

MUSCAT: The total issuance of Government Treasury Bills amounted to RO 47.3 million. The value of the allotted Treasury bills amounted to RO 30 million, for a maturity period of 28 days. The average accepted price reached RO 99.590 for every RO 100, and the minimum accepted price arrived at RO 99.590 per RO 100. The average discount rate and the average yield reached 5.34464% and 5.36665%, respectively. Whereas, the value of the allotted Treasury bills amounted to RO 17.3 million, for a maturity period of 91 days. — ONA



P9

WOLVES INFLICT FOURTH DEFEAT ON CHELSEA



P14

OMAN'S OIL PRODUCTION REACHES 350.5 MILLION BARRELS



P12

JOURNEY THROUGH WADI TAYSAA UNVEILS TREASURES OF YIOA



MUSCAT

MUNICIPAL COUNCILS FORUM MULLS UPGRADE

The Municipal Councils Symposium, which concluded on Monday, came out with a number of recommendations aimed at upgrading performance in a manner that responds to the needs of the forthcoming stage of domestic development. The symposium recommended the implementation of provisions of the Municipal Councils Law and the integration of efforts between municipal councils, government departments and the private sector establishments with the prime aim of realising the vision of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to empower the councils so that they could better carry out their developmental and social roles within their respective governorates. **DETAILS ON P3**

22.3% SURGE IN ACTIVE COMMERCIAL ENTERPRISES IN 2022



Oman's economic landscape witnessed a vibrant transformation in 2022, marked by a substantial 22.3% growth in active commercial enterprises, as revealed by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). This robust expansion paints a vivid picture of a dynamic and flourishing entrepreneurial ecosystem, fuelled by steadfast government support and expanding economic opportunities. The surge reverberated across sectors, with establishments experiencing a robust 20.9% increase, reaching an impressive 396,100 enterprises. Wholesale and retail trade, coupled with motor vehicle repair, led the charge with 61,000 active establishments, closely followed by construction with 55,000. Manufacturing, construction, and the aforementioned trade sector collectively formed the backbone of Omani commercial sector, constituting an impressive 66.5% of all active establishments. **DETAILS ON P13**

SHIHAB PRESIDES OVER READINESS SEMINAR



MUSCAT: HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs on Monday presided over the conclusion of a symposium titled "Strengthening national readiness to deal with advanced technologies." The symposium was organised by the Academy of Strategic and Defence Studies at the Al Shafaq Club of the Sultan's Armed Forces. (SAF). **DETAILS ON P2**

RAO graduation ceremony today

MUSCAT: The Royal Army of Oman (RAO) will on Tuesday celebrate the passing out of a new batch of officer cadets, university officers and limited service officers. The ceremony will be presided over by HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth.

During the celebration, the batch will perform a military parade on the military parade grounds of Muaskar Al Murtafaa (MAM) that will portray the skill they gained at the RAO under the patronage of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, the Supreme Commander.

The RAO band will also present a variety of musical performances on the occasion. — ONA



Oman raises gas supplies to 29 bn cubic metres

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 25

The Sultanate of Oman has raised its natural gas supplies to industrial estates and projects to over 29 billion cubic metres from the beginning of the year to the end of November.

Industrial estates accounted for 240 million cubic metres of domestic natural gas consumption, an increase of 6.2 per cent compared to the same period last year. The share of industrial projects from natural gas stood at 28.8 billion cubic metres, an increase of 1.3 per cent compared to last year.

The use of natural gas in oil fields increased to 12.3 billion cubic metres, an increase of 11.4 per cent, and in power generation stations to 7.9 billion cubic metres, an increase of 9.6 per cent over last year.

Production and import of



Industrial estates accounted for 240 million cubic metres of domestic natural gas consumption, an increase of 6.2 per cent.

natural gas in the Sultanate of Oman saw an increase of 4.9 per cent to 49.4 billion cubic metres at the end of last November compared to 47.1 billion cubic metres at the end of the same month in 2022. This includes 10.1 billion cubic metres of associated gas production and 39.2 billion cubic metres from non-associated gas production and import.

The increase in natural gas supplies to the industrial sector

coincides with the sector's expansion requirements and the execution of new projects in the sector particularly in promising industrial areas such as the Duqm Special Economic Zone which is witnessing a growth in the number of existing and planned projects.

Duqm also hosts one of the most important petrochemical industry projects namely the OQ 8 refinery which recently began its trial operation by exporting shipments of high-quality diesel and is expected that the project will be officially opened soon.

Within the priorities of supporting the local industry, the gas transportation network in the Sultanate of Oman has expanded significantly over the past years through new lines the most important of which is the gas supply project from Saih Nahidah to the Duqm Special Economic Zone.

Gulf states welcome UN-led peace push for war-torn Yemen

DUBAI: Gulf Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, on Monday welcomed new commitments by Yemen's warring parties to take steps towards a ceasefire and engage in peace talks led by the United Nations.

The commitments announced by UN special envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, marked the latest effort to end a bloody conflict that has killed hundreds of thousands of people and unleashed one of the world's worst humanitarian tragedies.

The Arabian Peninsula's poorest country has been gripped by war since the Iran-backed Ansar Allah rebels overran Sanaa in 2014, triggering a Saudi-led military intervention in support of the

government the following year. A UN-brokered ceasefire brought a sharp reduction in hostilities in April 2022. The truce expired in October last year, though fighting largely remains on hold.

Saudi Arabia, the key foreign party in the conflict, said in a statement it welcomed the UN announcement on Saturday of a "roadmap to support the path of peace".

Its foreign ministry encouraged Yemen's warring parties "to sit at the dialogue table, to reach a comprehensive and lasting political solution under the auspices of the" UN. Fellow mediator Oman also welcomed the development, saying it hopes a deal "will be signed as soon as possible". — AFP

China earthquake death toll rises to 149

BEIJING: One of China's most powerful earthquakes in recent years killed at least 149 people in a remote northwestern region, according to state media, with two people still missing after the magnitude 6.2 temblor hit a week ago.

The epicentre of the quake straddled the provinces of Gansu and Qinghai in an area where many of China's Hui people, a tight-knit ethnic minority characterised by its distinctive Muslim identity, are found.

Gansu bore the brunt of the quake's wrath. More than 200,000 homes were wrecked and 15,000 were on the brink of collapse, Chinese state media reported. Displacing 145,000 people, the powerful tremors killed 117 people in the province as of December 22, with 781 wounded.



An aerial view shows damaged buildings following the earthquake in Jishishan county, Gansu province, China. — Reuters file photo

In Qinghai west of Gansu, 32 people died and two remained missing as of 11 pm (1500 GMT) on Sunday, according to state media.

Local authorities attributed the severity of the damage to the shallowness of the quake. The thrust-type rupture of the earthquake and the relatively soft sedimentary rock in the region also amplified the destructive power of the tremors.

Many of the homes destroyed were built from an earlier era, made of earth-wood or brick-wood structures. Their load-bearing walls were constructed from earth, resulting in their poor defences against any earthquake, local authorities said. The tragedy has highlighted the urgency of raising the earthquake resistance of rural homes, they added. — Reuters

→ INSIDE

SPOTLIGHT

SEE P4



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Sayyid Shihab presides over conclusion of readiness seminar

MUSCAT: HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik, Deputy Prime Minister for Defence Affairs on Monday presided over the conclusion of a symposium titled “Strengthening national readiness to deal with advanced technologies.” The symposium was organised by the Academy of Strategic and Defence Studies at the Al Shafaq Club of the Sultan’s Armed Forces (SAF).
The symposium was aimed at raising the Sultanate of Oman’s competitiveness and innovation indicators, assisting in initiating employment opportunities in domains of future technologies, enhancing environmental sustainability, cutting down greenhouse gas emissions, augmenting the



The symposium was aimed at raising the Sultanate of Oman’s competitiveness and innovation indicators. – ONA



efficiency of related institutions and accelerating digital transition plans.
The symposium, which saw the participation of government and private sector establishments,

discussed means of building flexible government policies and effective systems to realise the Sultanate of Oman’s objectives.
HH Sayyid Shihab and the attendees toured an exhibition held

on the sidelines of the symposium. The exhibition showcased models of Omani projects and companies operating in the field of advanced technologies. He also listened to a briefing on the technologies

and innovations presented at the exhibition.
The closing ceremony of the symposium was attended by ministers, SAF commanders and other military and security

departments. It was attended by members of the State Council, senior SAF officers and top officials of government departments and specialists in the field of modern technology.
— ONA

Disabilities welfare committee highlights strategic approach

MUSCAT: The National Committee for the Welfare of People with Disabilities today held a meeting under the chairmanship of Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najar, Minister of Social Development.
The meeting reviewed the progress made of the lab of developing services and programmes for people with disabilities.
Further, the meeting



The meeting reviewed the progress made for people with disabilities. – ONA
highlighted the strategic approach and the executive position of the lab’s activities. It also showcased the list of projects and initiatives resulting from the lab’s works. — ONA

First group of visual artists with disabilities announced

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth has announced Adatee Hayatee (My Lifetools) as the first group of visual artists with disabilities in the Sultanate of Oman, marking the tenth anniversary of its founding and the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.
The announcement, a tribute and incentive to the group of artists with disabilities, comes after a procession of them with their artworks and after successfully conducting several art exhibitions of drawing, photography and woodcarving.
Speaking to the Observer, Laila bint Mohammed al Wahaibiyah, general supervisor of the group, said such an initiative from the ministry would help the artists with disabilities to develop and



The group includes several talented people with disabilities in several artistic fields

support the capabilities and talents of its members, hone their skills, and gain additional experience for them.
“We will be able to achieve a great stride forward through training courses, specialised workshops, and participation in

local and regional exhibitions, which will contribute to developing the group’s performance mechanism to present quality artworks and their artistic career,” she said, adding, “Omani artists brush with nature, civilisation and

history. Today, we are reaping the fruits of this journey through relentless efforts to bring them up in life, and we are proud of this recognition. Omani artists with disabilities can look forward to greater horizons,” she added.

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Urgent call for O+ blood donors to donate

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 25

The Department of Blood Banks Services (DBBS) said on Monday there is a severe shortage of blood stocks, specifically the O+ blood group.
In a statement, the DBBS said, ‘We urge O blood donors to donate blood as soon as possible at the Central Blood Bank in Bausher in order to meet the demands of medical institutions for blood units.’
Meanwhile, people can donate blood from 8 am to 8 pm, from Saturday to Thursday, and from 8 am to 1.30 pm on Friday.

Recall

Hyundai Elantra HD

Recall Date: 26 December 2023

Brand of Commodity	Year of Production	Number of Affected Commodities
Hyundai Elantra HD	2010- 2011	5

Recall consequence

Description of defect:
Some vehicles might experience driver airbag abnormal operation.

Recall Action

Procedure:
Air bag inflator will be replaced according to the service procedure.

To check the serial Numbers of the affected commodities, please visit the website for Recalls & Warnings: <http://recall.pacp.gov.om>
Toll free No 80050003 on all working days between 8.00 AM to 1.00 PM & 2.00 PM to 5.00 PM with effect from Date 26/12/2023.



