimulus. — **AFP**

■ BRUSSELS

**EU TO EXTEND
EMERGENCY GAS PRICE
CAP FOR ANOTHER YEAR**

The European Union is set to extend its emergency cap on gas prices for another 12 months to serve as a safeguard against possible energy price shocks, after energy ministers backed the plan on Tuesday.

The EU first agreed the gas price limit in December 2022, after months of crippling high energy prices caused by Russia slashing gas supplies to Europe after its attack of Ukraine.

Europe’s energy security situation is more comfortable today than during last winter — energy prices are far lower, countries have secured new sources of non-Russian gas, and gas storage is near-full.

“Despite the relatively good start of the winter, the geopolitical situation remains very fragile. And these emergency measures help us to shield our consumers against excessive energy prices,” EU Energy Commissioner Kadri Simson said.

The price cap had been due to expire in February 2024 and will now apply until the end of January 2025. — **Reuters**

Oman emerges as a lucrative real estate investment destination

JOMAR MENDOZA

MUSCAT, DEC 19

The Sultanate of Oman has been catching the attention of astute real estate investors seeking high returns and a stable investment environment. With its strategic location, growing economy, and progressive policies, Oman has positioned itself as a hub for real estate opportunities in the MENA region.

Oman’s investment potential is highlighted by the Housearch investment Index, which ranks the country among the top investment destinations globally. With an impressive investment payback of 11 years and a GDP growth rate of 3%, Oman offers a promising environment for investors looking to maximise their returns.

The Index ranks Oman as top 3 in the world after Ireland and Cyprus and ranked first in Asia. One of the factors contributing to Oman’s allure is its commitment to maintaining peace and stability.

The country enjoys a favourable rating on the Global Peace Index, indicating a peaceful environment that fosters investment confidence.

This stability, coupled with the government’s focus on infrastructure development, makes Oman an attractive proposition for real estate investments.

Moreover, Oman’s strong property rights index reveals a legal framework that safeguards private property rights. Investors can have peace of mind knowing that their assets are protected by robust laws and regulations, providing a solid foundation for long-term investments.



The Index ranks Oman as top 3 in the world after Ireland and Cyprus and ranked first in Asia.

WITH AN IMPRESSIVE INVESTMENT PAYBACK OF 11 YEARS AND A GDP GROWTH RATE OF 3%, OMAN OFFERS A PROMISING ENVIRONMENT FOR INVESTORS LOOKING TO MAXIMISE THEIR RETURNS.

The Sultanate of Oman offers a range of attractive investment prospects, including residential, commercial, and industrial properties.

The capital city, Muscat, is experiencing significant growth, with new developments encompassing luxury residential units, retail spaces, and office complexes.

The government’s commitment to urban development and infrastructure expansion creates

a conducive environment for entrepreneurs and businesses alike.

Additionally, Oman’s tourism sector is flourishing, with ambitious plans to position the country as a global tourist destination. This rapid growth in tourism opens up opportunities for investors looking to venture into the hospitality and leisure sectors.

From luxurious resorts along the stunning coastline to boutique hotels in the vibrant city centres, there is a wide array of options for those seeking to capitalise on Oman’s tourism potential.

Foreign investors are also welcomed in Oman, with various incentives and facilitation measures in place to encourage international investment.

The government has introduced initiatives to streamline business processes, enhance transparency, and attract foreign capital. These efforts, coupled with the country’s political stability, make Oman a favourable destination for foreign investors looking to diversify their real estate portfolios.

Furthermore, Oman’s proactive approach to diversifying its economy away from oil dependency is creating new investment opportunities.

Oman Vision 2040 outlines ambitious plans for economic diversification, including projects in sectors such as renewable energy, logistics, and manufacturing. This diversification strategy ensures a sustainable and resilient real estate market, with a variety of sectors to explore for investors.

Pumped hydro potential buoys Duqm’s green hydrogen appeal

FROM PAGE 13

Although conceived initially as a hub for industrial and hydrocarbon related investment, Port of Duqm is rapidly adapting to Duqm’s new positioning as a green hydrogen hub - a turnaround made possible because of its largely green-field nature, he said.

Accordingly, large tracts of land originally earmarked for development only in the second phase of the port’s expansion are now being redesigned to prepare them for investment downstream of the green hydrogen value chain, said Vermeulen.

At the same time, other areas within the port’s massive concession – onshore and offshore – are being unlocked to support the growth of the new green hydrogen industry at Duqm. As part of this effort, part of the 4.2 kilometres of jetty is proposed to be developed for the storage of hydrogen-related commodities.

