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The measures aimed regulating Oman’s labour market as announced by the Ministry of Labour will come into effect from today which the ministry recently announced to streamline the labour market and to clear the job market of illegal workers. Accordingly, labour inspections will be carried out by the Ministry of Labour officials with the assistance of officials from the Safety and Security Establishment majorly in four governorates, Muscat, Dhofar, Al Batinah North and Al Batinah South. **SEE P3**



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OMAN TARGETS 22,000 ELECTRIC VEHICLES BY 2030



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OMAN SHINES AS SPORTING HUB IN 2023



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BEAUTY OBSESSION FUELS THE SURGE IN COSMETIC SURGERY



MUSCAT

BADR RECEIVES CALL FROM CAMERON

Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, on Sunday received a phone call from David Cameron, British Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs. The two ministers discussed current conditions in the Gaza Strip and navigation in the Red Sea. They stressed the need for concerted international efforts to reach a comprehensive ceasefire, provide relief aid into the Gaza Strip and pave the way for peace.

THE VATICAN

OMAN ENVOY PRESENTS CREDENTIALS TO POPE

Mahmoud bin Hamad al Hassani, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Swiss Confederation, on Sunday presented his credentials to Pope Francis, Chief of State of the Vatican City, as Oman’s Non-Resident Ambassador to the Vatican. The Ambassador conveyed His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik’s greetings and wishes of good health to Pope Francis, along with His Majesty the Sultan’s wishes of well-being for the people of the Vatican.

SEE ALSO P2

KYIV

UKRAINE DOWNS RUSSIAN DRONES



Kyiv said on Sunday it had destroyed 21 of 49 drones fired after Russia vowed to retaliate for the attack on a border city that left 24 dead. The Ukrainian air force said the drones were particularly targeted at “the front line of defence, as well as at civilian, military and infrastructure facilities in the front-line territories”. Six guided missiles had also targeted the northeastern city of Kharkiv, Kyiv said in a statement on Telegram, without specifying whether they had hit their targets. **SEE P7**

Sur to mark Arab Tourism Capital 2024 title from today



The Arab Ministerial Council for Tourism in its 26th session held in Doha last month selected Sur as Capital of Arab Tourism 2024.

SUR: From Monday, the Wilayat of Sur in Al Sharqiyah South Governorate begins its preparations to celebrate the Arab Tourism Capital 2024. Meanwhile, the office of the Governor of Al Sharqiyah South, in coordination with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, partners and relevant authorities, is preparing a package of events, activities, programmes. In addition, a number of projects will be implemented to enhance tourism, aesthetic and development structure of the Wilayat of Sur.

Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, said: “The Arab Ministerial Council for Tourism in its 26th session held in Doha last month (December) selected Sur as Capital of Arab Tourism 2024. This constitutes a unique experience for this ancient wilayat and would contribute to enhancing tourist attraction through organising varied activities. We will make sure that the

Wilayat of Sur will make the most of this event by highlighting its tourism potentials and creating tourism activities.”

The Wilayat of Sur is rich in history, tourism, heritage and cultural components as well as an excellent infrastructure which enhances tourist attractions and encourages local, regional and international tourism, the minister said adding: “We seek to add positive successes to upgrade the status of Sur. There is a trend to develop the areas adjoining the city that will be announced in the near future after the issuance of the ministerial decision to designate the Wadi Shab area in the Niyabat of Tiwi in the Wilayat of Sur as a tourist area based on the approval of the Council of Ministers. Consultancy work is currently underway to develop many tourist facilities.”

The Minister of Heritage and Tourism added: “Over the next two months, in

coincidence with the celebrations of the Wilayat of Sur as the Capital of Arab Tourism 2024, consultancy services will be awarded to develop the Maritime History Museum in Sur, and we hope that it will be completed within two years. A project will also be awarded to set up the visitors’ centre at the Qalhat archaeological site, a world heritage site, and develop. Archaeological surveys and excavations continue at the site in addition to surveys to recover submerged antiquities. The archaeological surveying programme continues at the archaeological sites in the Wilayat of Sur including in Ras Al Hadd and Ras Al Jinz sites.”

Dr Yahya bin Badr al Maawali, Governor of Al Sharqiyah South, said that nomination of the Wilayat of Sur as the Arab Tourism Capital 2024 came from the basis that this wilayat has enormous capabilities that placed it on the map of Arab tourism. **TURN TO P2**

Gazans pray new year can bring peace after ‘wreckage’ of 2023

RAFAH: As they turn from a year that could barely have brought more bitter hardship after 12 weeks of a pulverising Israeli assault, people in Gaza have little hope that 2024 will bring much relief.

In Rafah on Gaza’s border with Egypt, which has become the biggest focal point for Palestinians fleeing other parts of the enclave, people on Sunday were more preoccupied with trying to find shelter, food and water than by the new year.

“In 2024 I wish to go back to the wreckage of my home, pitch a tent and live there,” said Abu Abdullah al-Agha, a middle aged Palestinian man whose house in Khan Younis was destroyed and who lost a young niece and nephew in an Israeli air strike.

“I wish for our children to live in peace and security, to go back to school, back to university, for workers to go back to work and find a source of income,” he added.

Israel launched its war in Gaza on October 7 after Palestinian Hamas fighters rampaged across the border, killing more than 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking about 240 hostages.

The Israeli bombardment has pushed nearly all Gazans from their homes, killed 21,800 people according to health authorities in the enclave, and left survivors facing hunger, disease and destitution.

Any hope of a political settlement to the conflict and Palestinians’ 75-year quest for self-determination appear further away than ever.

“Since October we’ve been struggling in tents in the streets, after our homes were demolished,” said Suzan Khader, weeping, adding that she wished the new year would bring an end to the war. — **Reuters**

INSIDE



THE YEAR 2023

FULL OF OPPORTUNITIES

2023 was a successful year for events industry

SPOTLIGHT SEE P4

Social protection benefits from this month

SHADDAD AL MUSALMY
@shadadm

The Social Protection Fund will begin disbursing benefits for children, the elderly, people with disabilities, orphans and widows starting this month, making the New Year more exciting. The total number of people registered in the social protection system as of Sunday reached 1,093,461 eligible persons including 147,407 elderly, 910,607 children, 9,168 orphans, 6,582 widows, and 19,697 persons with disabilities.

From this month, monthly assistance of RO 115 will be extended to Omani residents who are 60 years or older. Also, RO 10 per month will be given to Omani children under 18 years of age residing in the country. In addition, the government — through



Over 1 million Omanis registered so far including 147,407 elderly, 910,607 children, 9,168 orphans, 6,582 widows, and 19,697 persons with disabilities

the Social Protection Fund (SPF) — is extending financial support of RO 130 per month to each person living with some sort of permanent disability or illness that requires constant support and care. Widows and orphans are also entitled to monthly support of RO 80 per month.

Under the Orphans and Widows Benefits programme, the government provides monthly financial support to help people facing challenges resulting from the loss of their family’s breadwinner.

“Being one of the basic pillars of any country, the social protection system aims to provide support and care for the neediest groups, improve the quality of life of individuals and meet their basic needs in the field of health care, housing, education and income,” an official from Social Protection Fund said. **TURN TO P2**





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Ministry of Awqaf holds annual meet

FOUR REAL ESTATE PROJECTS IN THE PIPELINE



The meeting showcased a visual presentation about the achievements of 2023.

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs held its annual meeting to present its activities and achievements during the year of the Awqaf 1444/1445 AH / 2023 AD), under the auspices of Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, and Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, at Avani Hotel on Sunday.

The meeting showcased a visual presentation about the achievements of 2023, the Year of Awqaf, in which the events and activities were highlighted and the most prominent goals achieved during the year.

The Director General of Awqaf and Funds and the Reconstruction of Mosques and Holy Quran Schools also reviewed indicators and numbers and a number of Awqaf projects that were established that contribute to raising the value of the Awqaf assets and returns including constructing commercial buildings.

The meeting also included the signing of investment contracts with 5 companies to invest a number of Awqaf assets in a number of governorates of the Sultanate of Oman.

Speaking to the Observer, Abdulaziz al Ghafri, Deputy Head at the Awqaf Department said that the year 2023 was marked with increased focus on Awqaf

and the ministry was very keen on attracting more investments for waqf.

“Major achievements of the ministry include compulsory registration of stakeholders for any transaction, implementation of automation programme whereby all activities were streamlined under the electronic programme besides the four major projects which have currently been established for different governorates including the biggest project worth RO 3 million in Al Khoudh, which is the Square project built up in some 12,000 sqm,” Al Ghafri said.

In continuation of the ministry’s efforts to improve Awqaf services, it launched the National Awqaf

Register, which represents the cultural heritage of the Awqaf in the Sultanate of Oman and aims to maximise the benefit from Awqaf assets and seek new investments with greater returns.

“Awqaf in the Sultanate of Oman have been electronically documented, and rules and governance system have been established and maintained,” he said. All these come in the context of achieving the priorities of Oman Vision 2040 by developing the Awqaf system and opening broader horizons in serving it through governance, digital and technological transformation, and relying on advanced administrative systems and accurate accounting systems.