Municipal Councils forum mulls performance upgrade

MUSCAT: The Municipal Councils Symposium, which concluded on Monday, came out with a number of recommendations aimed at upgrading performance in a manner that responds to the needs of the forthcoming stage of domestic development.

The symposium recommended the implementation of provisions of the Municipal Councils Law and the integration of efforts between municipal councils, government departments and the private sector establishments with the prime aim of realising the vision of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to empower the councils so that they could better carry out their developmental and social roles within their respective governorates.

The closing ceremony was held under the auspices of Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior.

The symposium underscored the significance of municipal councils' awareness about updates brought about by Oman Vision 2040. It focused on linking the councils' legally defined functions



The symposium underscored the significance of municipal councils' awareness about updates brought about by Oman Vision 2040. – ONA

with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040. In this context, special emphasis was laid on devising annual plans to secure sustained high performance.

The symposium called for espousing clear-cut criteria to measure the performance of

municipal councils, bearing in mind demographic and geographical differences between the governorates.

The symposium recommended a review of the formation of municipal affairs committees in the wilayats to offer better



opportunities to study developmental needs.

A session titled "Media Aspects of Municipal Councils" was held on the closing day of the symposium. In addition, a discussion panel was held on means of integrating the roles

of municipal councils' members with the roles of governors.

The two-day event saw the launch of an electronic app called "Tanmia", which was developed by the Ministry of Interior. The app serves as a digital interface and a meeting space for municipal

councils and members of the public.

The symposium was attended by Royal family members, ministers and other senior government officials and governors.

— ONA

National Educational Research Forum begins

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The three-day Educational Research Forum commenced at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre under the auspices of Professor Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education for Education. This gathering, organised by the Ministry of Education through the Specialised Institute for Vocational Training for Teachers, aims to enhance the quality of education in the Sultanate of Oman. The forum featured 72 expert research papers.

From December 25 to 27, the Educational Research Forum attracts teachers, educational experts, and stakeholders involved in educational research. The event includes brainstorming sessions and the presentation



Dr Intisar Ambusaidiyah

of research papers, fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange. International speakers from ALESCO, ISESCO, the Arab Education Bureau for the Gulf States, and SQU contribute to various sessions held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

Speaking to the Observer, Dr Intisar bint Abdullah Ambusaidiyah, Director General of the Specialised Institute for Vocational Training for Teachers, highlighted the forum's

The Educational Research Forum involves the active participation of teachers, school principals

significance in presenting global educational visions and promoting the exchange of research experiences. The event aims to elevate educational research by aligning it with the developmental needs of the education sector. Dr Intisar, also the Chair of the organising committee, emphasised the forum's target audience, including decision-makers and academics.

"The forum also aims to develop educational research by reviewing the results of studies and

procedural research supervised by the Specialised Institute and aligning educational research with the development needs of the educational field, as the forum targets specialists from decision-makers and academics," said Dr Intisar.

These educational stakeholders oversee sessions, ensuring the effective dissemination of knowledge and information during the forum.

Dr Intisar outlined the forum's four primary themes: 'Developing the school education system,' 'improving learning outcomes,' 'raising the quality of school education,' and 'developing teachers' professional competencies.' Over the course of three days, 72 research papers will be presented, contributing to the ongoing efforts to advance education in the Sultanate of Oman.

Private sector employees can compete for gov't jobs

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 25

The Ministry of Labour (MoL), has confirmed that registering employment contracts for private sector employees does not affect the eligibility to compete for government jobs.

In a statement, MoL said, "The Ministry of Labour job applicants in the private sector refrained from registering employment contracts due to fear of not being able to compete for public sector jobs."

"Therefore, the ministry notes to citizens that public sector jobs are open to everyone and workers in the private sector have the right to compete for them," it added.

The statement emphasised the necessity of registering employment contracts in order to protect the rights and duties of the worker and the employer, and that years of service are counted in the workforce register as practical experience that gives preference in competing for better opportunities.



Oman-based entrepreneur bags international business awards

KAUSHALENDRA SINGH
@patkaushal

A dynamic entrepreneur wrote her own success story with patience, perseverance and hard work. She weaved a narrative of resilience, innovation, and unwavering commitment. Based in Oman and working as an entrepreneur, she got the prestigious Asia's Innovative Entrepreneur Award 2023 and 'Most Promising CEO in Consulting & Event Management' at the Middle East CEO Awards 2023.

A blend of strategic acumen, transformative leadership, and commitment to holistic well-being, Bhavna Batra's success with the Asia Award was not a cakewalk. Among 157 participants, her selection unfolded through a meticulous process — from nomination and identity validation to interviews and reference checks.

Founder and CEO of Muscat-

based Synergies, Bhavna claims to be as innovative as possible in her work and approach. "Probably my innovative consulting approach, coupled with a foray into event management and training, allowed me to navigate challenges and imprint an indelible mark on the entrepreneurial landscape," she said.

The Middle East CEO of the Year Awards 2023 recognised Bhavna as the 'Most Promising CEO.' The nomination, initiated by MEA Markets Magazine, led to a rigorous evaluation by industry experts. Bhavna's strategic decisions, partnerships with industry giants, and Synerggie's diversification underscored her transformative leadership. The award became a testament to her dedication to advancing business practices in the Middle East, setting new benchmarks for excellence.

"The recognition on such a prestigious platform makes me humble and motivated. It is a



sense of pride and validation of my work and approach towards work," she said when asked how it feels to get an award.

Beginning her career at the tender age of 16, Bhavna's trajectory evolved from roles in administration to sales and HR, eventually leading to the establishment of her business venture. Her vision transcends

My message to women entrepreneurs is clear. Embrace challenges as opportunities, believe in the power of your ideas, and forge connections for mutual support

BHAVNA BATRA

conventional boundaries with expertise in event management and training.

Her Oman connection is as old as 1995, when her father came to Muscat for a job and dreamed of giving his family a good life. She did her schooling in Oman and then her professional degree through distance learning.

Her satisfaction emanates

from business success and her diverse pursuits — from being an intuitive energy healer and Reiki master to contributing articles to esteemed newspapers and digital media companies. Her commitment to community well-being extends beyond business boardrooms to public events and international partnerships.

She admits the challenges of being a woman and working. "I managed to confront gender stereotypes and underscore the transformative power of resilience and determination. Overcoming unequal opportunities and work-life balance challenges, I paved the way for aspiring female entrepreneurs." Her success speaks volumes about breaking barriers, emphasising that gender should never limit entrepreneurial success.

"My message to women entrepreneurs is clear. Embrace challenges as opportunities, believe in the power of your ideas, and forge connections for

mutual support," she says.

Active contributions to Oman's esteemed newspapers and digital media companies and her work on three simultaneous books showcase Bhavna's dedication to sharing knowledge and experiences. Her writings cover diverse topics — from her belief in the power of the universe to a series of poems on various themes.

"In the symphony of existence, I believe in the profound power of the universe. My mission extends beyond business success, aiming to be a conduit for positivity and healing. I believe in the transformative power of unwavering belief, resilience, and a commitment to creating a legacy transcending gender stereotypes. In the cosmic dance of life, I am not just an observer but an active participant, leaving a ripple effect of compassion and transformation," she said when asked how she makes work-life balance.



DANGERS OF SLOW DRIVING!

DRIVING AT AN EXCESSIVELY LOW SPEED IN THE MIDDLE OR LEFT LANE CAN LEAD TO ACCIDENTS AS FASTER-MOVING VEHICLES ATTEMPT TO OVERTAKE THE SLOW-PACED CAR



AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 25

Some drivers overlook crucial procedures and regulations that ensure safe and composed driving for themselves and others. The neglect of the potential dangers associated with certain daily driving habits is a common occurrence. One underestimated aspect is the peril of deviating from a clear, straight path on the road and driving excessively slow, significantly below the prescribed speed limit. Both of these practices can result in numerous traffic accidents, posing a genuine threat to the lives of drivers, passengers, and other road users.

Yousef al Abri, who has experienced first-hand the consequences of driving too slowly in the fast lane, highlighted the misconception among some drivers that slow driving is safe driving. He pointed out this perception's fallacy, especially on major and fast roads. Driving at an excessively low speed in the middle or left lane can lead to accidents as faster-moving vehicles attempt to overtake the slow-paced car.

Al Abri emphasised, "If you prefer driving at a speed below the road speed limit, it is advisable to

stay in the right lane." Al Abri underscored that most overtaking manoeuvres on highways are prompted by the presence of a vehicle moving at a slow speed, causing congestion and serious traffic accidents, particularly during high traffic density. He called for stricter traffic control measures against those impeding traffic flow by driving below the limit without a valid reason.

Amjad al Balushi echoed these sentiments, asserting that driving at an excessively slow speed is as hazardous as driving at an excessive speed beyond the prescribed limits. Both behaviours pose a risk to road users, and he emphasised the imperative need to tighten control over such behaviours and enhance traffic awareness to curtail accidents, injuries, and fatalities.

Mohammed al Risi supported penalty for drivers who persistently drive at slow speeds in the far-left fast lane, designated for vehicles travelling at the specified speed. While personally favouring moderate speeds, he highlighted the negative impact of slow-moving drivers causing traffic congestion and potential accidents. Al Risi stressed the benefits of cautious driving, enabling drivers to handle road surprises smoothly, in contrast to speeding drivers who may cause accidents with a single mistake.

Al Risi emphasised the necessity of clearly defining the concept of slowness in driving, acknowledging that it can vary from person to person. In Oman, where speed limits are predominantly set at 80 kilometres per hour, driving at less than 55 kilometres per hour could be considered slow. Therefore, a precise definition of slowness is imperative, and drivers who persistently drive slowly in the left or middle lane should face penalties.

In a separate interview with Khalil al Balushi, clarification was provided regarding the issue of sudden speed reduction by some reckless drivers. Al Balushi confirmed that this behaviour jeopardises road safety and leads to accidents. He remarked, "Some drivers abruptly reduce speed to observe an accident that occurred in the other lane, leading to additional accidents in their lane." Al Balushi emphasised the urgency of increasing awareness in such situations, advocating for careful driving to avoid side accidents resulting from drivers' focus on incidents in the other lane. He called for positive interaction with traffic laws and strict adherence to specified speeds, affirming that avoiding dangerous behaviours contributes significantly to maintaining everyone's safety on the roads.



Israeli airstrikes resume genocide in a deadly night

GAZA: At a funeral in Gaza on Monday a line of Palestinians touched white shrouds containing the bodies of at least 70 people who Palestinian health officials said were killed by an Israeli airstrike targeting Maghazi in the centre of the besieged strip.

It followed one of the enclave's deadliest nights in the 11-week-old battle between Israel and Palestinian groups. One man hugged a dead child and others were hysterical.

"The walls and the curtains fell on us," said one man. "I reached down to my four-year-old child but all I found were rocks."

Strikes that began hours before midnight persisted into Monday. Palestinian media said Israel stepped up air and ground shelling in central Gaza.

Health ministry spokesperson Ashraf Al-Qidra said many of those killed at Maghazi were women and children.

Eight others were killed as Israeli planes and tanks carried out dozens of airstrikes on houses and roads in nearby Al-Bureij and Al-Nusseirat, health officials said.