Furthermore, with the port’s concession extending far out to sea, options to install a single buoy mooring (SBM) facility for the handling of hydrogen export cargoes can be explored as well, Vermeulen stated.

But in laying the groundwork for the growth of a hydrogen ecosystem in Duqm, the port is also seeking to ensure that the benefits of this new industry ripple across the wider national economy, he said.

This future ecosystem, the CEO said, envisions opportunities for investment in the manufacture of equipment and hardware necessary to drive the growth of the renewables and green hydrogen industry. Manufacturing opportunities span, among other goods, solar panels, wind blades, masts and turbines, and even electrolyzers, he added.

Oil steadies as US leads push to safeguard Red Sea vessels

The Nautica arrives in the Red Sea port of Hodeidah, Yemen. — **Reuters**

LONDON: Oil steadied on Tuesday as investors considered the potential impact on oil supply from attacks by militants against ships in the Red Sea, which have disrupted maritime trade and forced companies to reroute vessels.

The US on announced the creation of a multinational operation to safeguard Red Sea commerce. The United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles and Spain are among the nations involved.

Brent crude was up 9 cents at \$78.04 a barrel. US West Texas Intermediate crude for January was down 1 cent at \$72.46 while the more active February contract lost only 2 cents.

Though the attacks on shipping have boosted the geopolitical risk premium, “the actual effect on oil flows is likely to be limited”, said John Evans of oil broker PVM. “The attacks have not hit anything that would interfere with production,” he said.

Crude had climbed nearly 2% on Monday, driven up by fears over the disruptions to trade via the Suez Canal, through which about 12% of world shipping traffic passes.

Goldman Sachs analysts said the disruption is unlikely to have a large effect on crude and liquefied natural gas (LNG) prices because opportunities to reroute vessels suggest that production should not be directly affected. — **Reuters**

Oman, Austria review ways to enhance trade exchange

MUSCAT: Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, received yesterday at the Invest in Oman headquarters, Dr Martin Kocher, Minister of Labour and Economy of the Republic of Austria, and his accompanying delegation, who is currently visiting the Sultanate of Oman.

During the meeting, ways to enhance joint cooperation and develop bilateral relations between the two friendly countries in the fields of trade, industry and investment promotion to increase trade exchange between them were discussed.

The meeting was attended by Pankaj Khimji, Advisor for Foreign Trade and International Cooperation at the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Investment Promotion, and a number of officials from both sides.

Dr Martin Kocher and his accompanying delegation toured the Invest in Oman hall, during which he learned about the most important services and facilities that the lounge provides to the investor wishing to invest in the Sultanate of Oman, the investment mechanism and the entities associated with it, the



Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef (right), Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, received yesterday at the Invest in Oman headquarters, Dr Martin Kocher, Minister of Labour and Economy of the Republic of Austria.

WAYS TO ENHANCE JOINT COOPERATION AND DEVELOP BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO FRIENDLY COUNTRIES IN THE FIELDS OF TRADE, INDUSTRY AND INVESTMENT PROMOTION TO INCREASE TRADE EXCHANGE BETWEEN THEM WERE DISCUSSED.

capabilities and information it provides to investors, and the

most prominent opportunities available in various economic sectors in the Sultanate of Oman.

During the visit, a visual presentation was presented on the most prominent components of the investment, tourism and economic environment in the Sultanate of Oman, and an introduction to economic developments, investment laws and facilities provided by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion to investors in various sectors.

— **ONA**

Warnings of recession flash as GDP drops in UK

Recession fears have returned with latest official figures showing GDP unexpectedly fell 0.3 per cent in October. Economists in London had been predicting output to be flat in the month and one said the surprise dip meant that recession warning indicators are now “flashing red” again.

The monthly slump exacerbated by stormy weather, means that the economy did not advance at all in the three months to October.

Office for National Statistics (ONS) director of economic statistics, Darren Morgan said: “Our initial estimates suggest that GDP growth was flat across the last three months. Increases in services, led by engineering, film production and education – which recovered from the impact of strikes during the



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summer — were off set by falls in both manufacturing and housebuilding.

“October, however, saw contractions across all three main sectors. Services were the biggest driver of the fall with drops in IT, legal firms and film production.

These were also compounded by widespread falls in manufacturing and construction, which fell partly due to poor weather.”

The ONS said that the dominant services sector shrank 0.2 per cent in October, while the productive sector, which includes manufacturing was down 0.8 per cent. Construction output was down 0.5 per cent.

Rising interest rates have weighed heavily on consumers and businesses while the cost-of-living crisis has also hit the high street and hospitality sectors.