Oman Ambassador presents credentials to Pope Francis

THE VATICAN: Mahmoud bin Hamad al Hassani, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Swiss Confederation, on Sunday presented his credentials to Pope Francis, Chief of State of the Vatican City, as Oman’s Non-Resident Ambassador to the Vatican.

The Ambassador conveyed His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik’s greetings and wishes of good health to Pope Francis,

along with His Majesty the Sultan’s wishes of well-being for the people of the Vatican.

The ambassador underlined the status accorded to coexistence, tolerance and peace in the Sultanate of Oman.

Pope Francis asked the Ambassador to convey his greetings and best wishes to His Majesty the Sultan. He wished Omani people further progress and prosperity. — ONA

Sur to mark Arab Tourism Capital 2024 title

FROM P1
The Wilayat of Sur boasts rich historical, cultural and social heritage as well as diverse components whether on the maritime aspect or in other areas. Sur is already one of the key tourist destinations in the Sultanate of Oman and its designation as the Arab Tourism Capital 2024 provides further opportunity for this ancient city to deepen its presence on the Arab tourism map.

Coordination has begun with the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, partners and relevant authorities to prepare a good package of events and activities that reflect the historical and cultural heritage that characterises the Wilayat of Sur.

He pointed out that the office of the Governor of Al Sharqiyah South will hold a press conference in the coming days to reveal details about the celebration. — ONA

HAPPY
NEW YEAR

2024

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Social protection benefits from this month



FROM P1
There is no doubt that the social protection policies and its system is one of the issues on which the new development model of the Sultanate of Oman is based. It will contribute to better directing social benefits and assistance to the neediest groups, and at the same time, it is consistent with the development of specific groups and enabling them to move to a good quality of life.

Through the implementation of these benefits, social stability and social solidarity in society will be enhanced.

“The upcoming entitlements reflect the priority of the citizen in the lofty vision, and the concern and keenness of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to provide a decent life and safe living for the citizen,” said Adnan Rashid, a 63-year-old citizen who will be among the beneficiaries.

Since the very first day of his rule, His Majesty the Sultan confirmed his sincere endeavour to set up a new phase of Oman’s renewed Renaissance that meets the requirements of the upcoming period and fulfils the aspirations of the Omani people as well as preserve the

achievements that took place over the past five decades.

“The social protection system comes at a defining stage in the history of the Sultanate of Oman, as it will eliminate some of the challenges that people were facing. Such benefits, including the benefits for children under 18, will directly benefit the citizen and the country at large,” said Khalfan al Obaidani, a father of six children.

The Social Protection Fund, established by Royal Decree No. 33/2021, supervises social protection programmes that generate cash benefits for all categories.



Winter in Musandam: Unveiling magic of Oman’s gem

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 31

Winter tourism represents one of the main pillars of the Omani economy, and the Governorate of Musandam is one of the key regions that greatly benefits from this activity. As part of continuous efforts to enhance this vital aspect, the ‘Winter in Musandam’ identity was launched in its second edition, which will continue for five months.

This step comes within the framework of the winter tourism season, with the onset of moderate weather in various provinces of the Sultanate of Oman amid moderate weather that encourages many people to travel and explore various destinations within the country.

Musandam Governorate is considered a key gateway to tourism in Oman, given its resources and features that



The objectives of ‘Winter in Musandam’ include creating a tourist season for the residents of the governorate, promoting the tourist attractions it possesses

make it a tourist hub. These efforts aim to create an effective tourist attraction during the winter season, especially by taking advantage of its strategic location close to the UAE as well as increasing the number of visitors from all over the world.

The objectives of ‘Winter in Musandam’ include creating a tourist season for the residents of

the governorate, promoting the tourist attractions it possesses, and supporting the development of youth projects. The season includes various events and tourist, cultural, artistic, and sports programmes that cater to all tastes and ages. It also features local, regional, and international competitions and festivals.

Enjoyable times await both



locals and tourists throughout the tourism season, where they can indulge in exceptional experiences and diverse activities. The governorate will witness exciting events for enthusiasts of outings and camping, in addition to the opportunity to visit unique archaeological sites that enhance the region’s charm.

For adventure and thrill seekers, the launch of the ‘Zipline Adventure’ is expected, one of the latest exciting tourism projects in the region. The zip line stretches for 1800 meters and rises 220 meters above Khor Qada and the Moki area on the coast of Khasab, providing a unique experience.

On the other hand, sea trips

offer the opportunity to enjoy the beauty of islands and fjords, with the chance to watch dolphins and dive to experience unique encounters with marine life.

Visitors can also visit the Barzakh area to witness the meeting of the ocean and the sea, walk on the mountainous pathway connecting the Arabian Gulf and the Sea of Oman, and explore Telegraph Island with its towering mountains and blue sea during the ‘Winter in Musandam’ season.

Safari trips provide a unique opportunity to explore geological variations and winding mountain paths, while adventurers can experience paragliding. Visitors can also discover the tourist attractions in the Wilayat of Bukha, as well as the Wilayat of Mad’ha and Dibba, and get to know the beauty of Khasab Village with its prominent location on the Strait of Hormuz and its hospitality.

2024 government digital programme explored



The meeting discussed executive plan of national strategy for change management.

– ONA

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology on Sunday organised the first meeting of heads of teams tasked with the management of change and digital transition in government institutions.

The meeting was a link in a series of gatherings aimed at accelerating the implementation of digital transition in the government sector, with the prime objective of realising the goals and indices of the Government Digital Transition Programme 2021-2025.

The meeting discussed the executive plan of the national strategy for

change management with a view to consolidating the digital transition programme in government units. The strategy is scheduled to be activated with effect from January 2024.

The meeting stressed the need to enhance interaction among change management teams, transfer knowledge and benefit from successful experiences.

During the meeting, a “change management knowledge community” was announced. The community will help accelerate digital transition and secure its success and sustainability.

— ONA

Measures to regulate labour market from today

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The measures aimed regulating Oman’s labour market as announced by the Ministry of Labour will come into effect from today which the ministry recently announced to streamline the labour market and to clear the job market of illegal workers.

Accordingly, labour inspections will be carried out by the Ministry of Labour officials with the assistance of officials from the Safety and Security Establishment majorly in four governorates, Muscat, Dhofar, Al Batinah North and Al Batinah South.

“However, contrary to what is circulated, officials from the Safety and Security Establishment will not be carrying out any searches for labour law violators, instead they will just be assisting the inspection procedures. No inspection can be carried out by anyone other than the Ministry of Labour officials,” said Nasser bin Salem al



Inspection of workers and workplaces will remain to be the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour employees only

Hadhrami, Director-General of the General-Directorate of Labour in Dhofar Governorate.

Earlier, the Ministry of Labour entered into an agreement with the Safety and Security Establishment to give the status of judicial officers (inspection) starting January 1 and to launch the inspection unit in conformation to the government’s keenness to adopt new policies to regulate the labour market.

Accordingly, the earlier

decision to allow the SSE to carry out random labour inspections at organisations and to bring the illegal workers to law is cancelled considering that its employees do not fall within the concept of a public employee.

Speaking to the Observer, Al Hadhrami further said that the inspection of workers and workplaces will remain to be the responsibility of Ministry of Labour employees only and random inspection of workers

and workplaces and issuance of violations will continue as before.

“These measures of bringing violators to law are aimed at improving services by raising the quality and efficiency of labour audit operations in accordance with the development taking place in the labour market and the country’s drive towards economic openness and facilitation of investments to the country,” he added.

SU bags consultancy project on food waste awareness from ‘be’ah

MUSCAT: Sohar University(SU) was awarded the constancy project Oman Food Waste Awareness Study, in a highly competitive bid on the joint-industry-academia EJAAD platform, by Oman Environmental Services Holding Company SAOC (be’ah).

The formal agreement, inked on November 8, 2023, between Dr Hamdan al Fazari, Vice Chancellor of Sohar University, and Mohammed Moosa Ibrahim, Chief Corporate Support Officer at be’ah, designates Professor Rakesh Belwal, Principal Investigator from the Faculty of Business at Sohar University, to spearhead the development of the baseline instrument and assess public food waste awareness in the Sultanate of Oman.

Professor Belwal, along with



The project aligns with be’ah’s commitment to UN Sustainable Development Goals and Oman Vision 2040

the support of researchers Dr Muhammed Shakil Ahmed and Fatma al Qasmi, has initiated a comprehensive study using a questionnaire-based survey and subsequent focus groups. This study is set to cover all governorates in Oman over the next eight months.

Dr Hamdan al Fazari affirmed Sohar University’s unwavering commitment to

collaborative research, highlighting the institution’s distinction as the leading higher education institution in Oman for research quality. Professor Ghassan al Kindi, Pro-Vice Chancellor of Research and Innovation, congratulated Professor Belwal on securing his third consecutive research and consultancy project from be’ah, emphasising the university’s

dedication to excellence and growth.

In a statement on behalf of be’ah, Dr Farah al Barwani, Senior Manager - Research and Development at be’ah, stated, “This project aligns with be’ah’s commitment to UN Sustainable Development Goals and Oman Vision 2040. The initiative aims to mitigate the economic, environmental, and social impact of food waste, in harmony with the broader vision for a sustainable future in Oman.” Sohar University, rapidly advancing in research and consulting capabilities, has ascended to the 17th position among Arab institutions for the citation of published research articles. This significant accomplishment represents a remarkable 20-point rise in the QS Arab University Rankings this year.