Medics said an Israeli airstrike in Khan Younis in southern Gaza killed 23, bringing total Palestinian fatalities overnight to more than 100.

Several residents made pleas on social media for people to afford them shelter as they have become homeless after leaving their homes in Bureij.



Smoke billows over Khan Yunis during Israeli bombardment from Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. — AFP



"I have 60 people in the house, people who arrived at my house believing that central Gaza area was safe. Now we are searching for a place to get to," said Odeh, a resident of the refugee camps.

The Israeli army said it was reviewing the report of a Al-Maghazi incident and was committed to minimising harm to civilians. Palestinian groups deny the Israeli charge that it operates in densely populated areas or uses civilians as human shields.

The Palestinian Red Crescent published footage of wounded residents being transported to hospitals. It said Israeli warplanes were bombing main roads, hindering the passage of ambulances and emergency vehicles.

Israel has besieged the narrow Gaza Strip and laid much of it to waste, with more than 20,400 people confirmed killed and thousands more believed dead under the rubble.

The vast majority of the 2.3 million Gazans have been driven from their homes, and the United Nations says conditions are catastrophic.

The Israeli military said on Monday that two of its soldiers had died in the last day, bringing to 158 the number killed since ground operations began on October 20.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had acknowledged the "heavy cost" but said there was "no choice" but to continue to fight deeper into Gaza until "total victory". — Reuters

Pope calls for end to war as world celebrates Christmas day



Pope Francis stands at the balcony of St. Peter's basilica to deliver the Christmas Urbi et Orbi blessing in St. Peter's Square at The Vatican. — AFP

VATICAN CITY: People donned Santa caps on beaches, ski slopes and streets around the globe on Monday to celebrate Christmas, as Pope Francis called for an end to the war in Gaza.

In his annual Christmas Day "Urbi and Orbi" mass at the Vatican, Pope Francis called for an end "to war, to every war, to the very mindset of war, an aimless voyage, a defeat without victors, an inexcusable folly".

May peace "come in Israel and Palestine, where war is devastating the lives of those peoples", he said.

"I reiterate my urgent appeal for the liberation of those still being held captive. I plead for an end to the military operations with their appalling harvest of innocent civilian victims, and call for a solution to the desperate humanitarian situation by an opening to the provision of humanitarian aid", he said.

The Gaza war made for a sombre Christmas in Bethlehem, the biblical city in the occupied West Bank.

The town did away with its giant Christmas tree, marching bands and flamboyant nativity scene that normally draw tourists, settling for just a few festive lights.

In the centre of town, a huge Palestinian flag had been unfolded with a banner declaring that "The bells of Bethlehem ring for a ceasefire in Gaza".

"A lot of people are dying for this land," said Nicole Najjar, an 18-year-old student.

"It's really hard to celebrate while our people are dying."

Inside Gaza, the horrid conditions were driving "rising desperation due to acute hunger," World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Monday.

Israel retaliated with a

sustained bombardment and ground invasion of Gaza, that has killed more than 20,400 people, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's health ministry.

An unusual silence fell over the streets of Zababdeh, a Palestinian village that is home to one of the biggest Christian communities in the occupied West Bank.

On any other Christmas Day, Palestinian Christians would have flocked from surrounding towns to enjoy the fairy lights and a festive market in the village of some 5,000 people.

But as the war rages in Gaza and violence also surges in the West Bank, the Christian community here is in no mood to celebrate Christmas on Monday.

This year its members are praying for peace and mourning the dead, worried about violence even closer to home. — AFP

Desperation rising amid acute hunger, says WHO

GENEVA: The World Health Organization said it led missions to barely functioning hospitals in northern Gaza at the weekend, describing growing desperation and starving people stripping an aid truck of supplies.

The UN health agency and its partners delivered aid, including fuel, to the devastated Al-Shifa hospital, once Gaza's biggest and most advanced medical facility, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said late on Sunday on X.

What the participants in the December 23 mission witnessed was "rising desperation due to acute hunger," Tedros said.

"Partners demand immediate

scale-up of food and water to ensure population health and stability."

Israel has struck Gaza with a relentless military campaign that has killed more than 20,400 people, mostly women and children, according to the Palestinian health ministry.

At Al-Shifa, Tedros warned that "relentless hostilities and massive numbers of wounded people have brought its capacities to its knees".

He voiced hope that Saturday's delivery of 19,200 litres of generator fuel would help revive vital services at the hospital, which can currently only provide "the most basic of first aid".

The facility, which has suffered significant damage and seen its oxygen plant destroyed, is also providing refuge to around 50,000 displaced people.

Sean Casey, a WHO Emergency Medical Teams coordinator who was on the mission, described overflowing surgery wards and being unable to evaluate Al-Shifa's operating theatres, "because there are people inside and they are not opening the door".

At the same time, "everyone we speak to is hungry," Casey said in a video shot inside Al-Shifa, with crowds of displaced people, mainly children, milling in the background.

— AFP



Tenders Announcement

Tender Number T-45-2023

Tender Name Printing & Supply of Revenue & Operation Stationery Items on call-off Agreement Basis for Mwasalat.

Project Summary MWASALAT looking for specialized company for MWASALAT is seeking a professional printing company for: Printing and Supply of Revenue & Operation Stationery Items.

Tender Fee waived (Nil) Grade & Specialty Qualified & Specialized Companies in the field holding SME/Riyadha Cards.

Start date for tender document distribution Tuesday, 26th Dec 2023

Last date for tender document distribution Sunday, 31st Dec 2023

Last date for submission Tuesday, 16th Jan 2024

- The Tender documents may be shared by email during official working hours between 9:00A.M - 2:00 P.M.
- Tenderers are requested to share commercial registration (CR) & business card through email tenders@mwasalat.om and tender number as the subject of email. Tender Document shall be shared by email
- The submission Date / Time shall be on or before the deadline specified in the above table.
- Participants should submit their offers in the tender box located in the head-quarter of Mwasalat at Ghala, Muscat (Jabal Shams Building 5th floor), Any proposal submitted after the given Date & Time shall be rejected.

"Mwasalat" Head Quarter, Ghala Tel: +968 1551 P.O.Box: 911, Al Khuwair, PC: 133, Sultanate of Oman

For more information please send to: tenders@mwasalat.om

"Mwasalat" invites professional firms for the following tenders:

Tender Number T-42-2023

Tender Name Provision of Cleaning Services to Mwasalat Vehicles.

Project Summary MWASALAT is seeking proposals from proficient companies to provide comprehensive vehicle cleaning and pest control services. The selected contractor will be responsible for supplying skilled personnel, supervisory staff, essential consumables, and appropriate equipment.

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Sudanese in ‘total panic’ as paramilitaries move south

AL-JAZIRA STATE: On a countryside road in battle-ravaged Sudan, the hum of a passing vehicle turns villagers’ blood cold, fearing the arrival of paramilitaries plundering their way south in their war against the army.

“They’ve created a state of total panic,” said Rabab, who lives in a village north of Wad Madani, the Al-Jazira state capital and latest site of fierce battles between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

At least eight people were killed by RSF fighters in a village in Al-Jazira state, witnesses said, adding that they had been shot after trying to stop their looting.

Just south of Khartoum, more than half a million people had sought shelter in Al-Jazira after the fighting overwhelmed the Sudanese capital.

This month, however, paramilitaries pressed deeper into the state and shattered one of the country’s few remaining sanctuaries, forcing more than 300,000 people to flee once again, the United Nations said.

Those who remain -- unable or unwilling to leave -- have found themselves in what the Red Cross has called “another death trap”.

Since April 15, Sudan has been gripped by a war pitting army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan against his former deputy, RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo.

By the end of November, at



A general view of the Ourang refugee camp in Adre where refugees fleeing the conflict in Sudan live. — AFP file photo

least 12,190 people had been killed in the fighting, according to a conservative estimate from the Armed Conflict and Location Event Data project.

The United Nations says more than seven million people have been displaced by the war. At least 85,000 had sought refuge in Wad Madani.

In the village of Aykura, 30 kilometres north of Wad Madani, one resident said that “the RSF has taken everything -- the cars, the trucks, the tractors”.

He stressed the need for anonymity to protect him from paramilitary violence.

RSF fighters were seen north of Sennar, about 140 kilometres

Paramilitaries pressed deeper into the state and shattered one of the country’s few remaining sanctuaries, forcing more than 300,000 people to flee once again

south of Wad Madani, according to witnesses.

The RSF has become notorious

for looting property, with civilians who fled watching in horror as fighters posted videos of themselves on social media taking joyrides in stolen cars and vandalising homes.

In Tambul, halfway between Khartoum and Wad Madani, witnesses said RSF members rampaged through one of the state’s main markets, shooting into the air at random.

And many who tried to flee the onslaught were unable to.

Activists, who risk their lives to document the horrors, said the RSF had set up checkpoints across the state, stopping civilians as they tried to flee and ordering them to turn back. — AFP

Japan moon lander enters lunar orbit

TOKYO: Japan’s SLIM space probe entered the Moon’s orbit on Monday in a major step towards the country’s first successful lunar landing, expected next month.

The Smart Lander for Investigating Moon (SLIM) is nicknamed the “Moon Sniper” because it is designed to land within 100 metres of a specific target on the lunar surface.

If successful, the touchdown would make Japan only the fifth country to have successfully landed a probe on the Moon, after the United States, Russia, China and India.

On Monday, SLIM “successfully entered the moon’s orbit at 04:51 pm Japan time,” the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said in a statement released on Monday evening.

“Its trajectory shift was achieved as originally planned, and there is nothing out of the ordinary about the probe’s conditions,” the agency said.

The lander’s descent towards the moon is expected to start around 12:00 am Japan time on January 20, with its landing on the surface scheduled for 20 minutes later, JAXA said.

The H-IIA rocket lifted off in September from the southern island of Tanegashima carrying the lander, after three postponements linked to bad weather.

JAXA said this month that the mission would be an “unprecedentedly high precision landing” on the Moon.

The lander is equipped with a spherical probe that was developed with a toy company.

Compared to previous probes that landed “a few or 10-plus kilometres” away from targets, SLIM’s purported margin of error of under 100 metres suggests a level of accuracy once thought impossible, thanks to the culmination of a 20-year effort by researchers, according to JAXA.

— AFP



H-IIA rocket carrying the national space agency's moon lander is launched at Tanegashima Space Center on the southwestern island of Tanegashima, Japan. — Reuters file photo

Serbian protesters set up road block over parliamentary vote

BELGRADE: Protesters on Monday launched the first of several announced road blocks in Belgrade over alleged electoral fraud in Serbia’s recent parliamentary and local elections.

President Aleksandar Vucic meanwhile denounced the violence in the capital the previous evening and claimed there was evidence it had been planned in advance.

A few hundred demonstrators blocked the street in central Belgrade where the public administration and local self-government ministry is located.

The protesters, mainly students organised under the “Borba” (Fight) movement, were supporting the outcry from the opposition that started on December 18th, a day after the



Opposition supporters gather in front of Belgrade’s city council building as police officers stand behind the city council’s doors during a protest in Belgrade. — AFP

elections. They are calling for a revision of the electoral list, claiming that it was the source of the alleged electoral fraud.