Chancellor Jeremy Hunt said:

“It is inevitable GDP will be subdued whilst interest rates are doing their job to bring down inflation. But the big reductions in business taxation announced in the Autumn statement means the economy is now well placed to start growing again.”

The ONS figures continue the trend of sluggish growth that had characterised the British economy since the initial bounce back from the pandemic.

They came on the eve of the Bank of England’s latest decision on interest rates. It was widely assumed that the rates will be left unchanged at 5.25 per cent, almost exactly two years after they were first raised from the pandemic emergency rate of 0.1 per cent in December 2021.

Senior economist at consulting firm RSM UK, Thomas Pugh said: “The contraction in GDP in October, coming on the back

of flatlining growth in Q3, has our recession warning indicators flashing red.

However, growth should pick up over the rest of the quarter as a sharp fall in inflation, strong wage growth and government transfers to low-income households all give consumer spending a boost. As a result, we expect Q4 to look more like a repeat of Q3 than the start of a recession.”

There have been further comments from head of financial analysis at broker AJ Bell, Danni Hewson: “The disruption caused by strikes won’t have helped, but even with the continued squeeze on consumer spending, the contraction in economic growth recorded in October was greater than had been expected.

“All sectors of the economy were affected with the impact of two years of interest rate hikes.

The big question is whether

October is the harbinger of recession or a tipping point as wage growth finally surpasses inflation?

European strategist at Raymond James Investment services, Jeremy Batstone-Carr said: “The latest GDP figures drop is a reminder that the gloomy outlook is here to stay.

Dark clouds and early sunsets have dampened consumer spirits, which remain bruised by the continuing cost-of-living crisis.

“The latest ONS figures should serve as a spoiler of further muted economic activity to come in the new year, particularly as the lagged impact of earlier rate hikes are still working their way into the economy.

The global economy remains equally tarnished, creating a challenging situation for the UK’s export activity, as demonstrated by a widening trade deficit.”

There is no alternative to green industrial strategy

With the COP28 climate summit now wrapped up, the spotlight remains firmly on the global financing gap. It is estimated that achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will require a staggering \$5-7 trillion per year.

But not only must we urgently secure the necessary capital; we also must ensure that long-term patient investments are strategically directed toward ambitious goals. That means coordinating inter-sectoral responses across different supply chains, which in turn requires a robust industrial strategy.

Countries around the world are doubling down on plans to revitalise their industrial sectors. It is critical that Britain does not lose ground to them.

Earlier this year, Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt outlined an ambitious plan to position green industries as the engines of long-term growth. Strongly encouraging green businesses to ramp up their investments, he set an optimistic tone.

Conservatives and Labour must act to ensure investors confidence in the stability of UK policy, so that projects with a life of decades are not vulnerable to uncertainty.

The United Kingdom will need a clear, comprehensive vision for sustainable industrial development if it is to reap the economic opportunities presented by a world that is increasingly committed to achieving net-zero emissions.

As the Independent Review of Net-Zero warns, inconsistent policy approaches are bad not only for the planet, but also for business. After all, green industries could be worth more than \$10 trillion globally by 2050.

Industrial strategy thus holds a dual promise: helping to address climate change and revitalising industry so that it can compete in the twenty-first century. We need not accept environmental protection as a trade-off against economic progress.

The two can go hand in hand if green policies are deployed to fuel growth and innovation, and if sustainable practices are



GREG CLARK

The author, a former UK secretary of state for business, energy, and industrial strategy, is a member of parliament for Tunbridge Wells and Chair of the Science and Technology Select Committee.



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The author, a Professor in the Economics of Innovation and Public Value at University College London, is Founding Director of the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, Chair of the World Health Organization’s Council on the Economics of Health For All, and a co-chair of the Global Commission on the Economics of Water.

WHILE MANY COUNTRIES FORGE AHEAD WITH PLANS TO ENSURE INDUSTRIAL COMPETITIVENESS IN A WORLD THAT IS COMMITTED TO NET-ZERO EMISSIONS, THE UNITED KINGDOM REMAINS A LAGGARD, WITH POLITICIANS FROM BOTH MAJOR PARTIES BACKPEDALING ON PREVIOUS PROMISES. SUCH FLOUNDERING IS BAD FOR BOTH THE PLANET AND THE ECONOMY.



Labourers work at a steel plant of United Cast Bar Group's foundry in Chesterfield, Britain. – Reuters

woven into the fabric of how we consume, move, invest, and build. We had the honour of working together on a UK industrial-strategy blueprint back in 2018, when one of us (Clark) was Secretary of State and the other (Mazzucato) was co-chair of University College London’s Commission for Mission-Oriented Innovation and Industrial Strategy.