“Tender Announcement”
Supply of Food Parcels for the “Ramadan Iftar Program”
for the Year 1445 AH / 2024 AD for
Al Mahrah Governorate and Surrounding Areas
in the Republic of Yemen
Tender No. 1/2024

Oman Charitable Organization (O.C.O.) announces a tender for the supply of 27,900 (Twenty Seven Thousand and Nine Hundred) food parcels for the “Ramadan Iftar Program” for the year 1445 AH / 2024 AD, and distributing them to all the districts of Al Mahrah Governorate and the surrounding areas according to the attached list of locations (16 locations).

Specialized merchants and suppliers wishing to submit their bids for this tender can obtain the terms and conditions from the Financial Department of Oman Charitable Organization against payment of nominal fees, during the period from Monday 1 January 2024 to Thursday 04 January 2024. The last date for bid submission and acceptance shall be Wednesday 10 January 2024.

Bids shall be deposited in the tender box at the Financial Department, O.C.O. Headquarters Building at the Wilayat of Baushar, Muscat Governorate, Al Khuwair 33, Southern Street No. 47, near Sultan Said bin Taimur Mosque. Bids shall be placed in closed envelopes sealed with red wax and addressed to H.E. the Chairman of the Projects and Tenders Committee of O.C.O. before the specified date.

“O.C.O. is not obligated to award the tender in whole or in part or to consider the lowest price.”



THE
YEAR

FULL OF
OPPORTUNITIES

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

FROM one year to the other we cannot just drift from one calendar to the other. Do we just celebrate the arrival of a new year or do we take time to reflect? Business organisations do their year end audits and come up with the budget and projects for the new year.

But what about individuals? 2024 is a leap year and so it provides us with one more day in February. No matter what, some individuals plan what they want to achieve each year. If one has achieved the previous goals then they set more.

For others, it might be difficult to narrow down to how they want to grow. Basically setting goals to them is looking forward to further growth.

Hatim al Abdulsalam is a life coach, and this is how he sets his goals. “At the end of each year, I base my goals on three principles — Every goal I set has to get me closer to God, help me build relationships with others, develop me to become the best version of myself.”

“So based on these three I start breaking them down to small tangible goals. For example, pray more, support the poor and needy, watch what I say and do so that my faith becomes stronger,” he added.

Writer, Shahad al Wahaibi, also believes in setting goals. “Goal setting is important to eliminate distractions and set habits that help achieve them, many do not reach their goal not because it is impossible to do but do not turn the goal into actions,” she said. “I like to reset from time to time and not necessary new year but hearing people speaking about it encourages me to reflect,” she added.

If one has not succeeded yet, Shahad gives hope. “Write it down, there is power in writing. Make it simple and with a time line, be your biggest cheerleader and celebrate every milestone incremental growth is what will take you far not the one big leap,” she explained.

A business strategist Heba Zitouni gave the next step of having goals. She said the starting point is setting of the goals. “Because without a goal there is no plan,” she said adding that the ‘plan’ is the key word.

“Goal without a plan is just a dream. If the road map is messy, then there is no destination to move forward to. By having achievable big goals that are broken down into small goals with milestones. By this, your focus will be narrowed into small goals that make the big one,” Heba explained.

If a person is new at setting goals there is no need to be overwhelmed as one can focus on small attainable goals such as new habits and routines. For Hatim becoming a better version of himself meant getting his Masters degree. For another person it could be attaining driving license. For business people it could be a new market or product. The objective is to grow.

“Every sunshine brings new opportunities. Those who are smart enough are the ones who wake early and grab it. It is the negativity that control other people’s life,” Heba reflected.

2023 was a successful year for events industry

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

As we welcome new year, it is also a time to look back at how successful the year 2023 was. Oman's events scenario is aplomb after having hosted an impressive number of international events housing more than 1.5 million visitors comprising over 90 nationalities to its 19 international events besides helping an average of 17,000 students to graduate between January to December 2023.

The rate of visitation growth is estimated to be more than 62 per cent as Oman was home for over 149 national events and a perpetual support to more than 90 SMEs, thanks to the iconic, state-of-the-art Oman Convention and Exhibition Center (OCEC) which

helped it bag the coveted ‘Best Venue Middle East Awards 2023 as well as the ‘Innovative CEO of the Year 2023’ accolades home.

Speaking to the Observer, Said al Shanfari, CEO of Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre said that the year 2023 was one of the busiest years after its inception in 2016 as the demand for a venue like OCEC was all the more on the rise.

“The year 2023 was an exciting year as far as events are concerned as we have been constantly attracting both international and high-profile events to the country thanks to our state-of-the-art facilities. Hosting events in our homeland has a multitude of benefits in terms of both tourism enrichment and contribution to the GDP of the country. We are pretty convinced that these events hosted by the OCEC directly raise

Oman’s visibility on the international stage, channelling foreign investments to our country and participating actively to our overall foreign investment strategy,” Al Shanfari said.

MAJOR EVENTS

Some of the major events to which Oman played host include World Veteran Table Tennis Championships (from January 15 to 21) which welcomed over 1,600 table tennis competitors from 69 nations into Oman, producing an estimated economic value of more than RO 3 million of direct and indirect revenue into the economy.

This is followed by the 2nd Asian Arabic Debating Championship, which welcomed more than 300 intellectuals and academics heading to the country (from January 29 to February 2) engaging in debate and cultural and ideas exchange. All these events in 2023

amounted to nearly 35 regional and international events, which welcomed delegates from all over the globe.

The OCEC has also organised its own flagship events such as the ‘Muscat Art’, which reunited thousands of visitors and allowed international and local artists to showcase their art. The 2023 season is ending on a high-note with the much-anticipated MIJEX jewellery exhibition having reunited 45 international and local brands to showcase their latest collections.

Employment opportunities for local workforce: Al Shanfari expressed his confidence in attracting more Omani youth to the event sector with its outreach events being held from time to time at the National Youth Centre in alignment with its overall strategy of empowering young Omanis. This will help them achieve their professional

ambitions and guide them to a career in the business tourism sector as the OCEC is planning to welcome 40 interns in 2024, a 100 per cent rise from last year’s number, and as part of this strategy.

Marching forward, with more than 1.5 million square metres for exhibition space, an equivalent to 200 football pitches and 1,700 square metres of LED screen, an equivalent to 9 tennis courts, Al Shanfari said that OCEC would be hosting a plethora of international, regional and local events to the Oman soil aiming at fairing in terms of visibility, number of visitors and in terms of contribution to the national GDP.

“We are already geared up for its 2024 calendar, expecting to surpass 2023 figures with a high number of international and regional events coming to the country,” adds Al Shanfari.



Bulgaria, Romania to join Schengen



European flags are displayed at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France. – Reuters file photo

BRUSSELS: Bulgaria and Romania received the go-ahead to join Europe’s free-travel Schengen area starting in March 2024, the Spanish EU presidency announced.

Air and maritime internal border controls between the two EU countries and other Schengen members will be lifted on March 31, while a decision on the end of land controls will be taken at a later time, the EU said.

Border checks between the 27 Schengen members are largely suspended allowing people to travel, work and live in another member country without visas or permits.

The European Commission welcomed the decision to admit Bulgaria and Romania.

“Congratulations to Bulgaria and Romania: this great achievement is possible thanks to your hard work, commitment and perseverance,” Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in a statement. “Thanks to you the Schengen area will become even stronger to the benefit of all EU citizens.”

Romanian President Klaus Iohannis welcomed the “important step,” saying that efforts would continue towards the lifting of checks on persons at internal land borders.

“Today, Schengen becomes stronger,” said Bulgarian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mariya Gabriel. “Committed to continue the work in 2024.”

Bulgaria, Romania, Ireland and Cyprus are the only EU countries that are not

part of the Schengen area, while non-EU states Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein are members.

Efforts by Bulgaria and Romania to join had stalled for more than a decade since the commission first deemed the countries Schengen ready in 2011, mainly due to resistance from Austria.

Vienna argued that too many illegal migrants were reaching Austria via the two countries. New members can only be admitted if all member countries agree.

The judiciary and the rule of law in Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the EU in 2007, had been under special scrutiny by Brussels due to rampant corruption and organised crime.

Because of these issues, fellow member countries had not been able to unanimously agree to admit the two countries to the EU’s Schengen zone.

The commission, which repeatedly stressed that both countries fulfil all requirements to join Schengen, officially ended the monitoring in September.

European Council President Charles Michel congratulated the countries on the achievement.

“A long awaited step for Romanian and Bulgarian citizens to enjoy easier freedom of movement with the perspective of land transport to come,” he said on X.

European Parliament President Roberta Metsola echoed Michel’s words, adding “It was a long time coming. It makes our Union stronger and our people safer.”

— dpa

Australia thunderstorms raise flash flood risks

SYDNEY: Parts of Australia’s east face severe thunderstorms for the second straight day on Sunday, the weather bureau warned, with heavy rains raising the risk of dangerous flash flooding.

In the last 24 hours, a wild weather system across the southeastern regions of Queensland and northern New South Wales has produced torrential rains, hailstones as big as 5 cm and wind gusts close to 100 kmph.