After the December 17 elections, Vucic’s party said it had

secured a commanding victory.

But international observers -- including representatives from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) -- reported “irregularities”.

Serbian opposition demonstrators broke windows as they tried to storm Belgrade city hall. A heavy police presence pushed them back with the help of pepper spray

The allegations led to continuous protests in front of Serbia’s electoral commission building lasting several days.

Seven members of the main opposition camp, united under the banner “Serbia Against Violence”, meanwhile began a hunger strike aimed at getting the results annulled.

Serbian opposition demonstrators broke windows as they tried to storm Belgrade city hall. A heavy police presence pushed them back with the help of pepper spray.

Vucic said two police officers had been “severely injured” during the protest, with others sustaining lighter injuries. More than 35 “bullies” were being prosecuted, he added.

He described the incidents as an attempted “forcible takeover of state institutions”, and said there was evidence that everything had been prepared in advance.

Prime Minister Ana Brnabic told a local TV station on Sunday that the scenario had been known in advance, and thanked Russian security agencies “who had information that had shared

with us”.

Early on Monday, Vucic met the Russian Ambassador in Belgrade Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko and briefed him on the Sunday’s incidents.

Shortly before, Russia had denounced what it said was Western interference.

“The attempts of the collective West to destabilise the situation in the country are obvious,” Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told state-run news agency RIA Novosti.

A deputy from the opposition “Serbia against Violence” coalition, Radomir Lazovic retorted: “Always everyone else is at fault except the government”.

He said he had been beaten by policing during Sunday night’s clashes. — AFP

HANOI

Police arrest senior official over illicit sand mining

Police in Vietnam arrested a top provincial official on Monday in an investigation into illegal sand mining, the government said.

Nguyen Thanh Binh, the chairman of the people’s committee in An Giang province in the Mekong delta -- a hotspot for sand mining -- was arrested on suspicion of abuse of power, the ministry of public security said in a public announcement.

Binh, 59, had “abused his power, intervened and made



orders so that the Trung Hau 68 Company could over-exploit sand in An Giang... pocketing a huge sum of money”, the statement said, without providing further details. — AFP

BANGKOK

Tens of thousands affected as floods hit south

Floods caused by intense rainfall have affected tens of thousands of people in Thailand’s deep south, officials said on Monday, with some roads and railway lines forced to close.

At least a dozen schools in the provinces of Yala and Narathiwat have been forced to close, while footage from the region showed homes and shops inundated with murky brown waters and residents taking refuge on



upper floors.

The heavy rains have also caused problems at sea, with at least seven boats sunk in the Gulf of Thailand and Andaman Sea since Friday. — AFP

NIAMEY

Niger suspends ties with Francophone body

Niger has suspended all cooperation with the international organisation of Francophone nations (OIF), its military leaders said.

The 88-member body “has always been used by France as an instrument to defend French interests”, said a spokesperson for Niger’s ruling junta on national television.

The OIF had already suspended most cooperation with Niger last week because



of the coup, but said it would maintain those programmes “directly benefiting civilian populations, and those contributing to the restoration of democracy”. — Reuters

Get set for the leap year!

As a child, I always felt uneasy with sunset even though the sky would turn out in brilliant colours, announcing the end of the day.

That was the thing — the ending of a day. Something about it made the mood sad; although too young to understand that there would not be a day altogether, there was a sense of missing. At sunset, the lights get switched on, and then there is no more exploration in the garden. And now, it is time to say goodbye to a year.

The opportunities of this year may or may never come again. We will all add one more year of experience to our life and career. And there would also be people who can't wait to start a new chapter and a new year.

That's an opportunity a new year gives us after every 12 months - to have a fresh start. But do we realise we can do so at every sunrise? Because it is all actually a mindset. Each year gives one the opportunity to overcome challenges faced the year before by finding new ways to meet and tackle them.

An interesting aspect is to reflect and see the new people you met and their qualities that impressed you and their traits that you would miss. Now, it gets even more intriguing when you think about why you like and dislike their qualities because we often identify the qualities through us. But the best part is finding out what we learned from them. Not to compete, but they could enhance your understanding of life and your own path.

You know what else? We realise that we could also be on someone else's list, and now we can wonder about what could be the descriptions that would be projected under your name.

Another topic to ponder is the beautiful moments you experienced, places you visited, authors and books, and people you will miss.

A significant thought process is to identify the aspects we are going to leave behind as we say goodbye to 2023. From habits to attitude, we have to do our homework and plan to execute it in the first month of the new year, so eventually, it becomes part of our



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The writer is a senior journalist and a radio anchor

characteristics. Don't worry. There is no copyright on characteristics. That is the beauty of life — we can make all the changes the day we realise we want to be better than yesterday.

One major understanding we must indulge in is the need to prioritise. As the air hostess tells us, we wear the oxygen mask each time we fly and then wear it for the child. In the big picture, only if we can provide for ourselves can we contribute to the world.

But you know what is exciting? This is also the time to set goals for next year. Remember, we keep getting asked what are your short-term and long-term goals. Now, this weekend, we can ask ourselves what we want to achieve in 2024.

And what is special about 2024? It is a leap year! We will have one more day in February to make it special. So this coming new year, we will have 366 days to ponder and thrive, be strong and enjoy leisure as well while accomplishing achievable goals.

And so we just have to find our own ways to make February 29th, the leap day, special as we would have to wait another four years to have that day again.

Our understanding of time through hours, days, months and years might be man-made. But the sun and moon rise and set for us to number the days. They maintain their path, and so does the North Star. The Polestar has guided mankind for centuries, and it symbolises direction, guidance, stability and purpose.

Great qualities to imbibe, don't you think? The Polaris has helped so many sailors to navigate to their destination. But you could also be the North Star in others' lives.

According to the business community, the North Star implies a company's definition of its purpose, its products, its customers and potential acquirers.

And then you could be a North Star friend who makes others feel at ease so they can be true to themselves.

So the priority ought to be finding your true self and then being the North Star. And keep shining! Go ahead, take a leap!

CELEBRATION CHANT



Children dressed in Ukrainian traditional costumes attend a Christmas celebration, in Lviv, Ukraine. – Reuters

It's time for the US to give some tough love to Israel

It is time for the Biden administration to give Israel more than just gentle nudges about how it would be kind of, sort of nice if Israel could fight this war in the Gaza Strip without killing thousands of civilians.

It's time for the US to stop wasting time searching for the perfect UN cease-fire resolution on Gaza.

It's time for the US to tell Israel that its war's aim of wiping Hamas off the face of the earth is not going to be achieved — at least not at a cost that the US or the world will tolerate, or that Israel should want.

It's time for the US to tell Israel how to declare victory in Gaza and go home, because right now the Israeli prime minister is utterly useless as a leader: He is — unbelievably — prioritising his own electoral needs over the interests of Israelis, not to mention the interests of Israel's best friend, President Joe Biden.

It's time for the US to tell Israel to put the following offer on the table to Hamas: total Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in return



Thomas L. Friedman

The author is a reporter, and columnist

for all the Israeli hostages and a permanent cease-fire under international supervision, including US, Nato and Arab observers. And no exchange of Palestinians in Israeli jails.

What would the advantages of this approach be for Israel?

First, if I am reading the mood in Israel correctly these days, the overwhelming majority of the country wants the 120-plus hostages returned — over and above any other war aims. Israel is a small country. Many, many Israelis know someone — or know someone who knows someone — with a loved one taken hostage or killed in Gaza.

The hostage issue is making Israelis crazy, for good reason, and it's making rational military decision-making there impossible — especially as many experts believe that Hamas leader Yehia Sinwar has now surrounded himself with Israeli hostages as human shields and it will be impossible to kill him without also killing many of them. Any Israeli government that

does that would sow the wind and reap the whirlwind of wrath from the Israeli public.

Second, Israel has inflicted vast damage on Gaza's main urban areas and on Hamas' tunnel network and killed thousands of Hamas fighters, along with, tragically,

thousands of the Gazan civilians among whom Hamas embedded itself. Hamas as a military organisation deserved to be punished and pummelled, and it has been considerably degraded. But that huge toll of killed, wounded and displaced Gazan

civilians has produced a humanitarian disaster. And Israel has no plan — indeed, has not had a plan since the start of the war — for how this humanitarian crisis will be managed and remediated, and how to induce non-Hamas Palestinians and Arabs to come forward and partner with Israel to repair and run a postwar Gaza.

There is also increasing discomfort in the Israel military leadership over the fact that it is being asked by the far-right government of Benjamin Netanyahu to fight a war in Gaza without a clearly defined political objective, timetable or mechanism to win and hold the peace.

My view: Israel should just get out and let the person who started this terrible war, knowing but not caring that it would lead to the death and destruction of thousands of innocent people in Gaza, manage the cleanup. And that is the Hamas leader, Sinwar.

— The New York Times



Israeli soldiers gather around tanks near the border with the Gaza Strip in southern Israel on December 25, 2023, amid ongoing battles between Israel and the fighter group Hamas. – AFP

sport

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Wolves inflict fourth defeat on Chelsea

WOLVERHAMPTON : Wolverhampton Wanderers continued their stellar home form to heap misery on Chelsea on Christmas eve with a 2-1 win in the Premier League on Sunday, thanks to second-half strikes from Mario Lemina and Matt Doherty.

After a goalless first half, Lemina headed in a Pablo Sarabia corner six minutes after halftime to give Wolves the lead before Doherty secured the win with a second goal in added time while Christopher Nkunku scored his first goal for Chelsea.

Wolves, who are unbeaten at home in the league since September, moved up to 11th with 22 points, level with 10th-placed Chelsea but trailing the London side on goal difference.

Chelsea have now lost four away games in a row as Mauricio Pochettino’s side fell to their eighth league defeat of the season.

“We feel very disappointed because we deserve much more. We are not clinical enough. We created chances and had the possession,” Pochettino said.

“It is a young team and many players are in the Premier League for the first time. They need to adapt. We need to learn from these games. We are in a position Chelsea should not be in.”

Chelsea’s best chance of the first half fell to Raheem Sterling who stole the ball from last man Joao Gomes and sprinted into the Wolves box with only the keeper Jose Sa to beat.

Sterling went for the finish himself despite having two team mates including Cole Palmer unmarked to his right. The shot was blocked by Sa, laying waste to the three-on-one opportunity.

Chelsea paid for their wastefulness six minutes after halftime when Lemina was left poorly marked and his header from Pablo Sarabia’s corner sailed into the net.

“It’s amazing, the support we have here is fantastic. I hope we

ENGLISH PREMIER LEAGUE RESULTS
ON SUNDAY:
Wolves 2 (Lemina 51, Doherty 90+3) Chelsea 1 (Nkunku 90+6)
ON SATURDAY
Fulham 0 Burnley 2 (Odobert 47, Berge 66)
Liverpool 1 (Salah 29) Arsenal 1 (Gabriel 4)
Luton 1 (Townsend 25) Newcastle 0
Nottingham Forest 2 (Elanga 47, Wood 74) Bournemouth 3 (Solanke 51, 58, 90+4)
Tottenham 2 (Richarlison 9, Son 18) Everton 1 (Gomes 82)
West Ham 2 (Bowen 72, Kudus 78) Manchester United 0
ON FRIDAY
Aston Villa 1 (Zaniolo 90+7) Sheffield United 1 (Archer 87)
ON THURSDAY
Crystal Palace 1 (Ayew 45) Brighton 1 (Welbeck 82)

can keep pushing on and making the fans happy,” Lemina told Sky Sports.