That work took a sector-based strategy (focused on automobiles, aerospace, finance, life sciences, and creative industries) and applied it to outcomes such as clean growth, healthy aging, sustainable mobility, and an inclusive data economy.

The point is not to pick winners or only to fix market failures, but to work with firms (from whatever sector) that are willing to join forces to solve problems and to create and shape new markets.

Just as the original moon landing required innovation in domains ranging from aerospace to nutrition, electronics,

materials, and software, today’s climate-related challenges call for innovation in multiple sectors — not just renewable energy.

A mission-oriented approach leads to more than just completing the mission. The innovations it catalyses can lead to a multiplier effect — with initial investments crowding in private investment and generating spillovers that amplify the impact on GDP.

Through the process of solving smaller problems on the way to the moon, we created the technologies for today’s camera phones, foil blankets, baby formula, and a broad range of software applications.

Public and private actors need to work well together. Reorienting public agencies around ambitious missions requires evaluation metrics to capture dynamic economy-wide spillovers.

It will not do to continue obsessing over often spuriously precise cost-benefit calculations (which would have stopped the moon mission from ever getting

off the ground).

Equally important, partnerships between the public and private sectors should be symbiotic, and public funding should come with conditions to maximise public value by steering investments in an inclusive and sustainable direction.

For example, conditionalities can require recipients to reduce the material content of their products and create greener supply chains. We know that such measures work.

The German steel industry’s progress in adopting a climate-friendly circular-economy model owes much to that country’s industrial strategy.

Public policies encouraged low-carbon processes among steel manufacturers and established markets for carbon-efficient steel, materials, and green hydrogen.

All countries need broad, coherent plans to align public investments with commitments to decarbonise transportation and supply chains across the economy. Equally important, the green

transition will succeed only if it is also a “just transition.”

To support the necessary shift of workers from brown to green jobs, governments can require businesses that receive public benefits to align their operations with climate goals, adopt fair labour policies, and reinvest profits in worker training and research and development.

Moreover, policymakers should incentivise brown sectors to reduce their environmental footprint, and to mitigate the risk of stranded assets. Inclusive green industrial strategies belong neither to the left nor the right. They are about creating an economy that serves people and conserves the natural world on which we all depend.

The question is not whether we can afford to implement such policies; it is whether we can afford not to. British political leaders — Conservative and Labour alike — must recognise the profound potential that such strategies hold.

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NAME CHANGE

I **AZIZ AHMED YACOOB ALI** (holder of Indian Passport No. **Z3129890**) son of **YACOOB ALI** having permanent residence in 3 Busheri Bldg, 1st Floor, R.No.5, 3rd Jail Rd Cross Lane, Mumbai 400009. (complete postal address in India) and presently residing in Flat No 3, Bldg 1942, Way 3128, P.O. Box 1068, PC 112, Ruwi, Muscat, Oman (complete postal address in Oman) intend to change my name from **AZIZ AHMED YACOOB ALI** (old name) to **AZIZ AHMED CHHATRIWALLA** (new name) for all practical purpose. Any objection towards my name change may please be communicated to Embassy of India, Muscat, Diplomatic Quarters, Al-Khuwair, P.O. Box No. 1727, Postal Code 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman.

NAME CHANGE

I **JENISMOL JESTIN** (Holder of Indian Passport No. **N2027008**) Daughter of **ABRAHAM KUMBHAMKUZHIIYIL ABRAHAM** Having Permanent Residence in **CHARUVILAYIL HOUSE, VELLAPPARA P.O KONNI, PATHANAMTHITTA, PIN 689691, KERALA, INDIA** (Complete Postal Address In India) And Presently Residing In **F14, BUILDING 2902, NEAR NOOR SHOPPING, AL KHUWAI, MUSCAT, OMAN** (Complete Postal Address In Oman) Intend To Change My Name From **JENISMOL JESTIN** (Old Name) To **JENISMOL KUMBHAMKUZHIIYIL ABRAHAM** (New Name) For All Practical Purpose.

Any Objection Towards My Name Change May Please Be Communicated to Embassy of India, Muscat, Diplomatic Quarters, Al Khuwair, P. Box No. 1727, Postal Code 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman.