The rural town of Beerburrum in Queensland’s Sunshine Coast region picked up 127 mm of rain, roughly a month’s average.

“Yet another day of severe thunderstorms is on the way ... with the storm risk becoming more extensive throughout the first week of 2024,” Miriam Bradbury, a forecaster at the Bureau of Meteorology, said in a video message on the social media platform X.

Some parts of Queensland will receive “locally intense rainfall which will lead to flash flooding,” she said.

Federal Emergency Management Minister Murray Watt said the government will deploy up to 70 military veterans and retired emergency service



Sydney set to smash rainfall records as Australia braces for more floods. – Reuters file photo

workers across southeast Queensland to assist with the cleanup efforts from recent storms.

The latest storms follow severe weather on December 25 and 26 that killed 10 people and knocked out power for tens of thousands of properties across the east, and after Cyclone Jasper earlier this month caused widespread flooding and damage.

Climate change has amplified Australia’s weather extremes in recent years, experts say. The El Nino weather phenomenon, which can provoke wildfires, cyclones and prolonged drought, is also affecting the country

during its current summer period.

Even as authorities prepare for thunderstorms in some parts, towns in Queensland’s outback are sweltering with a heatwave across swathes of Australia’s north. Temperatures in one such town, Julia Creek, could touch 45°C on Sunday, according to weather forecasts.

But the weather in the country’s southeast is expected to be mild. Sydney is set for its iconic New Year’s Eve fireworks display with authorities expecting one million people around the foreshore to watch the traditional 12-minute pyrotechnic display.

— Reuters

Mexico restarts repatriating Venezuelans as tensions run high

MEXICO CITY: Mexico’s government has restarted repatriation flights of Venezuelans, two days after officials agreed to work more closely with their US counterparts to tackle record migration at their shared border.

Earlier this week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Mexico to hold high-level talks on migration and other issues.

The talks came after the US government temporarily shuttered some border crossings to redeploy agents towards enforcement.

The Mexican foreign ministry said “it was agreed to restart the coordinated mechanism of repatriation flights for Venezuelans.”

“Both countries are working on the implementation of social programmes in Venezuela that will benefit, among others,



People wait to receive food from an organisation in Matamoros, Mexico. – Reuters

repatriated people by linking them with productive projects and paid internships in workplaces,” the statement said.

Meanwhile, US Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said on social media that the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement had also repatriated

Venezuelans this week.

“The US continues to remove those who have no legal basis to remain back to their countries of origin, including Venezuela,” he wrote on X. “We also continue to work with our partners, including Mexico, to expand lawful pathways and coordinate enforcement measures against those who do not use them.”

The Venezuelan transport ministry confirmed on social media that 207 nationals had landed on Saturday morning in Maiquetia, near the capital Caracas, from Mexico “as part of the migration agreements established by both nations.”

More than half a million migrants this year crossed the dangerous Darien Gap jungle connecting South America with Central America - double last year’s record

— Reuters

Taliban balk at Security Council plan for envoy



Afghanistan’s acting Minister of Defence Mawlawi Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid (C) speaks during a press conference in Kabul. – AFP

KABUL: Afghanistan’s Taliban authorities criticised the UN Security Council’s plan for a special envoy to promote gender and human rights in the country as “unnecessary”.

On Friday, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted a resolution calling for the appointment of a special envoy for Afghanistan to increase engagement with the country and its Taliban leaders.

But foreign ministry spokesman Abdul Qahar Balkhi said a new envoy “is unnecessary as Afghanistan is not a conflict zone and is ruled by a central government that is able to secure its national interests”.

In a post on social media site X, he said the Taliban government welcomes “more robust and enhanced engagement” with the UN, but special envoys “have complicated situations further via imposition of external solutions”.

“The approach of the government of Afghanistan will ultimately be guided by the unaltered religious beliefs, cultural values and national interests of the people of Afghanistan,” he said on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Since the Taliban surged back to power in August 2021, Kabul’s new rulers have insisted on their right to impose social controls in accordance with their austere interpretation.

They have rejected appeals to obey international law as undue meddling in their domestic affairs.

Teenage girls have been banned from attending most secondary schools and women from universities, prompting global outrage and protests in some Afghan cities.

The UN resolution followed an independent assessment report issued in November calling for greater engagement with Afghanistan.

It was adopted after 13 members of the Security Council voted in favour. — AFP

TENDER NOTICE

Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries
Wealth and Water Resources

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources Announces the following Tender: -

Tender No.	Description	Tender documents price (R.O)	Class	Last date for collection of documents	Last date for submission of documents
575/2023/ MAFWR/ HQ-55- Recall-1	DEVELOPMENT OF TRADITIONAL AGRICULTURE IRRIGATION SYSTEM IN ALHAWIYAH FALAJ, WILAYAT BIDIYAH	42/600	Second	Thursday 4/1/2024	Sunday 14/1/2024

- Interested Companies registered with The General Secretariat of the Tender Board (in the above mentioned Grade) may obtain Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>.

- The value of the document will be paid & submitted on line on given website.

- Preference will be given to companies whose bid includes the largest percentage of Omanization and possible purchase of national products.

- The Tenderer should attach Bid Commitment Declaration (regarding the exemption from submitting a bid bond in tenders).

- All correspondence pertaining to the tender inquiry must be online at e-tendering System.

- All correspondence pertaining to the e-tendering System technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: +968 24402200 or etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om.

TENDERS COMMITTEE

Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries Wealth and Water Resources

شركة ضيافة الصحراء ش.م.ع

Sahara Hospitality Co. (S.A.O.G.)
P.O. Box 311, Muscat, Postal Code 100, Sultanate of Oman.

DIRECTORS' REPORT FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR ENDED ON NOVEMBER 30, 2023.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I am pleased to submit the un-audited Financial Statements of the company for the financial year ended on November 30, 2023 along with related reports.

Revenue was RO 11,814,029 as against RO 12,620,245 in the corresponding period of previous year whereas net Profit after taxes for the period was RO 2,562,469 as against RO 2,563,932 in the previous year.

The total shareholders fund increased from RO 27,150,944 at the end of November 2022 to RO 27,732,589 at the end of current financial year and as a result of this growth, the net assets per share have recorded R.O 3.500.

On behalf of the Board of directors, I express our most sincere gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tarik Bin Taimour Al Said for his wise leadership and generous support to the private sector. Furthermore, I would extend our gratitude to his government for their co-operation and assistance with special mention to Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Muscat Security Market and Capital Market Authority.

I conclude this report by expressing our appreciation to our shareholders, Petroleum Development Oman, our bankers and customers for their valued support and cooperation.

For and on behalf of Board of Directors,

TALAL BIN QAIS AL ZAWAWI
CHAIRMAN

Unaudited consolidated Statement of Financial Position as at 30 Nov, 2023		
	30th Nov, 2023 RO. '000	30th Nov, 2022 RO. '000
Fixed Assets	15,153	14,690
Current Assets		
Inventories	28	25
Trade & Other Receivables	5,157	5,938
Receivables from Related Party	71	25
Bank and Cash	10,806	8,805
	16,062	14,793
Total Assets	31,215	29,483
Current liabilities		
Trade and other Payables	1,234	491
Payables to related parties	1,583	1,171
Lease liability	22	21
Tax liability	419	438
	3,258	2,121
Long-term liabilities		
Lease liability	23	46
Deferred Tax liability	183	149
Employees' end of service benefits	19	16
	225	211
Total Liabilities	3,483	2,332
Net Assets	27,732	27,151
Shareholder's Fund		
Share Capital	7,923	7,923
Legal Reserve	2,641	2,641
Retained Earnings	17,168	16,587
Total Shareholders' Equity	27,732	27,151

Unaudited consolidated Statement of Comprehensive Income for 12 months ended 30 Nov, 2023.		
	12 months ended 30th Nov, 2023 RO. '000	12 months ended 30th Nov, 2022 RO. '000
Turnover/Revenue	11,814	12,620
Gross Profit	3,241	3,383
Other Income	235	218
Administration & General Expenses	(453)	(576)
Operating Profit	3,023	3,025
Finance Charges	(8)	(8)
Profit before taxation	3,015	3,017
Taxation	(452)	(453)
Net Profit attributable to ordinary shareholders	2,563	2,564
Net profit margin	22%	20%

The complete accounts in either Arabic or English will be delivered to any shareholder within 7 days of receipt of the request. Such request may be sent to the Board Secretary, Sahara Hospitality Co. (S.A.O.G.), P.O.Box: 311, Postal Code –100, Muscat.

ON:18 CE No. 1/62731/7



Israeli jets pound central Gaza with chaotic strikes

GAZA: Israeli jets intensified attacks on central Gaza on Sunday, residents and medics said, as battles raged through the rubble of towns and refugee camps in a war that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said would take “many more months” to end.

Netanyahu’s comments signal no let up in a campaign that has killed many thousands and levelled much of Gaza, while his vow to restore Israeli control over the enclave’s border with Egypt raises new questions over an eventual two-state solution.

Air strikes pounded al-Maghazi and al-Bureij in the centre of the Palestinian enclave, killing eight people in one house and driving more to flee to Rafah on the border with Egypt from front lines where Israeli tanks strike.