Wolves doubled their lead when Benoit Badiashile failed to deal with Hugo Bueno’s cross and an unmarked Matt Doherty guided his shot past Chelsea keeper Djordje Petrovic.

“(The second goal was) very important because they nicked a goal at the end. I tend to have a knack over my career of being in the right place at the right time and I slotted it away,” Doherty said.

“The kind of atmosphere that’s generated around the stadium. Our record against top six teams is good. We’ve beaten most of them here and away. We’re doing really well.”

Christopher Nkunku netted a consolation goal for Chelsea, his first for the London club since his close-season move, but they could not find an equaliser.

— Reuters



Wolverhampton Wanderers’ Matt Doherty celebrates scoring their second goal with Hugo Bueno, Joao Gomes and teammates. – Reuters

Ratcliffe agrees deal to buy 25 pc of Man Utd

LONDON: British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe has agreed a deal to buy a 25 per cent stake in Manchester United for about \$1.3 billion, vowing to return the Premier League club to the “top of world football”.

United also announced in a statement on Sunday that Ratcliffe’s INEOS company would take control of football operations after years of under-achievement under the Glazer family.

And the 71-year-old chairman of the global chemicals giant will provide substantial funds for future investment in the club’s outdated Old Trafford stadium.

It brings to an end a lengthy saga that began 13 months ago when United’s unpopular US owners said they were

considering “strategic alternatives” to help the club grow.

The American family bought the club for £790 million (\$1.47 billion at the time) in 2005, loading the 20-time English champions with debt.

Qatari banker Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad al Thani and Ratcliffe made offers in the region of £5 billion for a complete takeover, but that fell short of the Glazer family’s valuation.

Sheikh Jassim withdrew his bid to buy 100 per cent of the club in October while Ratcliffe continued to pursue a minority shareholding.

“The joint ambition is to create a world-class football operation building on the club’s many existing strengths,



British INEOS Group chairman Jim Ratcliffe’s INEOS company would take control of Manchester United football operations after years of under-achievement under the Glazer family. – AFP

including the successful off-pitch performance that it continues to enjoy,” the United said in their statement on Christmas Eve.

Ratcliffe, who tried to buy Chelsea last year, grew up in the Manchester region and describes himself as a committed fan.

“As a local boy and a lifelong supporter of the club, I am very pleased that we have been able to agree a deal with the Manchester United board that delegates us management responsibility of the football operations of the club,” he said.

He said the expertise and talent from the wider INEOS Sport group would be harnessed in the drive for success, underlining that it was a long-term project.

“Our shared ambition is clear,” he said. “We all want to see Manchester United back where we belong, at the very top of English, European and world football”.

Dave Brailsford, the former performance director of British Cycling, is expected to have significant influence in his role as INEOS’s director of sport.

The club said Ratcliffe would acquire 25 per cent of the Class B shares held by the Glazer family and up to 25 per cent of its Class A shares, which are traded in New York.

Ratcliffe’s proposal values United at \$33 a share. Under the deal, an additional \$300 million will be provided for investment into United’s outdated Old Trafford stadium. — AFP

Australia retain line-up, Pakistan replace Sarfaraz with Rizwan



Babar Azam

MELBOURNE: Australia named an unchanged XI for the Boxing Day Test against Pakistan, but the touring side replaced veteran stumper Sarfaraz Ahmed with Mohammed Rizwan for the second match of the three-Test series.

Scott Boland missed out in his home ground as Australia retained the pace trio of captain Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood, who bowled them to a comprehensive victory in the opening Test in Perth.

“We’re a huge fan of Scotty, I don’t think that’s a secret,” Cummins told reporters on Monday.

“It’s very rare that you’re going to get through seven Test matches with the same (fast) bowling line-up. There’s always niggles or things that pop up.

“He’s ready to go if anything happens, so I’m sure he’ll play a part at some point.

“The message (to Boland) is always ‘We love what you’re bringing, unfortunately you miss out on this one but don’t change... and stay ready.’”

Pakistan would confirm their playing XI only at the toss on Tuesday but Sarfaraz has been dropped after managing seven runs in Perth.

Skipper Shan Masood said Rizwan, an attacking batter, needed time to shift to red-ball cricket, which was a key factor in playing Sarfaraz in the opening Test.

“We think Rizwan is ready and we can give Sarfaraz a little bit of a break to recoup and come back,” Masood told reporters.

“It was more of a tactical decision in terms of the conditions and getting the best out of each player in those conditions.”

Pakistan’s bowling looked depleted as they seek to level the series in Melbourne.

Noman Ali has been ruled out of the last two matches having undergone appendicitis surgery, while fellow spinner Abrar Ahmed will continue to sit out with a leg injury he suffered during a tour game.

With a recovering Naseem Shah still not fit for action and Haris Rauf opting out of the series, the lack of firepower in their pace attack has also been a major concern for Pakistan.

— Reuters



Pat Cummins

India eye ending Test series jinx in South Africa



CENTURION, South Africa: Two years after Virat Kohli shouted angrily into a stump microphone in what proved to be his final Test as captain, India will seek once again to breach the ‘final frontier’ for their Test team when they begin a two-match series at SuperSport Park on Tuesday.

South Africa is the only regular Test-playing country where India have yet to win a series.

“There is a lot of pride to be able to keep that record intact,” said South African captain Temba Bavuma on Sunday.

“There will be extra drive and motivation (for India), so we will need to be at our best.”

Kohli led a strong Indian team in 2021/22, with high expectations after successful tours of Australia and England. India won the first Test at Centurion but South Africa, inspired by then-captain Dean Elgar, succeeded in

two hard-fought fourth innings chases in the remaining matches to clinch the series.

Kohli’s frustration boiled over when a television review at a crucial moment in the decisive match went in favour of Elgar.

He resigned as Test captain the day after the match.

Both Kohli and Elgar remain as key batsmen for their teams, although not as captains.

Elgar, 36, who will retire from international cricket after the second Test in Cape Town, was axed as captain after a shake-up of the Test side earlier this year which included the appointment of Shukri Conrad as coach.

Conrad confirmed Elgar’s decision to retire was based on a conversation between the pair but praised the opening batsman’s “resilience, dog fight, pride in performance and that ability to never back down.”

SA TO RELY ON PACE

They are qualities which will be much needed against India with South Africa lacking experience and quality in their top order batting.

India, too, have question marks over their batting, with Cheteshwar Pujara and Ajinkya Rahane no longer in their plans.

Both showed on previous tours an ability to withstand South Africa’s fast bowlers on the country’s traditionally lively pitches.

South Africa will again be relying on pace to unsettle the Indian batsmen. “India have a quality batting line-up but we’ve got quality bowlers,” said Conrad.

Young guns Marco Jansen and Gerald Coetzee played in four-day domestic matches last week but the more experienced Kagiso Rabada (sore heel) and Lungi Ngidi (ankle sprain) both missed

the opportunity to get some red-ball cricket.

Conrad, though, expected both to be fit for the Test. “They’ll be fresh, they’ll be firing,” he said.

India will be without pacer Mohammed Shami because of injury but Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Siraj will still spearhead a potent attack. — AFP

SQUADS

South Africa

Temba Bavuma (capt), Dean Elgar, Aiden Markram, Tony de Zorzi, Keegan Petersen, David Bedingham, Tristan Stubbs, Kyle Verreynne (wkt), Marco Jansen, Wiaan Mulder, Gerald Coetzee, Keshav Maharaj, Kagiso Rabada, Lungi Ngidi, Nandre Burger.

India

Rohit Sharma (capt), Yashasvi Jaiswal, Shubman Gill, Virat Kohli, Shreyas Iyer, KL Rahul (wkt), Ravindra Jadeja, Ravichandran Ashwin, Shardul Thakur, Mohammed Siraj, Mukesh Kumar, Prasidh Krishna, KS Bharat (wkt), Abhimanyu Easwaran.

Mohammed al Saeedi wins 100 km endurance race

SPORTS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 25

Mohammed bin Said al Saeedi claimed title in the 100 km local endurance race organised by the Oman Equestrian Federation at the Al Mohammed Endurance Village track in Barka with the participation of 52 horses.

HH Sayyid Munther bin Saif al Busaidy, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Oman Equestrian and Racing Federation, was the chief guest for the race, in presence of HH Sayyid Saud bin Harib al Said, Member of the Federation’s Board of Directors.

The competition started with a veterinary examination one day before the race to ensure their safety and readiness.

The event included 100 km with one-star rating and 120 km with two-star, under the supervision of the International Equestrian Federation in addition to two qualifying races of 40 km and 80 km.

With good competition among 52 horses, eight horses were able to reach the finish line, where the 100 km race title was



The winner of endurance race receives the trophy.

won by horse ‘Ankara’, rode by Mohammed bin Said al Saeedi and trained by Hamad bin Said al Saeedi, owned by Muscat Stud. ‘Marquez Royal Flyer’ claimed the second place, rode by Sheikha bint Mohammed al Rawahiya, trained by Mohammed bin Hamoud al Balushi and owned by Rakan Stables.

‘MA Radimir’ finished third, rode by Mohammed bin Issa al Balushi and trained by Muhannad bin Ibrahim al Balushi of the Sultanate Stud.

Muscat CT thump Yalla Shabab, AER win

MUSCAT: Muscat CT edged Yalla Shabab in a low-scoring thriller in the Premier Division League 2023-24 powered by Muscat Pharmacy LLC at the Oman Cricket Academy Turf 1 on Saturday.

Bilal Khan and Kaleemullah exploited the conditions to their favour picking four Muscat CT batsman out for just nine runs on board. Shoaib Khan and Suraj Kumar tried stitching a partnership but was out scoring 26. Muscat CT put up a lowly 111 on board. Bilal Khan and Mujibur Ali picked 3 wickets each. In reply, Afriedh KT and Samay Shrivastav wreaked havoc in the Yalla Shabab camp bundling them for a mere 67. Mohammed Naseem scored a quick 22 while Afriedh KT and Samay Shrivastav claimed 4 wickets each. Muscat CT remain unbeaten in the league so far in their 5 matches.

On Friday, AER beat Orient Travels in the A Division League 2023-24 powered by Khimji Ramdas LLC at the Oman Cricket Academy Turf 2.

AER got off to a timid start losing five wickets within the first session of the game.

Syed Amir Ali’s blistering run-a-ball 113 ensured AER get to an above-par total of 233 on the board. Ibrar



Samay Shrivastav and Afriedh KT of Muscat CT. Hussain picked 5 wickets. In reply, Sajith Fernando and Ibrar Hussain looked to dominate AER’s bowling attack, but couldn’t take the team through falling short by 57 runs. Syed Amir Ali, Muhammad Ihtesham and Amandeep Singh picked two wickets each while Akbar Ali claimed 3 scalps. AER registered their third win of the league and have saved themselves from relegation.