PERFORMANCE

Whirling dervishes perform a sipiritual Dhikr “Devran-i Serif” ritual during a ceremony, one of many marking the 750th anniversary of the death of Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi, at Mevlana Cultural Center in Konya. — AFP



LIFESTYLE

People sit by a fire outside one of the tents housing Palestinians displaced by the conflict in Gaza between Israel and the Palestinian Hamas movement, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. — AFP



FASHION

Ashmi Benmehidi, a French musician who left an insurance job in Montpellier, South of France, to practice the art of the ney, poses with his new traditional hat “Sikke”, worn by whirling dervishes, in a workshop in Konya. — AFP



MUSIC

Ruaa Hassouna plays music for Palestinian children on her Oud (Ud, or oriental lute) as Palestinian children participate in an activity aimed to support their mental health, in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. — AFP

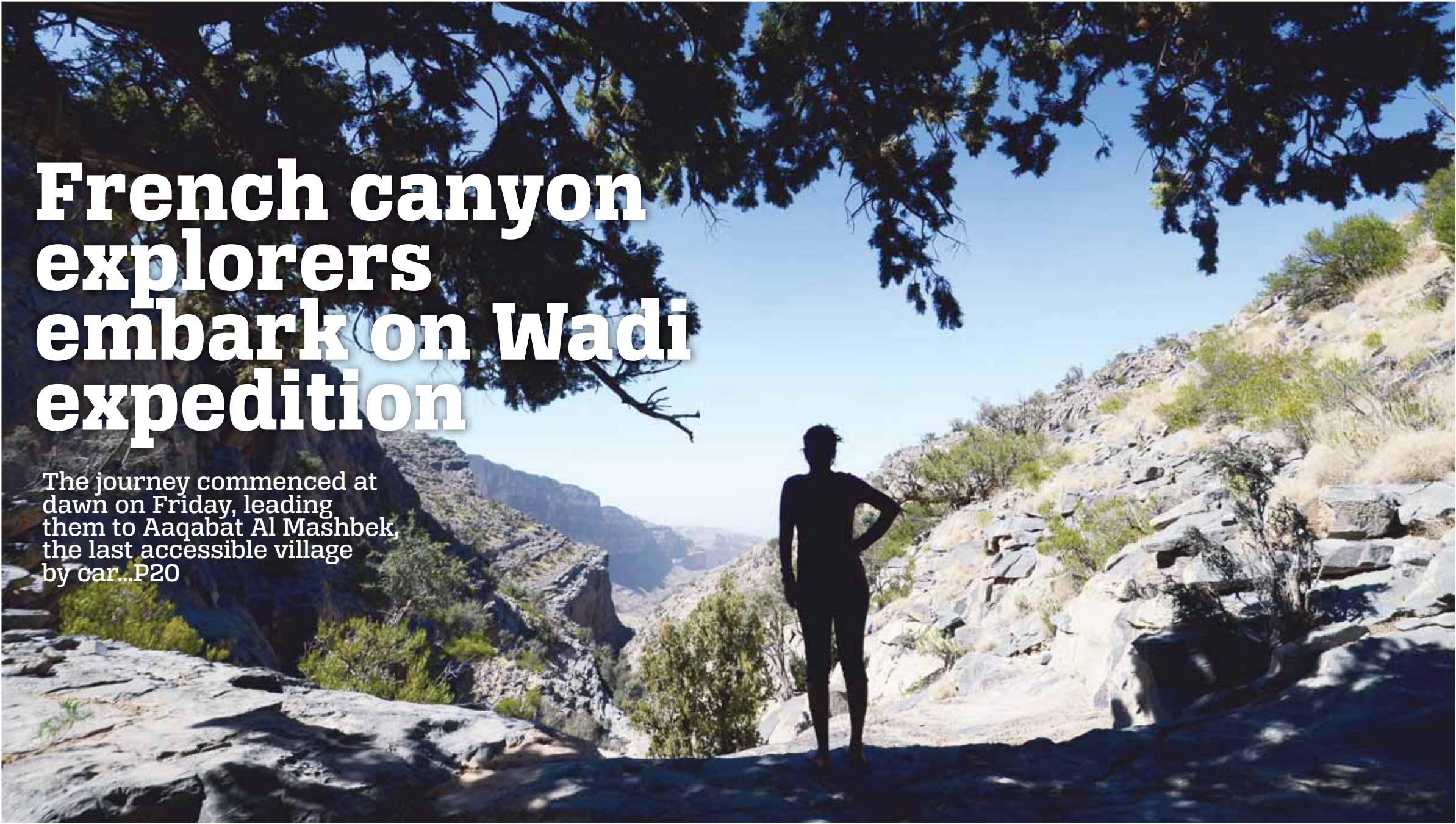


DIVING

A diver dressed as Santa Claus prepares to enter the tank before a show at the Sea Life Bangkok Ocean World aquarium in Bangkok. — AFP

art & life

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French canyon explorers embark on Wadi expedition