A Red Crescent video showed the chaotic aftermath of strikes in central Gaza, as rescuers worked in the dark to carry an injured child from smoking rubble.

The stated goal of Israel’s military is to eliminate the Palestinian groups.

Israel’s air and artillery bombardment has killed more than 21,800 people according to health authorities in Gaza, with many more feared dead in the rubble, and pushed nearly all its 2.3 million people from their



Displaced Palestinians, who fled their homes due to Israeli strikes, shelter in a tent camp, in Rafah. – Reuters

homes.

The war and lack of supplies has left 40 per cent of Gazans at risk of famine, the Gaza director of the UN agency for Palestinian

refugees said on social media.

Israel blockaded most food, fuel and medicine after the Oct. 7.

People on Sunday sat outside their makeshift tents in Rafah,

wedged among the ruins of houses destroyed by Israeli bombardment, as some sought food or clean water. In central Gaza, dark smoke rose above the

fighting.

The United States, Israel’s main ally, has urged it to scale down the war and European states have signalled alarm at the extent of

A Red Crescent video showed the chaotic aftermath of strikes in central Gaza, as rescuers worked in the dark to carry an injured child from smoking rubble

Palestinian civilian suffering.

However Netanyahu’s comments, when he said he would not resign despite opinion polls showing his government is broadly unpopular and defended his security record despite the Oct. 7, indicate there will be no easing any time soon.

Israel says 174 of its military personnel have been killed in the Gaza fighting but that its operations are making progress, including by destroying some tunnels under the enclave.

Palestinian media reported on Saturday that Abdel-Fattah Maali, a senior member of Palestinian groups armed wing, was killed in an Israeli strike in Gaza. It said Maali, originally from the West Bank, was freed during a 2011 prisoner swap and expelled to Gaza. — Reuters

N Korea’s Kim orders military to prepare for possible ‘war’



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un gestures as he attends the 8th Plenary Meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea, at the party’s headquarters, in Pyongyang, North Korea. – Reuters

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un wrapped up the year with fresh threats of a nuclear attack on Seoul and orders for a military arsenal build-up to prepare for a war that can “break out any time” on the peninsula, state media reported on Sunday.

Kim lambasted the United States during a lengthy speech at the end of five days of year-end party meetings that set his country’s military, political and economic policy decisions for 2024.

The meeting announced plans for further military development in the coming

year, including launching three more spy satellites, building unmanned drones and developing electronic warfare capabilities, as well as strengthening nuclear and missile forces, according to the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

This year, Pyongyang successfully launched a reconnaissance satellite, enshrined its status as a nuclear power in its constitution and test-fired the most advanced intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in its arsenal.

Kim accused the United States of posing “various forms

of military threat” and ordered his armed forces to maintain the “overwhelming war response capability”, according to KCNA’s account of the meeting.

The meeting concluded that it is a “fait accompli that a war may break out on the Korean peninsula any time due to the enemies’ reckless moves for invading the DPRK”, KCNA said. In an effort to deter Pyongyang, Washington deployed a nuclear-powered submarine in the South Korean port city of Busan this month and flew its long-range bombers in drills with Seoul and Tokyo.

— AFP

DR Congo’s Tshisekedi wins second term in landslide victory

KINSHASA: DR Congo’s President Felix Tshisekedi has won a second term in office with a landslide victory, according to provisional results announced on Sunday, in a vote opposition leaders have dismissed as a “sham”.

Provisional results from the single-round presidential ballot, declared by the country’s electoral commission Ceni, showed that Tshisekedi had won 73 per cent of the vote.

Moise Katumbi — a wealthy businessman, football club owner and former provincial governor — was the runner-up with about 18 per cent.

The Democratic Republic of Congo’s Constitutional Court is expected to confirm the provisional results on January 10.

Tshisekedi, 60, first came to power in January 2019 after a disputed election that many observers said he had in fact lost.

Martin Fayulu — who says he was robbed of the last presidential election in 2018 — also contested this year’s poll but in the end won



Agents of Congo’s National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) count casted ballot during the parliamentary and presidential election at a polling station in Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of Congo. – Reuters file photo

about five per cent of the votes.

The 20 remaining candidates were either under, or hovering around, one per cent.

Nine opposition candidates — Mukwege, Fayulu and Katumbi — on Sunday signed a declaration rejecting what they termed a “sham” election and called for a re-run.

Fayulu, addressing reporters in the capital Kinshasa the same day, said the results “are a masquerade. This must not be accepted”.

Tresor Kibangula, a political analyst at the Ebuteli research institute who spoke to AFP

before the full provisional results were released, said Tshisekedi’s vote tally “is way beyond all expectations”.

Some 44 million people out of the 100 million inhabitants of the huge country were registered to vote on December 20 for president, as well as for national and regional lawmakers and municipal councillors.

Initially scheduled for December 20, voting was officially extended by a day to account for problems, and continued for days afterwards in remote areas, according to observers. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

NIAMEY

Sahel states rally thousands to support alliance

The prime ministers of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali affirmed their commitment to a shared future under an alliance that has seen the three junta-led countries distance themselves from the larger West African political bloc since their coups.

The three neighbouring states are all ruled by military officers since 2020. This has put them at odds with the rest of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS),



which is urging them to return to democratic rule.

“From now on, we say, whether you’re from Mali, Niger or Burkina, we have the same destiny. — Reuters

BAMAKO

UN stability mission in Mali officially ends

The UN stabilization mission in Mali officially ends at the turn of the year following a decade of support, with the last soldiers already having returned to their bases. The UN mission closed its last camps in Timbuktu over the past few days. The official closing ceremony was held on December 11 in the Malian capital Bamako.

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established in 2013 to support political



processes in the West African country and carry out a number of security-related tasks. In June, Mali’s military government demanded the withdrawal of all 12,000 UN peacekeepers. — dpa

NAIROBI

RSF chief visits Djibouti amid ceasefire efforts

The leader of Sudan’s paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on Sunday visited Djibouti, which is leading regional efforts to broker a ceasefire after more than eight months of war.

His regional tour — which has also taken him to Ethiopia and Uganda — comes as diplomats scramble to broker a meeting between Daglo and his rival, Sudanese army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.

In another post on X, Djibouti



Foreign Minister Mahmoud Ali Youssouf said the visit was part of his country’s efforts, as head of regional grouping IGAD, to try to forge a ceasefire in Sudan.

— AFP



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In brief

SAN JOSE



AUTHORITIES DETAIN 12 PRIESTS IN WAVE OF ARRESTS

Nicaraguan authorities have arrested at least 12 priests since December 20, opposition figures and news reports said.

Eleven of those arrested appear on a list given by lawyer Martha Molina, an expert on Nicaraguan Church affairs, exiled in the United States.

The newspaper La Prensa also said Jader Hernandez, pastor of a church in Managua, was detained.

Relations between the Vatican and the Managua government deteriorated amid the 2018 protests, during which more than 300 people were killed in clashes between the opposition and government supporters. — AFP

COLOMBO



TROOPS KILL POLICE OFFICER IN BOTCHED DRUG RAID

A police officer was killed and another critically wounded on Sunday when troops opened fire on an undercover unit during a drug raid at a hotel in Sri Lanka, local police said.

The unit was part of a major anti-narcotics drive code-named “Yuktiya,” or justice, which police said had resulted in over 17,000 arrests in the past three weeks.

The undercover officers were at a beach hotel in Weligama, a popular surf spot on the island nation's southern coast, a police officer said. Army troops deployed to reinforce local police in the anti-drugs campaign rushed to the area to investigate an unrelated shooting and opened fire at a van speeding away from the scene. — AFP

BERLING



SCHOLZ VISITS FLOOD-HIT NORTHERN GERMANY

Chancellor Olaf Scholz travelled on Sunday to parts of northern Germany hit by floods after days of heavy rains, urging the nation “to close ranks” in the face of the challenges posed by nature.

The German leader arrived by helicopter at Verden an der Aller in Lower Saxony, one of the worst hit states, where he was briefed about the emergency situation as well as protective measures that had been undertaken.

Accompanied by the region's state premier Stephan Weil, Scholz met affected inhabitants as well as members of the emergency services. — AFP

Ukraine downs drones as Russia retaliates for Belgorod attack



Firefighters extinguish a fire in a building after a Russian drone attack in Kharkiv, Ukraine. — AFP

KYIV: Kyiv said on Sunday it had destroyed 21 of 49 drones fired after Russia vowed to retaliate for the attack on a border city that left 24 dead.

The Ukrainian air force said the drones were particularly targeted at “the front line of defence, as well as at civilian, military and infrastructure facilities in the front-line territories”.

Six guided missiles had also targeted the northeastern city of Kharkiv, Kyiv said in a statement on Telegram, without specifying whether they had hit their targets.

Oleg Sinegubov, the head of Kharkiv's military administration, said there had been 28 civilians wounded in the attack on the city, including two teenagers and a foreign citizen.

Residential buildings, offices

The official death toll has risen to 24 with 108 wounded in Belgorod — just 30 kilometres from the Ukrainian border

and cafes were hit in the latest overnight attacks, said Kharkiv mayor Igor Terekhov.

The official death toll has risen to 24 with 108 wounded in Belgorod — just 30 kilometres from the Ukrainian border, which has been repeatedly struck by what Moscow says is indiscriminate shelling.