Brief scores

Muscat CT 111 all out in 39.2 overs (Suraj Kumar 26 (47b); Mujibur Ali 3-23) beat Yalla Shabab 67 all out in 21.3 overs (Mohd Naseem 22 (21b); Samay Shrivastav 4-4, Afriedh KT 4-26) AER 233-9 in 50 overs (Syed Amir Ali 113 (113b); Ibrar Hussain 5-39) beat Orient Travels 176 all out in 35.1 overs (Ibrar Hussain 88 (73b); Akbar Ali 3-19) by 57 runs.



ANIMALS

Pandas inside their enclosure at a zoo in China's southwestern Chongqing municipality.— AFP



BOLLYWOOD

Bollywood actors Ranbir Kapoor and his wife Alia Bhatt pose with their daughter Raha in Mumbai. —AFP



FASHION

A Kosovo child dressed as an angel attends at Mother Teresa Cathedral in Pristina.— AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

Santa Claus rides a cycle along a street engulfed in fog in New Delhi — AFP



LIFESTYLE

People visiting a business area with artificial snow in Guangzhou, in China's southern Guangdong province. — AFP

art & life

TUESDAY | DECEMBER 26, 2023 | JUMADA AL THANIA 12, 1445 AH



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Journey through Wadi Taysaa unveils treasures of Yiq

The village, seemingly asleep, offered no signs of life as we prepared for our exploratory trek ...P12



Cybertruck designer says Tesla stainless steel pickup is no experiment

THE ANGULAR, POLARIZING design of the Cybertruck will help boost the Tesla brand, the electric vehicle maker's chief designer said on Thursday, adding that the pickup was no experiment.

"Love it or hate it, it's a conversation starter, and it gets people talking about the brand," Tesla Chief Designer Franz von Holzhausen said at the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles, which is adding Cybertruck models to a Tesla exhibit.

The long-delayed Cybertruck starts at a price of \$60,990, over 50

per cent more than what CEO Elon Musk had touted in 2019, with a smaller range than originally promised. But it is drawing interest from people who have never owned a truck, with some potential owners queuing up for it at some Tesla showrooms, von Holzhausen said.

"Just because it looks different doesn't mean that it can't be potentially a high volume vehicle," he added, saying the pickup measures up to the performance of traditional rivals. "There seems to be this air of doubt."

"We're bringing people

into the market that never would have owned a truck before," von Holzhausen said. "And so I don't think it's an experiment."

The stainless-steel clad truck is all angles, in part because a traditional press can't bend the steel into curves. The Lamborghini Countach, also an aggressively angular car, had also inspired the design, as had Lockheed's F-117 Stealth Fighter jet, von Holzhausen said.

"It looks like it shouldn't do what it does, yet, intelligent engineers figured it out," he said of the F-117.

The Tesla design studio was also inspired by the car-turned-submarine in the 1977 James Bond movie The Spy Who Loved Me, which Musk bought.

The Cybertruck's launch has not been without glitches.

In 2019, von Holzhausen



threw a metal ball at the truck during its launch event, shattering two of its fortified glass windows. At another event last month where the first trucks were delivered, he lobbed a baseball at the

windows without any damage. A recent viral video also showed the Cybertruck carrying a Christmas-tree being pulled up a slope it was unable to climb by a gasoline-powered car.

Von Holzhausen, however, defended the car, saying his kids love being picked up from school in the Cybertruck, and he has been mistaken for Musk by people when driving it. — **REUTERS**



TRAVEL

Journey through Wadi Taysaa unveils treasures of Yiqā

BY KHALED ABDUL MALAK

In the sequel to our exploration of Yiqā's wadi, embarking from the serene Aaqabal al Mashbek, we delved into the wonders of wadi Taysaa, commencing our adventure from the picturesque village of Jamma nestled at the canyon's edge.

On a tranquil on Friday morning, my companion Rigel and I set forth, traversing the dusty path to Jamma for a day filled with new discoveries. The journey took us approximately one and a half hours, culminating at the village's quiet, still heart around 8 am.

The village, seemingly asleep, offered no signs of life as we prepared for our exploratory trek, laden with backpacks stocked with sustenance to endure the unfolding expedition.

Our sojourn through the Wadi bed initially revealed a parched landscape, with a discernible goat trail guiding us amidst the towering boulders. The canyon greeted us with expansive vistas, its wide expanse flanked by towering cliffs.

As we progressed, colossal ziziphus spina-christi trees, known as sidr in Arabic, adorned the path, promising the allure of Oman's finest honey during the blooming season from September to October.

Around two hours into our trek, the canyon narrowed, revealing ancient petroglyphs etched on the rock faces—a testament to the region's rich history featuring horse riders and warriors brandishing bows and swords.

Venturing further, we encountered a pool, marking a point where the canyon constricted, compelling us to wade through its waters to proceed upstream. A brief solo venture beyond the pool led me to a small waterfall, halting my progress.

Rejoining Rigel, we retraced our steps, pausing



for a riverside lunch beneath the shade of a majestic 'sidr' tree. During this peaceful interlude, we encountered Sultan, a curious local resident of Jamma.

Intrigued by our presence, Sultan offered insights into the challenges of navi-

gating Taysaa's wadi bed. He proposed an alternative route from the mountainsides, graciously offering to guide our future return journey.

As we walked back to Jamma, Sultan shared the story of a lush green spot, a



family farm called Zheyraṭ, visible on satellite images, accessible by a donkey trail requiring a 14-hour trek from Jamma.

Upon reaching Sultan's home, his father, Majid, warmly welcomed us. Expressing gratitude for our exploration, Majid envisioned our experiences showcasing Oman's beauty to the world, anticipating a future influx of tourists.

In a gesture of Omani hospitality, coffee, dates, and fruits were generously served before we commenced our journey back to Muscat. Promising Sultan a future call for assistance with donkeys when returning with French canyoning enthusiasts, we bid farewell to Jamma, leaving the promise of further exploration hanging in the air.

LIFE AT THE ACADEME



Dr Zainab Al Ajmi

Green Jobs: The Way for a Sustainable Future

IN RECENT YEARS, one of the most debated topics among scholars, as well as policymakers, has been related to climate change and the most efficient response to its detrimental consequences. According to the European Commission (2019), the global atmosphere is warming and that may cause the extinction of no less than one million out of eight million species. In this context, climate change and degradation of the natural environment at the same time have been recognised as global factors for change (Stanef-Puică et al., 2022). This is how the concept of green curriculums emerged, addressing concepts such as sustainability, renewable energy, and the green economy. Consequently, contributed to environmentally friendly initiatives and activities, to the emergence of green jobs.

The term "Green Jobs" is one of the terms derived from the concepts of sustainable development that have become prevalent in academic curricula, especially those that emphasise a commitment to sustainability concepts, often referred to as green curriculum. In general, green activities are key actions of policy makers in countries and regions across the world that can be created in almost all economic sectors which help in sustainable development leading to greening the economy and are an important tool in counteracting unemployment. Scholarly among the several definitions of green jobs available in the literature are the following: work in agricultural, manufacturing, research, and development, administrative, and service activities that contribute substantially to preserving environmental quality. Specifically, but non-exclusively, this includes jobs that help to protect ecosystems and biodiversity; reduce energy, material, and water consumption through high-efficiency strategies; decarbonise the economy and minimise or altogether avoid the generation of all forms of waste and pollution" (Podolowska, Sulich&, Szczygiel, 2016). Incorporating these concepts into educational theory promotes an integrated approach to green jobs, emphasising their pivotal role in addressing global environmental challenges while driving economic growth. By equipping individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills, education can play a transformative role in shaping a sustainable and green workforce.

According to (Podolowska, Sulich&, Szczygiel, 2016) green jobs should be understood as decent jobs that contribute to preserving the environment, both in traditional sectors such as manufacturing and construction and new, emerging sectors such as renewable energy and energy efficiency. A green job is any job or self-employment that genuinely contributes to a more sustainable world. At the enterprise level, green jobs can produce goods or provide services that benefit the environment, for instance, green buildings or clean transportation. For people beginning their professional careers, the potential of green places for employment is very high. Nevertheless, one thing is certain, green jobs lead to the creation of a new management framework based on the need to connect to the eco-efficient technologies of the future and to use resources efficiently to reduce environmental pollution and climate change. In addition, green jobs require decent work, connecting the 1st Millennium Development Goal-Poverty Reduction- with the 7th Millennium Development Goal- environmental protection (Stanef-Puică et al., 2022). These lofty and ambitious goals, with their high requirements, should be among the most prioritised objectives of the educational process in any country.

In summary, the world changing rapidly, and requires adaptable education, which in turn, entails ensuring schools' resource sufficiency and providing learning outcomes support. Moreover, fostering students' learning adaptability is crucial. Green jobs are strongly associated in the realm of education with topics, such as sustainable development, green education, and green and purple economy. Furthermore, research on green jobs has concentrated on the relationship between green business and green education.

Dr Zainab al Ajmi is very passionate about the growth of the education system in Oman and wants the country to produce globally competitive workforce. Her column tackles movements and developments within the education sector.

FOR FEEDBACK, EMAIL THE AUTHOR AT zeinbf@moe.om



22.3% surge in active commercial enterprises in 2022

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, DEC 25

Oman's economic landscape witnessed a vibrant transformation in 2022, marked by a substantial 22.3% growth in active commercial enterprises, as revealed by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

This robust expansion paints a vivid picture of a dynamic and flourishing entrepreneurial ecosystem, fuelled by steadfast government support and expanding economic opportunities.

The surge reverberated across sectors, with establishments experiencing a robust 20.9% increase, reaching an impressive 396,100 enterprises.

Wholesale and retail trade,



Oman has witnessed a major uptick in retail and commercial establishments.

coupled with motor vehicle repair, led the charge with 61,000 active establishments, closely followed by construction with 55,000.

Manufacturing, construction, and the aforementioned trade sector collectively formed the backbone of Omani commercial

sector, constituting an impressive 66.5% of all active establishments.

The thriving small enterprise segment, witnessing a 20.2%

THE SURGE REVERBERATED ACROSS SECTORS, WITH ESTABLISHMENTS EXPERIENCING A ROBUST 20.9% INCREASE, REACHING AN IMPRESSIVE 396,100 ENTERPRISES

climb to 205,400, constitutes a remarkable 86.6% of the total commercial landscape.

This underscores the entrepreneurial spirit in Oman and emphasises the pivotal role these businesses play in job creation and economic dynamism.

Medium-sized establishments, serving as a bridge between start-ups and larger players, saw a commendable 19.7% surge to 17,800 enterprises.

Even larger corporations

witnessed a healthy 10.3% ascent to 1,000 institutions, showcasing the growing confidence and ambitions within the Omani corporate landscape.

This impressive performance is a testament to Oman's strategic investments in infrastructure, policy reforms, and diversification initiatives. Projects like the Oman Logistics Hub and port developments in Salalah and Duqm signal a brighter future for Omani corporate and commercial sectors.