The journey commenced at dawn on Friday, leading them to Aaqabat Al Mashbek, the last accessible village by car...P20

Apple pauses US sale of latest Watch models over patent clash

APPLE ON MONDAY SAID it will stop selling some of its smartwatch models in the United States while it fights a patent battle over technology for detecting blood oxygen levels. The move comes more than a month after the United States International Trade Commission (USITC) recommended banning imports of Apple Watch models that appear to infringe patents held by Masimo Corp. USITC issued a “limited exclusion order” set to go into effect after Christmas day if not nixed by President Joe Biden. A presidential review is

underway regarding the USITC order regarding imports of Apple Watch models with the blood oxygen sensing feature at issue in the patent dispute. “While the review period will not end until December 25, Apple is preemptively taking steps to comply should the ruling stand,” an Apple spokesperson said in response to an AFP inquiry. Those steps include pausing US sales of Apple Watch Series 9 and Apple Watch Ultra 2 from the Cupertino-based tech titan’s website starting December 21 and from US retail store locations after



December 24, according to the spokesperson. “The ITC’s expert judgment in this matter should be respected,” a Masimo spokesperson said in reply to an AFP inquiry. “The decision to exclude certain foreign-made models of the Apple Watch demonstrates that even the world’s most powerful company must abide by the law protecting intellectual property rights.” Apple contends that the ITC finding was in error and should be reversed, something it will ask a federal court to do if necessary. The order stemmed from a complaint made to the commission in mid-2021 accusing Apple Watch of infringing on Masimo’s patented technology for “light-based oximetry functionality.” Apple in September released its Apple Watch

Series 9, touting increased performance along with features such as the ability to access and log health data. Apple has been steadily ramping up fitness and health features with each generation of Apple Watch, which dominates the smartwatch category. “Our teams work tirelessly to create products and services that empower users with industry-leading health, wellness and safety features,” Apple said when the order was issued. “Masimo has wrongly attempted to use the ITC to keep a potentially lifesaving product from millions of US consumers while making way for their own watch that copies Apple.” Apple late last year filed two patent infringement lawsuits accusing Masimo of copying Apple Watch technology. — AFP



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Chocolate wars as Italian artisans battle Swiss giant

TURIN'S FAMED gianduiotto, a small, creamy chocolate that melts on the tongue, is at the centre of a battle for European recognition pitting Italian artisans against Swiss giant Lindt.

In his workshop outside the northwestern Italian city, Luca Ballesio kneads chocolate with spatulas before expertly slicing off pieces and lining them up on a tray.

The 42-year-old is one of the last chocolatiers who makes gianduiotto to the old-fashioned way, a hand-made approach which gives the sweets their typical prism shape.

He is part of a committee of around 40 artisan chocolatiers, as well as companies such as Ferrero, Venchi and Domori, who are seeking to obtain a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) for the gianduiotto from the European Union.

The goal is to raise the profile of the chocolate, increase sales — already estimated at around 200 million euros (\$219 million) a year — and continue the chocolate tradition in Turin.

But they are facing opposition from Lindt, owner since 1997 of Italian producer Caffarel, which claims to have invented the gianduiotto.

The plan is currently blocked at Italy's ministry of agriculture.

"This battle is important in promoting a historic product of Turin," Ballesio said.

The committee has developed some very detailed criteria, which would have to be met by anyone hoping to secure the hoped-for PGI to their products.

HERESY

Faithful to tradition, it advocates a return to the original gianduiotto — 30 to 45 percent roasted hazelnuts from Piedmont, at least 25 percent cocoa, plus sugar.

The 200-year-old recipe is not, however, to the tastes of Lindt, which requires the addition of powdered milk and wants to reduce the hazelnut content to 26 percent.

The addition of powdered milk for many here is heresy.

"For us, adding powdered milk to chocolate is like diluting wine with water," said Guido Castagna, president of the Gianduiotto Committee in Turin.

With Christmas just a few days away, production in 49-year-old Castagna's workshop in Giaveno, near the city, is in full swing.

Castagna pours bag after bag of hazelnuts into a machine which roasts them before they are ground up and mixed with cocoa.

The chocolate mixture then passes through a machine which slices it and pours it directly onto a conveyor belt without using moulds.

Each chocolate is then wrapped by hand in shiny aluminium foil, ready to be placed under the Christmas tree.

"We don't want to take anything away from Caffarel. We're not fighting a war against Caffarel. For us Caffarel can easily continue its production," Castagna said.