The two sides took turns to accuse each other of pummeling

civilian areas of their shared frontier region over the weekend.

The governor of Belgorod region, Vyacheslav Gladkov, said on Sunday that one person had been killed by Ukrainian shelling in a village close to the border.

Moscow said the Belgorod attack had included the use of controversial cluster munitions, and told an emergency meeting at the UN Security Council that Kyiv had targeted a sports centre, an ice rink and a university.

Russian envoy Vasily Nebenzya called it a “deliberate, indiscriminate attack against a civilian target”.

Putin gave his traditional New Year's Eve address on Sunday, in which he praised Russia's soldiers on the front line and called for unity in the face of “difficult tasks”.

“To all those who are on duty, on the front line of the fight for truth and justice,” Putin said, “you are our heroes. Our hearts are with you. We are proud of you, we admire your courage.”

The Belgorod attack came a day after Ukraine said a barrage of Russian missile strikes on several cities, including the capital, had killed 39 people.

Schools, a maternity hospital, shopping arcades and blocks of flats were among the buildings hit in Friday's barrage, one of the most violent attacks since the start of the war.

Ukraine was still sifting through the rubble on Saturday when fresh strikes hit the regions of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia and Chernigiv, according to local authorities. — AFP

Eurostar services resume flooded tunnel probed

LONDON: Eurostar warned customers travelling from London on Sunday of potential delays after flooding forced the cancellation all Saturday trains.

The first Eurostar train left London St Pancras International shortly after 8:00 am. US tourist Mollie Burpo, 46, travelling to Paris with her family, said they had watched Saturday's travel chaos nervously but that the queue was “fast” and “well organised”.

Engineers have brought water in two tunnels in Kent in southern England under control meaning that at least one tunnel was useable, Eurostar said.

But it cautioned that “there will be some speed restrictions in place in the morning which may lead to delays and stations are expected to be very busy”.

The company operates services from London to Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam.

It announced late on Saturday that all scheduled trains would run on Sunday after an estimated over 30,000 people were impacted by the last-minute cancellations.

Travellers were left stranded on mainland Europe while those at St Pancras scrambled to find hotel rooms or make alternative travel arrangements.

Some tourists said their New Year holiday plans had been “ruined”. — AFP



Police officers stand guard at St Pancras International Station after Eurostar cancels its services due to a flooded tunnel, in London, Britain. — Reuters

Appeals court allows California to bar guns in most public places, starting 2024

LOS ANGELES: A federal appeals court cleared the way for a California law that bans the carrying of guns in most public places to take effect at the start of 2024, as the panel put on hold a judge's ruling declaring the measure unconstitutional.

The 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals suspended a December 20 injunction issued by a judge who concluded the Democratic-led state's law violated the right of citizens to keep and bear arms under the US Constitution's Second Amendment.

The three-judge panel issued an administrative stay that temporarily put the injunction on hold until a different 9th Circuit panel could consider pausing the lower-court judge's order for even longer while the litigation plays out.

“This ruling will allow California's common-sense gun laws to remain in place while we appeal the district court's dangerous ruling,” California Governor Gavin Newsom, a



Students protest gun violence in front of City Hall, in Los Angeles. — Reuters file photo

Democrat, said in a statement.

The measure, which is set to take effect on Monday after Newsom signed it into law in September, was enacted after a

landmark ruling in June 2022 by the conservative-majority US Supreme Court that expanded gun rights nationwide.

The Supreme Court in that case

struck down New York's strict gun permit regime and declared for the first time that the right to keep and bear arms under the Second Amendment protects a person's

right to carry a handgun in public for self-defence.

The ruling, *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v Bruen*, also set out a new test to assess the constitutionality of gun laws by holding they must be “consistent with the nation's historical tradition of firearm regulation.”

California, which has some of the strictest gun control laws in the United States, was among a group of states with similar laws as New York, and following the US Supreme Court's decision moved to revamp its firearms regulations.

Under California's new law, people could not carry concealed guns in 26 categories of “sensitive places” including hospitals, playgrounds, stadiums, zoos and places of worship, regardless of whether they had permits to carry concealed weapons.

The law, Senate Bill 2, also barred people from having concealed guns at privately owned commercial establishments that are open to the public. — Reuters

A literary journey of motivation and inspiration



Sandhya Rao Mehta
The writer is Associate Professor, Dept of English Language and Literature Sultan Qaboos University

A great way to greet the new year is to have a long list of unfinished books and a promise to read them all.

2024 promises to be rich in literary output but more importantly, it will be an interesting year to see what the reading trends will be.

Beginning with motivational books is appropriate at this time of year when we are looking for inspiration and self-improvement.

Dale Carnegie’s ‘How to Win Friends and Influence People’ remains a classic in the category of building confidence and networking. Carnegie’s idea that business and personal relationships are not only compatible but essential to one’s profession became a mantra that continues to be followed today.

‘Atomic Habits’ by James Clear is way ahead of many other books in this category. This practical self-help book shows how we create habits and how they can be used to our advantage by making small, practical changes.

‘Quiet: The power of introverts in a world

that can’t stop talking’ by Susan Cain is an appropriate book that focuses on a niche readership: the ones who don’t know how to yell for attention.

The book gives power and authority to those who we usually don’t consider as important. Using examples of public personalities like Rosa Parks, Yeats or even Charlie Brown, Cain shows how world changing phenomena has often been the result of the silent actions of introverts. It makes it easy to be one.

Decluttering the mind, body, soul and even the house has become trendy, even necessary.

Following Marie Kondo’s phenomenally successful ‘The life-changing magic of tidying up: The Japanese art of decluttering and organising’, cleaning up has become an art and a science. This book started an entire industry of minimalist lifestyles, resulting in other variations like Peter Walsh’s ‘Let it go: Downsizing your way to a richer, happier life’ which gives tips on how to manage letting go of a lifetime of possessions which have emotional and spiritual meanings. This is a topical book for those who

THE WRITER
UNPACKS
MOTIVATIONAL
BOOKS FOR
THE NEW YEAR
WHICH SHE
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LOOK AHEAD
AND A NEW YEAR
OF HOPE AND
PROMISE

are always on the move, making new homes while having to leave old ones behind.

Deepak Chopra’s ‘The seven spiritual laws of success: A practical guide to the fulfilment of your dreams’ remains a favourite in the bestseller list of most popular motivational books of all time.

The focus on living in harmony with nature, prioritising health and relationships, all remain solid advice for longevity and spiritual peace.

Robin Sharma also remains popular. In ‘The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari’ series, Sharma continues to write about balancing different aspects of life, cultivating relationships, and living fully, one day at a time.

Even children need motivation from time to time. Looking beyond the ‘Chicken Soup’ series, children are spoilt for choice in terms of the number of options available to them of books that make them believe in themselves and inspire them to reach out to a world of opportunities.

The new year must begin with hope and promise. These books give us much-needed motivation to look ahead.

Big Ben marks 100 years of New Year ‘bongs’

HELEN ROWE

London’s Big Ben marked the 100th anniversary of its “bongs” to ring in the New Year being broadcast live across the world. Ever since New Year’s Eve 1923 when BBC engineer A G Dryland clambered onto a roof opposite the British parliament to record the strikes, live transmission has become an annual tradition.

The unmistakable sound of the “nation’s timepiece” has long occupied a special place in national life. The bongs are heard twice daily — at 6pm and midnight and three times on Sunday — on BBC radio, and at the start of the nightly News at Ten on commercial channel ITV.

Such is their importance that even during the recently-ended five-year restoration programme when they were largely silenced, important exceptions were made.

As well as New Year, Big Ben also continued to mark Armistice Day and Remembrance when the nation remembers its war dead.

Big Ben also rang out to mark Britain’s departure from the European Union in 2021 and the state funeral of Queen Elizabeth II in 2022

After a week of testing, normal service finally resumed last November.

While the rest of London is enjoying New Year’s Eve, clock mechanic Andrew Strangeway will be at the top of the 96-metre Elizabeth Tower.

The tower houses the clock and its five bells, including the largest one from which Big Ben takes its nickname. Along with the two other members of the in-house timekeeping team, the 37-year-old will be making last minute checks to make sure the clock will be “within fractions of a second of being correct.”

Although the chances of a mishap on the big night are tiny, Strangeway said the clock did suffer a disaster during the 1970s when it stopped due to metal fatigue.

“I think the chances of anything going seriously wrong are small. Our main worry on things like New Year is — is it going to go off and is it going to be on time,” he said. Completed in 1859, the structure was known as the Clock Tower before being renamed the Elizabeth Tower in 2012 to honour the late queen’s Diamond Jubilee.

In the years before the renovation, parliament’s timekeepers would benchmark the Great Clock’s time against the telephone speaking clock.

Now, it is calibrated by GPS via Britain’s National Physical Laboratory. But the method to adjust the clock’s timing mechanism remains old-fashioned: old pennies are added or removed from weights attached to two giant coiled springs, to make or lose a second. — AFP

This was a terrible year, and hope for the best one for humanity



Nicholas Kristof
The writer is the NY Times columnist and author

As the year ends, civilians are dying at a staggering pace in the Gaza Strip and the genocide in Darfur may be resuming. A man charged with 91 felonies is leading in American presidential polls, and our carbon emissions risk cooking our planet.