Continued emphasis on technology adoption, skilled workforce development, and fostering a supportive regulatory environment will be pivotal in sustaining this momentum and solidifying Oman's position as a regional entrepreneurial powerhouse.

Logistics sector thrives with 15.4% growth in 2022

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, DEC 25

Oman's strategic pursuit to establish itself as a regional logistics hub achieved substantial progress in 2022, boasting a remarkable 15.4% year-on-year sector growth, as reported by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

This robust expansion mirrors a dynamic and rapidly evolving landscape, propelled by strategic investments and diversification endeavours.

Maritime freight was at the forefront, commanding a significant 54.8% share of all inbound goods in 2022. This highlights the pivotal role played by Oman's well-established



Maritime freight was at the forefront, commanding a significant 54.8% share of all inbound goods in 2022.

port infrastructure in propelling sectoral growth, notably through key players like Sohar Port and Salalah Port. The aviation sector also took centre stage as international flights surged by an impressive 128.2%.

This upswing reflects the flourishing air

cargo industry and a thriving passenger travel sector, driven by airport expansions and enhanced connectivity.

Oman's strategic geographical positioning as a gateway between continents positions it perfectly to capitalise on the global airfreight boom. Roadways witnessed a substantial 23.6% increase in new constructions in 2022, further expanding Oman's extensive network.

This was also evident in a 3.3% increase in registered vehicles and a remarkable 29.9% of total new driving licenses issued. With ambitious projects like the Oman Logistics Hub and port developments in Salalah and Duqm on the horizon, the future of Omani logistics appears promising.

New study highlights potential for lithium mining in Oman

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 25

The potential for large-scale and sustainable lithium mining in the Sultanate of Oman, in support of its clean energy transition, has been underscored in a new scientific paper published by researchers of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU).

According to Muscat-based scientists Ashraf Mishrif and Asharul Khan of SQU's Humanities Research Centre, the sprawling mudflats of Umm as Samim in Al Dhahirah Governorate, as well as the lithium-rich seawaters off Mahout in Al Wusta Governorate, hold rich potential as sources of high-grade lithium for a future lithium processing industry in Oman, as well as for global markets.

"This study is probably the first of its kind to explore the potential and challenges of developing a clean energy transition through sustainable exploration and the use of lithium in Oman's mining industry," the scientists said in an introduction.

"The findings reveal that Oman has huge potential for lithium exploitation and production, considering the enormous quantities of spodumene and



Solar salt extracted from briny seawater found off Oman's Al Wusta coast is billed as a promising source of lithium for potential extraction.

seawater salt with high-grade lithium available..." the researchers stressed.

A potentially promising source of lithium are the massive rock salts in Umm as Samim, one of the largest mudflats in the Arabian Peninsula, adjoining Oman's border with Saudi Arabia.

Among the many minerals found in the thick sediments of the mudflats is spodumene, which is regarded as the most significant lithium ore material because of its high lithium concentration.

A small handful of SMEs are currently exploiting parts of the sediments, but mainly for industrial salts with applications in the Oil & Gas sector.

However, at least three

applications for lithium exploration and development are presently being evaluated by the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, according to the research paper.

Another key source is briny seawater found off Mahout on the Al Wusta coast, the study points out. Concentrations of lithium in seawater can range from 0.14 to 0.25 parts per million.

At present, however, all solar salt exploited from the Mahout and Duqm areas is destined for Oil & Gas operations.

Importantly, these sites at Umm al Samim and Mahout have the potential to not only support commercial-scale lithium extraction, but also potentially fuel the manufacturing of lithium-

oil batteries for Electric Vehicles (EV) and Hybrid Electric Vehicles (HEVs) in the future, according to the study.

"Our analysis reveals the growing importance of lithium in the energy and industrial sectors, with the increasing utilisation of the mineral in the production of aircraft, electronic equipment, pharmaceuticals, pyrotechnics, and batteries for electronic devices.

The pivotal role of lithium in powering EVs, smartphones, personal electronic devices, and many more has encouraged industrialists to label it the new "white gold," it added.

Efforts to unlock Oman's lithium resource potential are now at a nascent stage. Earlier this year, the Ministry of Energy and Minerals awarded a landmark concession to UK-based Knights Bay for the development of lithium and cobalt rich laterites in a 1,444 sq km mineral block in the Wilayat of Ibra.

Oman Investment Authority (OIA) has also invested in a number of international companies specialising in the development of lithium and non-lithium based battery technologies, among other clean energy innovations.

Tenders floated for reception centres at key heritage sites



Situated near Ibri, the archaeological marvel of Bat stands as a testament to Oman's rich history.

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, DEC 25

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) has invited suitably qualified companies to bid for its contracts to develop Reception Centres at two prominent Unesco World Heritage Sites — Bat in Al Dhahirah Governorate and Qalhat near Sur.

The ministry's endeavour to develop full-fledged Reception Centres at these world-class tourism attractions reflects a strategic investment in heritage tourism.

The addition of Reception Centres will support the transformation of these UNESCO World Heritage Sites into welcoming hubs that bridge the past with the present, inviting explorers to uncover the mysteries of Oman's ancient marvels while promoting sustainable tourism and economic development in the region.

Situated near Ibri, the archaeological marvel of Bat stands as a testament to Oman's rich history, featuring ancient beehive tombs and cemeteries dating back to the third millennium BC.

The proposed Reception Centre at Bat aims to provide a comprehensive gateway for visitors, facilitating their exploration of the vast necropolis

and the distinct clusters of burial monuments that span the site.

Similarly, Qalhat, located on the east coast, unveils its historical significance as a major port between the 11th and 15th centuries.

Renowned for its unique archaeological testimony of cultural and commercial relationships with Arabia, East Africa, India, China, and South-East Asia, Qalhat, now known as the Bibi Maryam mausoleum, is set to gain a Reception Centre that aims to unlock its tourism potential.

This development seeks to revitalise interest in the city's history, offering a gateway for visitors to delve into the echoes of its maritime past.

These initiatives align with Oman's commitment to heritage preservation and cultural promotion.

The Reception Centres at Bat and Qalhat are envisioned as pivotal hubs for tourists, providing essential information, facilities, and guided tours to enhance the overall visitor experience.

By fostering a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural significance of these Unesco World Heritage Sites, the ministry aims to attract both local and international tourists, contributing to the economic growth of the region.

Oman’s oil production reaches 350.5 million barrels

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 25

Oman’s oil and gas sector has demonstrated its resilience and potential for growth in the period of January to November 2023. Despite global challenges, the data from the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), provides a positive outlook for the sector, showcasing controlled declines in production and a strategic approach to diversifying export destinations.

According to NCSI’s monthly bulletin, during the Jan-Nov 2023 period, there was a moderate but controlled decline of 1.4% in oil production, amounting to 350.538 million barrels compared to the same period in 2022 with 355.472 million barrels.

This decline is primarily due to a planned reduction in crude oil production, which experienced a decrease of 3.9% (272.457 million barrels), while condensate production showed healthy growth of 8.5% (78.080 million barrels).



A liquefied natural gas plant is pictured in Qalhat, Oman.

This measured approach ensures the sustainability of resources while maintaining competitiveness.

Despite the decline in overall production, Oman has aimed for stability in daily average production, with only a marginal decrease of 1.4% to 1.049 million

barrels in the Jan-Nov 2023 period. It demonstrates Oman’s commitment to meeting domestic demand and actively participating in the global energy market.

In terms of pricing, the average price of oil declined by 14.8% to \$81.6 per barrel in the Jan-Nov 2023 period.

One of the remarkable achievements in Oman’s oil and gas sector during this period is the successful diversification of export destinations.

While major countries around the world witnessed a decline in oil imports, Oman managed to hold its ground.

OMAN EXPERIENCED A SIGNIFICANT INCREASE OF 10.1% IN EXPORTS TO CHINA, SOLIDIFYING CHINA’S POSITION AS A CRUCIAL PARTNER FOR OMAN’S ENERGY TRADE. OMAN EXPORTED 260.636 MILLION BARRELS UNTIL NOV-END COMPARED TO 236.765 MILLION BARRELS DURING THE SAME PERIOD LAST YEAR.

Notably, Oman exported to Japan 8.885 million barrels until Nov-end, a decline of 16.9% compared to the same period last year.

Also, exports to South Korea declined by 68.5% with 3.802 million barrels compared to the same period last year with 12.071 million barrels.

However, Oman experienced a significant increase of 10.1% in exports to China, solidifying China’s position as a crucial

partner for Oman’s energy trade. Oman exported 260.636 million barrels until Nov-end compared to 236.765 million barrels during the same period last year.

Additionally, Oman’s efforts to expand its customer base paid off, with a remarkable 147.8% increase in exports to other countries.

This diversification strategy has ensured stability despite unpredictable market conditions.

Alongside the oil sector, Oman’s natural gas production has also flourished during Jan-Nov 2023.

The country saw a 4.9% increase in imports and local production, amounting to 49.444 billion cubic metres.

This growth can be attributed to both associated and non-associated gas sources, which have supported domestic needs and various industrial sectors.

Industries such as power generation, other industrial projects, and oil field activities experienced substantial growth rates, highlighting Oman’s commitment to sustainable and diverse energy solutions.



Seminar explores role of private sector in GCC

MUSCAT: A two-day seminar hosted by the Ministry of Economy kicked off today to explore economic and development integration in the GCC. The seminar is titled “The Role of the Private Sector in Economic Diversification in GCC States”. The opening ceremony was held under the auspices of Dhafir bin Awad I Shanfari, Chairman of the Economic and Financial Committee at the State Council. Moreover, the event explored

mechanisms of establishing a highly competitive private sector in the region which can compete on the international arena. It also highlighted the role of the private sector in realising the initiatives, projects and programmes of GCC economic integration. All findings of the seminar will be submitted to the ministerial permanent preparatory committee of the GCC Economic and Development Affairs Authority.

China identifies second set of projects in \$140 bn spending plan



Men work on the scaffolding at a construction site of Hebei Zongheng Iron and Steel plant inside the Tangshan Fengnan Economic Development Zone, Hebei, China. – Reuters

SHANGHAI: China’s top planning body said it had identified a second batch of public investment projects, including flood control and disaster relief programmes, under a bond issuance and investment plan announced in October to boost the economy. With the latest tranche, China has now earmarked more than 800 billion yuan of its 1 trillion yuan (\$140 billion) in additional government bond issuance in the fourth quarter, as it focuses on fiscal steps to shore up the flagging economy. The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) said in a statement on Saturday it had identified 9,600 projects with planned investment of more than 560 billion yuan. China’s economy, the world’s second largest, is struggling to regain its footing post-Covid-19 as policymakers grapple with tepid consumer demand, weak exports, falling foreign investment and a deepening real estate crisis. — Reuters

US inflation decelerating in boost to economy

WASHINGTON: US prices fell in November for the first in more than 3-1/2 years, pushing the annual increase in inflation further below 3%, and boosting financial market expectations of an interest rate cut from the Federal Reserve next March.

The report from the Commerce Department on Friday also showed underlying inflation pressures continuing to subside.

Cooling inflation left more income at the disposal of households, helping to underpin consumer spending and the overall economy as the year winds down.