NAVAL BLOCKADE

"But it must be clear to Caffarel that we are defending the gianduiotto as it was originally made."

Caffarel, for its part, insists it had



never opposed the recognition of a PGI certificate, which it says would "contribute to the prestige of gianduiotto in Italy and across the world".

But the Lindt subsidiary already has its own brand, "Gianduia 1865 — the authentic Gianduiotto of Turin" and fears the creation of a similar PGI, "Gianduiotto of Turin", will cause confusion.

"Our objective is to find an agreement which satisfies all parties and which allows Caffarel to protect the historic value of its brand," the company said.

The chocolates date back to the naval blockade ordered by Napoleon against Britain and its empire in 1806, which created a shortage of cocoa on mainland Europe.

Turin chocolatiers went on to



use hazelnuts — which are abundant in the region — for the first time.

But it was not until 1865 that the Piedmontese hazelnut paste took the name of a carnival figure, Gianduia, the symbol of Turin, and was marketed by Caffarel.

"Caffarel knows where to find us

and if they think there may be an opening, we are ready to discuss it with them," said Antonio Borra, a lawyer for the PGI committee.

But, he warned: "There are points on which we cannot compromise, starting with the name of Turin, which belongs to the whole territory, not a single company." — **AFP**

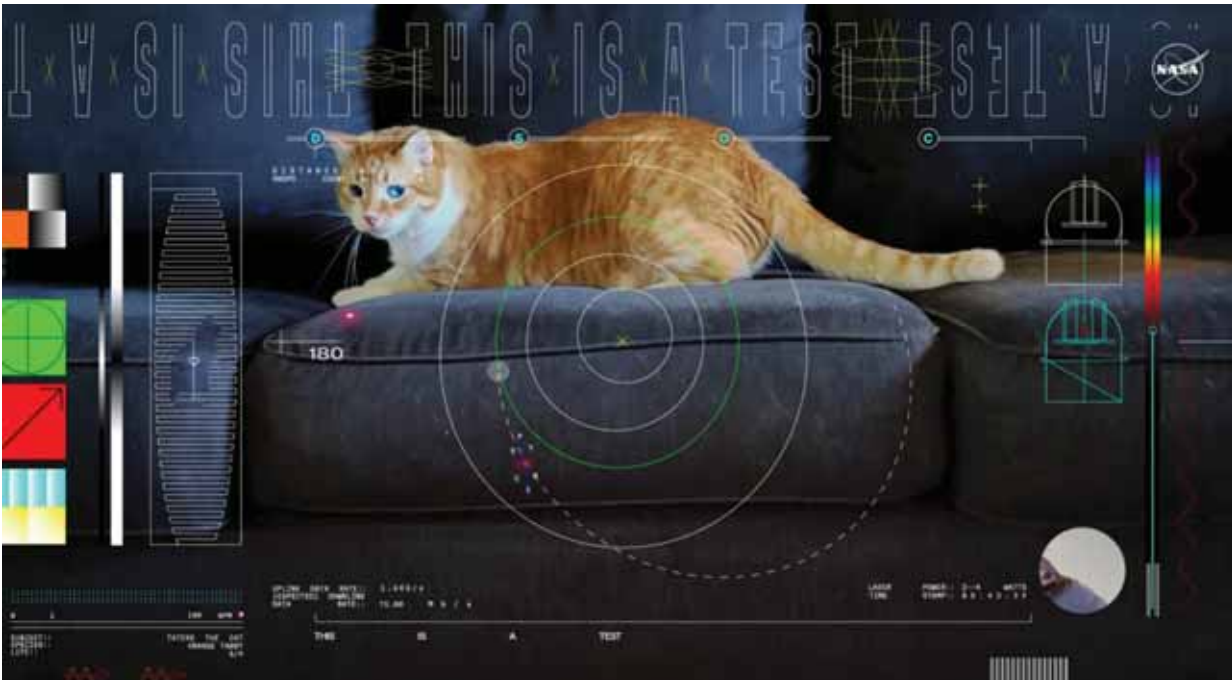
SCIENCE

The feline frontier: NASA sends cat video from deep space

NASA ON MONDAY announced it had used a state-of-the-art laser communication system on a spaceship 19 million miles (31 million kilometres) away from Earth — to send a high-definition cat video.

The 15-second meow-vie featuring an orange tabby named Taters is the first to be streamed from deep space, and demonstrates it's possible to transmit the higher-data-rate communications needed to support complex missions such as sending humans to Mars.