But something else is also true: In some ways, 2023 may still have been the best year in the history of humanity.

How can that possibly be?

Just about the worst calamity that can befall a human is to lose a child, and historically, almost half of children worldwide died before they reached the age of 15. That share has declined steadily since the 19th century, and the United Nations Population Division projects that in 2023 a record low was reached in global child mortality, with just 3.6 per cent of newborns dying by the age of 5.

That’s the lowest such figure in human history. It still means that about 4.9 million children died this year — but that’s 1 million fewer than died as recently as 2016.

Or consider extreme poverty. It too has reached a record low, affecting a bit more than 8 per cent of humans worldwide, according to United Nations projections.

All these figures are rough, but it seems that about 100,000 people are now emerging from extreme poverty each day — so they are better able to access clean water, to feed and educate their children, to buy medicines.

None of this eases the pain of those who have lost their children in 2023, nor is it a balm for those caught in war or climate catastrophes. Yet, at year’s end, it’s worth acknowledging this backdrop of progress — not to distract anyone from all that is going wrong, but to offer a reminder that when we try hard enough, we can accomplish amazing things. Right now, looking at the anguish worldwide, I’d say we’re not trying hard enough.

I write a version of this column each year at around this time, and it upsets many readers. They believe it



A man carries a baby as he rides a bicycle past a building destroyed during Israeli bombing in Rafah in southern Gaza Strip. — AFP

is offensive to hail progress when so many are dying unnecessarily from wars and disease, when the future seems so bleak to so many.

I understand their point; my career has been dedicated to covering genocide, war and poverty. But one thing I learned long ago as a

DESPAIR SEEMS CONTRADICTIONARY IN A WORLD BRIMMING WITH PAIN, BUT THE MOST IMPORTANT TREND IN THE WORLD MAY BE THE REVOLUTION IN CHILD MORTALITY

journalist is that when our coverage is unremittingly negative, people tune out and give up. If we want to tackle problems — from the Gaza war to climate change — then it helps to know that progress is possible.

Other health news is also encouraging, a reflection of the way public health tools are behind many of the advances in well-being. Two horrifying diseases are close to eradication: polio and Guinea worm disease. Only 12 cases of wild poliovirus have been reported worldwide in 2023, and 2024 may be the last year in which wild polio is transmitted.

Meanwhile, only 11 cases of Guinea worm disease were reported in humans in the first nine months of 2023.

Likewise, the United States government recently approved new CRISPR gene-editing techniques to treat sickle cell disease — and the hope is that similar approaches can transform the treatment of cancer and other ailments. Another landmark: New vaccines have been approved for respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV, and malaria, and both are expected to save children’s lives.

Blinding trachoma is also on its way out in several countries. A woman suffering from trachoma in Mali once told me that the worst part of the disease wasn’t the blindness but, rather, the excruciating pain, which she said was as bad as childbirth but lasted for years. So, I’m thrilled that Mali and 16 other countries have eliminated trachoma.

Those who see 2023 as a notably grim year are also right, of course. My reporting in the Middle East late this year was personally depressing, and climate change threatens the gains in poor nations such as Bangladesh and Madagascar. — **The New York Times**

Welcome new year of opportunities

Every New Year marks a chance for all to make things better than the past year, which bade farewell. For the New Year ahead, each one has different plans, dreams, and goals to chase and accomplish them someday throughout the year. Although not all these could be achieved, at least you have them ready! It always worth chasing a dream to make it comes true someday. All our dreams are possible, but it is a matter of how much we strive to make them really possible!

As it has been said that success comes only to those who believe in their dreams. Accordingly, the more people believe in their dreams, the easier they become possible and achievable. Regardless of how challenging our dreams are, we can make them become a reality by believing in them and persisting to achieve them. Hellen Keller said, “Your success and happiness lies in you. Resolve to keep happy, and your joy and you shall form an invincible host against difficulties.”

Whether we want them or not, every New Year brings new challenges and opportunities. It is upon us to decide how to make the most of all these challenges and opportunities that we come across. Although nobody can go back and make a new beginning, anyone can start from now and make a brand-new ending at least for the coming year. Possibly, we all can make a promise and have a dream and work on achieving our dreams as well as fulfilling our promises regardless of how difficult they are.

Let’s all start by looking at the lives of all those who achieved outstanding successes by being committed to their goals and plans. They challenged themselves and proved they could make their dreams possible! There are countless examples



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An author, columnist, creative writer, translator and a communications professional

of individuals whose endless efforts and perseverance brought enlightenment to humanity overall. Case in point, Thomas Edison, the inventor of the light bulb and other inventions, was very committed to succeed even though he failed at least in 700 different projects.

Some might have faced similar experiences like Edison. However, the only difference is that he was committed to achieving their goals and dreams. Hence, we should be self-confident and believe in our dreams and goals. Through our wisdom, hard work, commitment, persistence, and God’s will, we can succeed in what we have set out to achieve. The only key question that we all need to ask ourselves is where do we stand in setting our goals and what are we doing to achieve them?

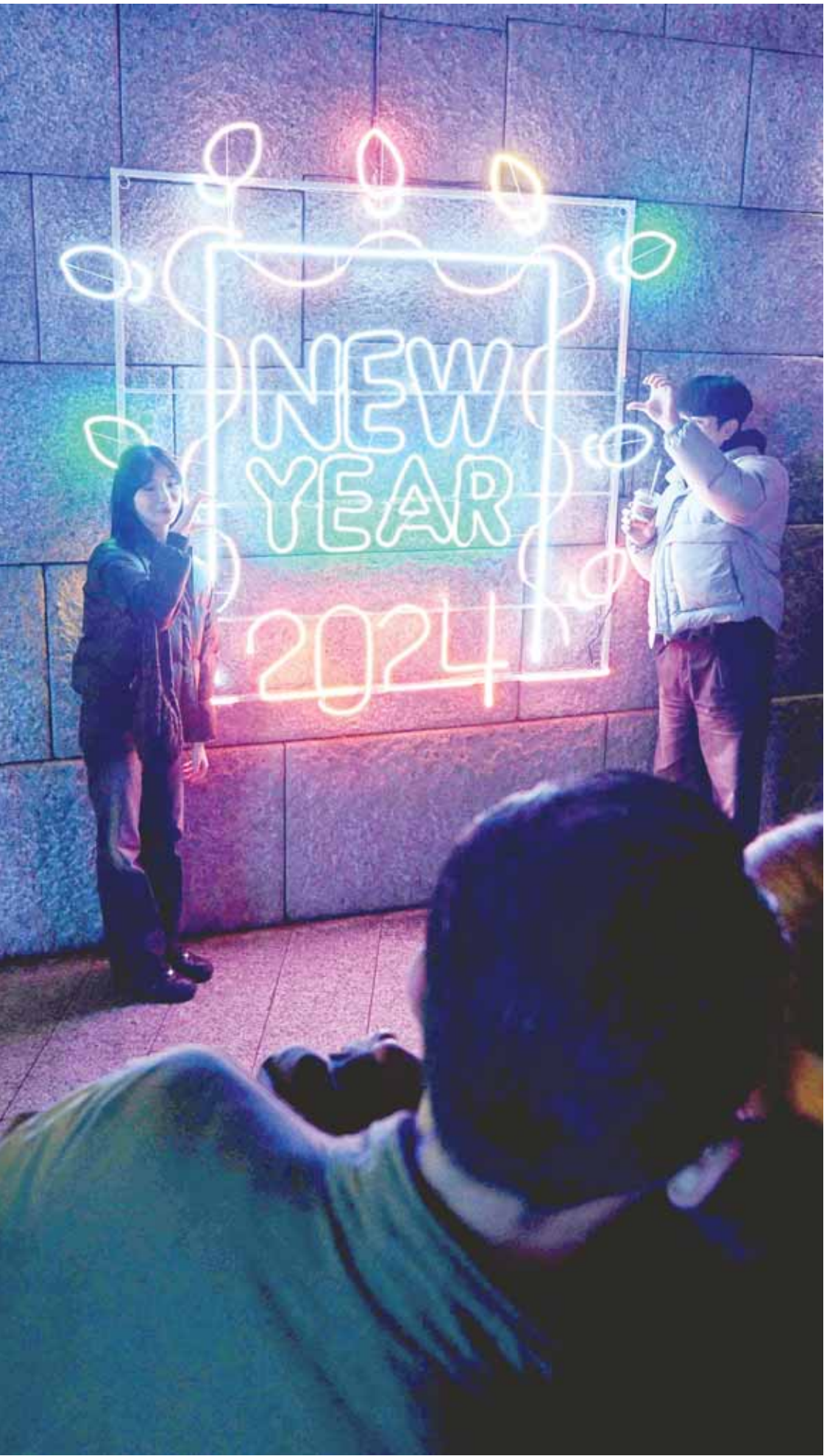
Today, we have a new book in our life with 365 blank pages to write on. It is us who decide what to note down or stamp on those pages every single moment we live each day. Just remember that every time you flip a page of this book, you present a space for new ideas and progress in your life. There is always a second chance to change things and make your day or life even better. I assure you that life is full of opportunities, but it is us who decide when to grab it.