This was yet another data set showcasing the durability of the economic expansion, thanks to a resilient labour market. The economy has defied dire predictions of recession from economists and some business executives going back to late 2022.

“(Fed) Chair (Jerome) Powell couldn’t have asked for a better present this year,” said Sal Guatieri, a senior economist at BMO Capital Markets in Toronto.

“So far at least, the endgame is turning out better than the Fed or nearly anyone could have imagined at the start of the year. While the Fed won’t rush into cutting rates, it’s likely now just a



A man shops at a supermarket to buy food in Chicago, Illinois. – Reuters

matter of time.”

Inflation, as measured by the personal consumption expenditures (PCE) price index, fell 0.1% last month, the Commerce Department’s Bureau of Economic Analysis said. That was the first monthly decline in the PCE price index since April 2020 and followed an unchanged reading in October.

Food prices edged down 0.1% and energy prices dropped 2.7%. In the 12 months through November, the PCE price index increased 2.6% after rising 2.9% in October. October marked the first time since March 2021 that the annual PCE price index was below 3%.

Economists polled by Reuters had forecast the PCE price index unchanged on the month and rising 2.8% year-on-year. Excluding the volatile food and energy components, the PCE price index rose 0.1% in November, matching October’s gain.

The so-called core PCE price index advanced 3.2% year-on-year, the smallest rise since April 2021, after increasing 3.4% in October. The Fed tracks the PCE price measures for its 2% inflation target.

The government reported that core PCE inflation increased at a 2.0% annualised rate in the third quarter. — Reuters

OQ elevates hydrogen leadership at MENA’s largest GHSO event



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 25

Oman’s OQ, the global integrated energy group, took center stage at the Green Hydrogen Summit Oman 2023 (GHSO), a vital platform aligning seamlessly with the group’s Alternative Energy (AE) strategic business unit.

This unit stands as the linchpin of OQ’s energy transition endeavours, playing a pivotal role in achieving national objectives.

As the host for GHSO, one of the MENA region’s largest Hydrogen event, OQ also sponsored Women in Future Energies — an event uniting global women across the energy spectrum to nurture future pioneers.

“At OQ AE, decarbonisation forms the nucleus of our strategy, addressing both our assets and Oman’s broader decarbonisation journey. To realise this vision, OQAE has embraced four key pathways, ensuring the resilience of our core business through: Energy Excellence, Clean Energy, Low Carbon Molecules, and Negative Emissions,” the business unit said in a press statement.

In alignment with this commitment, OQ has made substantial strides by signing

agreements for two pivotal project developments: Hyport Duqm and Green Energy Oman, actively advancing.

Plans also encompass bolstering energy efficiency across upstream and downstream operations, with an MOU signed at the Green Hydrogen Summit.

The awarding of a green hydrogen block to the SalalaH2 consortium (by Hydrom at GHSO), comprised of OQ AE, Marubeni Corporation, Dutco Overseas Limited (Dutco Group), and Samsung C&T, is a Legacy Initiative producing over 4 GW of renewable energy for green hydrogen and green ammonia production.

This initiative, which signed term sheets in March 2023, is set to contribute to local use and international green ammonia markets.

“OQ’s participation in the Green Hydrogen Summit Oman 2023 underscores our unwavering commitment to sustainable practices and contributing to Oman’s energy future.

Together, we’re charting the course for a greener, more sustainable tomorrow. GHSO served as a dynamic platform for business leaders to meet and push forward these transformative developments,” it added.

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Ahmedabad will be India’s next Silicon Valley

Global firms are realising that white-collar jobs can be done from anywhere, so they’re doubling down on India, where labour costs are a fraction of what they are in the West. They will build a cheap and reliable workforce outside the traditional technology hubs of Bengaluru and Hyderabad.

As a result, India will have many Silicon Valleys.

Fortune 500 companies from Walmart to Germany’s Bosch are just as likely to consider India when hiring artificial intelligence experts as they are for back-office roles. Increasingly, firms are leaning on employees in the country to execute more complex engineering and research tasks.

For instance, engineers at Boeing’s hub in Bengaluru used machine learning to help



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upgrade wire designs on aircraft including the Chinook helicopter to cut down on design time.

The company is investing \$200 million in a new office near the city’s airport. Such global capability centres (GCCs) will employ about 4.5 million workers in India by 2030, more than double the current number, EY estimates.

However, centres like Bengaluru are plagued with infrastructure problems and are getting pricier to operate in.

Currently, a third of all staff at India’s GCCs are based in just the one city, according to research from consulting firm Zinnov.

These employees also tend not to stick around in their jobs for very long.

Record demand by global companies for cloud services during the pandemic coincided with high-paying venture



An employee works on a computer terminal against the backdrop of a picture of late Apple co-founder Jobs at the Start-up Village in Kinfra High Tech Park in Kochi, India. – Reuters

capital-funded startups poaching workers. Attrition at India’s top three IT services firms including Tata Consultancy Services soared to an average of over 22% in financial year 2022, for example. That makes places like Ahmedabad, Coimbatore, Mysuru and Jaipur more attractive as emerging hubs.

Talent and real estate costs for companies can be about 30% and 50% cheaper, respectively, according to Deloitte.

While cities like Austin and Miami in the United States have struggled to replicate the success of Silicon Valley, India won’t face the same problem.

Nearly 75% of the country’s top 100 engineering schools, like the alma maters of Microsoft and Alphabet bosses Satya Nadella and Sundar Pichai, are in smaller towns anyway.

Indian workers are young and willing to move, so companies can build offices in far-flung places and the talent will follow.

Firms are creating positions at a rapid pace – more than 200,000 roles in India for data scientists and AI experts remained unfilled as of August 2022.

As global companies leverage technology to usher in the next wave of productivity, they could also find themselves spreading out across the South Asian nation. — Reuters

China’s economic engine is running out of fuel

Earlier this month, the ratings agency Moody’s cut its outlook on China’s sovereign credit rating to negative, citing risks from a deepening property crisis and a prolonged growth slowdown. In fact, Moody’s now predicts that annual economic growth will fall to 4% in 2024 and 2025, before slowing further, to 3.8%, on average, for the rest of the decade.

Potential growth will decline to 3.5% by 2030. A major driver of this slowdown will be “weaker demographics.”

Not surprisingly, China’s leaders said they were “disappointed” with the downgrade, claiming that the economy still has “huge development resilience and potential” and will remain a powerful engine of global growth. But China’s assessment of its potential growth is based on deeply flawed forecasts.

On August 24, 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping convened nine economists — including former World Bank Chief Economist Justin Yifu Lin — for a symposium that would guide the 14th Five-Year Plan for economic and social development.

Based on that discussion, Xi declared that it was “completely possible” for China to double its GDP per capita over the next 16 years.

Lin explained the logic behind this optimistic forecast. In 2019, China’s GDP per capita was only 22.6% of the level in the United States (calculated by purchasing power parity).

Germany was at the same level in 1946, Japan in 1956, and South Korea in 1985, and their economies grew at an average rate of 9.4%, 9.6% and 9%, respectively, over the subsequent 16 years.

Even hampered by low population growth and a trade and technology war with the US, Lin concluded, China’s potential annual growth — 8% in 2019-35, and 6% in 2036-50 — could easily translate into real annual growth of 6% and 4%, respectively.

Per this forecast, China’s GDP would surpass that of the US in 2030, and be twice as large by 2049, at which point there would be four times as many Chinese as Americans.



YI FUXIAN

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WESTERN OBSERVERS TEND TO FOCUS ON CRITICISING THE RHETORIC AND DECISIONS OF CHINA’S LEADERS. BUT POINTING OUT THE ERRORS IN THE FORECASTS ON WHICH CHINA BASES ITS POLICIES – WHICH TYPICALLY FAIL TO ACCOUNT FOR UNFAVOURABLE DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS – MAY BE MORE CONSTRUCTIVE.



Workers are seen at a production line manufacturing solar photovoltaic components at a factory in Huzhou, Zhejiang, China. – Reuters

Lin had previously made even more optimistic predictions. In 2005, he forecast that China’s economy would be 1.5-2 times larger than America’s by 2030, and that there would be five times as many Chinese.

In 2008, he was even more sanguine, predicting that China’s economy would be 2.5 times the size of America’s by 2030. In 2011, he was back to forecasting that China’s economy would be twice as large as that of the US in 2030, and in 2014, he returned to his 2005 forecast that China’s economy would be 1.5-2 times larger.

Over the years, China’s leaders have embraced Lin’s forecasts as a kind of vindication of their political system and governance model. “The world is undergoing profound changes unseen in a century,” Xi declared in 2021, “but time and situation are in our favour.”

Similarly, Ma Zhaoxu, the vice minister for foreign affairs, pledged last year that, in the face of efforts to impede China’s rise, Chinese diplomats would uphold the “spirit of struggle” to ensure the country’s continued development. During the Covid-19 pandemic, leaders eagerly presented China’s response as a reflection of its “institutional advantage.”

But, however appealing to China’s leaders Lin’s economic forecasts may be, they have proved wildly wrong, not least because they fail to account for China’s bleak demographic outlook.

Both a higher median age and a higher proportion of people over 64 are negatively correlated with growth, and on both points, China is doing far worse than the three countries to which Lin compares it.

When Germany’s GDP per capita was equivalent to 22.6% that of the US, its median age was 34. In Japan and South Korea, the median age was just 24.

After those 16 subsequent years of strong growth, the median age in the three countries stood at 35, 30, and 32, respectively.

Contrast that with China, where the median age was 41 in 2019, and will reach 49 in 2035.

Likewise, at the beginning of the 16-year period to which Lin refers, the proportion of people over 64 in Germany, Japan, and South Korea was 8%, 5%, and 4%, respectively; at the end, it stood at 12%, 7%, and 7%.

In China, that proportion was 13% in 2019 and will be 25% in 2035.

In the 16 years after the proportion of people over 64 reached 13% in Germany (in 1966) and Japan (in 1991), these economies’ average annual growth was only 2.9% and 1.1%, respectively.

Moreover, in Germany, Japan, and South Korea, the labour force (aged 15-59) began to decline in the 12th, 38th, and 31st years after their per capita GDP equaled 22.6% that of the US.

China’s began to decline in 2012. If one imagines China’s economy as an airplane, the 1978 launch of the policy of reform and opening up would have been what ignited the fuel — the young workers — that enabled the economy to take off and fly at high speeds for three decades. But, in 2012, the fuel began to run low, causing the plane to decelerate.

Instead of adjusting to their new reality, the Chinese authorities — heeding the advice of economists like Lin – continued to lean on the throttle by investing heavily in real estate, thereby creating a massive property bubble.

It is obviously dangerous to continue flying at a high speed without enough fuel, which is one reason why some economies are attempting to “de-risk” their trade by shifting supply chains away from China, which is currently more than 140 economies’ main trading partner.

Western observers tend to focus on criticising Chinese leaders’ rhetoric and decisions.

But pointing out the errors in the forecasts that form the basis of Chinese policy may be more constructive.

For the country’s sake, the decisions made at the upcoming Third Plenum of the Communist Party of China must reflect reality, not more pie-in-the-sky predictions.

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