The video was beamed to Earth using a laser transceiver on the



Psyche probe, which is journeying to the main asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter to explore a mysterious metal-rich object. When it sent the video, the spaceship was 80 times the distance between the Earth and

Moon.

The encoded near-infrared signal was received by the Hale Telescope at Caltech's Palomar Observatory in San Diego County, and from there sent to NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in

Southern California.

"One of the goals is to demonstrate the ability to transmit broadband video across millions of miles. Nothing on Psyche generates video data, so we usually send packets of randomly gener-

ated test data," said Bill Klipstein, the tech demo's project manager at JPL.

"But to make this significant event more memorable, we decided to work with designers at JPL to create a fun video, which captures the essence of the demo as part of the Psyche mission."

Space missions have traditionally relied on radio waves to send and receive data, but working with lasers can increase the data rate by 10 to 100 times.

GIANT POUNCE FOR CATKIND

The ultra-HD video took 101 seconds to send to Earth at the system's maximum bit rate of 267 megabits per second — faster than most home broadband connections.

"In fact, after receiving the video at Palomar, it was sent to JPL over the internet, and that connection was slower than the signal coming from deep space," said Ryan Rogalin, the project's receiver electronics lead at JPL.

So why a cat video? First, there's the historic connection, said JPL. When American interest in television began growing in the 1920s, a statue of Felix the Cat

was broadcast to serve as a test image.

And while cats may claim the title as man's best friend, few can dispute their number-one position when it comes to internet videos and meme culture.

Uploaded before launch, the clip shows Tabby, the pet of a JPL employee, chasing a laser light on a couch, with test graphics overlaid. These include Psyche's orbital path and technical information about the laser and its data bit rate.

While laser transmission has been demonstrated in low Earth orbit and as far away as the Moon, the Psyche mission is the first time it's been deployed in deep space. Aiming a laser beam from millions of miles away requires extremely precise "pointing," a major technical hurdle engineering teams had to solve.

The technology demonstration even needs to compensate for the fact that in the time it takes for light to travel from the spacecraft to Earth, both the probe and the planet will have moved — so the uplink and downlink lasers need to adjust for the change accordingly. — **AFP**



TRAVEL

French canyon explorers embark on wadi expedition

BY KHALED ABDUL MALAK

A few months ago, a seasoned team of French canyon explorers, driven by their passion for discovery, returned to the Sultanate of Oman for the fourth time. Their mission was to embark on the inaugural exploration of one of the Sultanate of Oman's major wadis, commencing from the majestic Jabal Al Sarah.

I waited for more than fourteen years for this moment, which was sparked by discovering a mysterious green mark on Google Earth. Back in 2009, trails leading to this enigmatic spot were spotted, beginning in the village of Yiq, nestled between Al Rustaq and Ibri, just an hour and a half from Muscat.

My first trip to explore the canyon started from the mountain with two friends Rigel and Mona. We left Muscat early morning on Friday towards Jabal Shams.

In May 2022, the first exploration unfolded, with the team venturing from the mountain to the downstream of the canyon. The journey commenced at dawn on Friday, leading them to Aaqabat Al Mashbek, the last accessible village by car, situated near the starting point of the canyon in Jabal Al Sarah. A one-hour hike revealed the green mark, perched hundreds of metres below a towering cliff.

Despite the challenging terrain and the absence of a range finder, the allure of the canyon, with its breathtaking views, captivated the explorers. After an intense photo session, the team sought respite under a splendid juniper tree, indulging in a well-deserved lunch.

Upon their return to the village, the explorers encountered friendly locals who, over cups of traditional "Kahwa" and dates. They expressed disbelief at the team's ambitious plan to traverse the canyon down to Yiq.



As the day wore on, the explorers met Mohammed and his grandson, engaged in crafting "Iqals" from their goats' wool. Mohamed's grandson, displaying

hospitality, led the team to a unique "cold water dispenser" — a goat skin waterskin hanging from a tree in the village square. The refreshing water, drawn with a



skilled technique, showcased the resourcefulness of the locals in maintaining freshness even in the scorching May heat.

"Can you show me how I can drink from this container," I asked the young boy.

He untied a rope at one end of the skin bottle and asked me to lift the back of it with one hand and let the water flow in my other hand to drink from it. It was not very easy in the beginning but I succeeded after a couple of trials and the water was really fresh

despite the heat of May.

"It is made from goat skin" explained the young guy, "It keeps the water fresh in summer."

Grateful for the warm hospitality, the explorers bid farewell and embarked on their lengthy journey back to Muscat.

However, for me, the plans were already in motion for the next adventure — an exploration of the canyon from the opposite end, starting in Yiq and moving upstream.