Another year with different happy and sad memories, success, achievements and disappointments has passed. With every New Year comes greater challenges and obstacles in our life, but it is part of the experience and life enjoyment! As the New Year is just kicking off, I wish you all courage, hope and faith to overcome all the challenges and hard times that you come across. As the New Year dawns and approaches us with new hopes, I wish each and every one of you a wonderful year ahead filled with promises of a brighter tomorrow.

Happy New Year and wish you all a happy, prosperous, and successful year!

THE MORE PEOPLE BELIEVE IN THEIR DREAMS, THE EASIER THEY BECOME POSSIBLE AND ACHIEVABLE.

TURNING A NEW LEAF



People get ready to welcome New Year in central Seoul on Sunday. – AFP

The West must face reality in Ukraine

Harvard’s Graham Allison recently commented that, while China “is and will be the fiercest rival a ruling power has ever faced,” the current “demonisation” of the country “confuses more than it clarifies.” To “create and sustain a strategy for meeting the China challenge,” Allison insists, the United States “must understand China for what it is” — neither “ten feet tall” nor “on the brink of collapse.” Post-Soviet Russia has never received such consideration.

On the contrary, the US has spent decades caricaturing Russia as both a quintessential villain and a fragile has-been. After Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, then-President Barack Obama dismissed it as a “regional power” displaying its own weakness. And following the full-scale attack of Ukraine last year, the apparent assumption was that Russia — and Vladimir Putin’s regime — would quickly crumble under the weight of Western sanctions.

Putin’s decision to attack Ukraine was fuelled by delusion. But that does not mean that the West’s assessment of the situation was sensible.

On the contrary, most Western observers seemed to be able to imagine just two scenarios: either Putin takes Kyiv in a matter of days, turning Ukraine into a Kremlin puppet, or Russia is quickly defeated, forcing Putin to withdraw his troops and recognise Ukraine’s territorial integrity.

This helps to explain why, when Russia’s initial offensive stalled, then-



Nina I. Khrushcheva

The writer is the Professor of International Affairs at The New School and co-author with Jeffrey Tayler

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, visiting Kyiv, reportedly recommended that Ukraine should “just fight,” rather than negotiate a peace deal.

Better to let Russia lose — weakening the country’s economy, depleting its military, and damaging Putin’s position, possibly beyond repair — than to reward it for its attack.

And Russia would lose, the narrative went. Whereas Ukraine had the West’s full-throated support — with weapon and aid flows to match — Russia did not have enough equipment, and what it did have was as outdated as its tactics.

Beyond the battlefield, unprecedented Western sanctions were destined to trigger a harsh backlash against Putin; Russians might even storm the Kremlin to regain access to European handbags and American fast food. No one seemed to imagine that the demonisation and dismissal of most things Russian could galvanise Russians against the West, or that Russia would be able to sustain a long war.

Yet this is precisely what has happened. Russia continued to leverage its numerical advantage while updating its battlefield strategy and boosting the production of military hardware. At home, it minimised the costs of the sanctions, not only by circumventing them, but also by

making sure that local actors – including the Russian state – gained ownership of departing Western firms’ Russian operations at rock-bottom prices. Meanwhile, it built up its war economy.

For ordinary Russians, things are not bad at all. Store shelves are well-stocked, and restaurants are bustling. Pensions and salaries have increased – not as much as inflation, but enough to support the Kremlin-backed narrative that Russia is standing strong, despite the West’s best efforts to destroy it.

Far from recognising how dangerous this narrative is, Western leaders continue to reinforce it, with Polish President Andrzej Duda, for example, saying in June, at the start of Ukraine’s failed counteroffensive

that “Russians need to feel the bitter taste of defeat.

The war is still not popular in Russia: 56 per cent of the Russians surveyed in October by the Levada Center expressed support for transitioning to peace talks. At the same time, just 34 per cent of respondents reported that they would support withdrawing Russian troops from Ukraine and returning Russian-controlled Ukrainian territory. Meanwhile, Putin’s approval rating remains above 80%. Call it the Stalingrad effect.

While Russians rally around Putin, Ukraine’s Western backers seem to be losing their resolve. Earlier this month, European Union leaders failed to push

through a €50 billion (\$55 billion) financial aid package for Ukraine, though they have agreed to start EU accession talks. This failure came as the US Congress gave up on passing a new military aid package for Ukraine this year.

Now, President Joe Biden is promising that the US will stand with Ukraine not for “as long as it takes,” as he used to claim, but for “as long as we can.” He still argues that Russia lacks the “resources and capacity” to sustain a long war in Ukraine, and, indeed, sanctions will ultimately take a toll on Russia’s economy. But Putin will throw everything he has at this war — and will likely maintain considerable popular support along the way.

The decline in foreign aid is already weakening Ukraine’s position on the battlefield, after a year of few tangible gains by Ukrainian forces. Meanwhile, a rift seems to be growing between Zelensky and the Ukrainian military’s commander-in-chief, General Valery Zaluzhny.

There are three plausible scenarios. First, the West recommits to supporting Ukraine. But the political hurdles — Republican opposition in the US, and a Hungarian (and now Slovak) veto in the EU — are high. Even if they are cleared, Ukraine will struggle to recruit enough new soldiers. – Project Syndicate @2023



Putin’s decision to attack Ukraine was fuelled by delusion.

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Participants in the last edition

Al Mouj, Ministry of Heritage and Tourism join forces to host Muscat Marathon

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) has partnered with Sabco Sports to increase the reach of the event and promote Oman's potential to become the next great sports and adventure tourism destination. Scheduled on 26-27 of January, the event has grown to become Oman's biggest run and now aims to capture a growing global audience seeking exciting tourism experiences.

Haitham bin Mohammed al Ghassani, the Director General of Tourism Promotion at the Ministry of

Heritage and Tourism, affirmed, "The tourism sector experienced remarkable growth in 2023, and we foresee the continuation of this positive trend. Sports tourism events constitute a fundamental strategic pillar embraced by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism to enhance inbound tourist traffic to the Sultanate of Oman. The Al Mouj Muscat Marathon holds a prominent position in the ministry's tourism calendar for 2024, serving as a catalyst for attracting international participants, alongside

the active participation of local runners from across the Sultanate of Oman. Our enduring objective is to showcase Oman's culture, beauty, and unique experiences, emphasising its capacity to host a diverse array of tourism events to appeal to various types of travellers. This event significantly contributes to promotional, economic, and social gains, leading to the diversification of the economy through sports tourism activities."

"We are very proud to partner with the Ministry of Heritage of Tourism

and excited to introduce Oman to new audiences and encourage more people to visit this amazing country using the mass appeal of sport. With awe-inspiring nature, authentic charm and world class facilities, Oman continues to develop a reputation for being a vibrant destination for local and international tourists and can play a role in developing a thriving tourism sector in the coming years," says Ali al Ajmi, General Manager of Sabco Sports.

Organised by Sabco Sports and hosted

by Al Mouj Muscat, Oman's premier destination and title sponsor of the event, there are five race categories to choose from ranging from 1 km, 2 km and 3 km Kids' Runs to a half- and full marathon. All finishers will receive a tech t-shirt and a medal to celebrate their achievement.

Over 12,000 runners of all ages are expected, with registrations flowing in from across the nation and around the world to experience the unique atmosphere of the race and spend a fun-filled weekend at Al Mouj Muscat.

Iran's Sepher lifts Oman Squash Open title

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 31

Iranian ranking player, Sepehr Etemadpoor defeated Bahrain's Yousif Thani 3-2 to snatch the title of 2023 Oman Squash Open on Thursday at the squash hall of Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher. Kuwait's Athbi Hamed blanked Egyptian player Omar Afifi 3-2 to finish third in the play-off match. In the semis, the champions Sepehr won against Athbi 3-0 while Yousif ended the challenge of Afifi by the same result.

Hisham bin Juma al Sinani, General Director of Welfare and Sports Development in the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, was the chief guest for the concluding ceremony in the presence of Dr Abdulrahim bin Musallam al Droushi, Chairman of Oman Racket Sports Committee (ORSC). The chief guest delivered the awards and cash prizes to the top winners with a total cash prize of \$1,900. The first placed winner Sepehr Etemadpoor received



A group photo of the first places winners

\$1,000 and the trophy while Yousif Thani from Bahrain has been awarded \$500. Kuwait's Athbi Hamed and Omar Afifi from Egypt who finished in the third and fourth places got \$250 and \$150 respectively.

The three days event was classified as the first PSA tournament in Muscat under organisation of ORSC in cooperation with global

organisation of PSA and BWF. The event featured strong competitions among the participants from many top local players who already have BWF rankings besides other overseas players from Bahrain, Kuwait, Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, Philippines, India and Tunisia.

The Iranian winner Etemadpoor began his campaign in the tournament with a match against Said al Hajri in the last 16 round.

He managed to end the match at 3-0 before beating another local player Waleed al Niri 3-0 in the quarters. In the semifinal, Etemadpoor trashed Kuwait's Athbi Hamed 3-0 and then Bahrain's Yousif Thani 3-2 in the final match to snatch the title.

BIG SUCCESS

The chief guest Hisham al Sinani expressed his satisfactory on the

success of 2023 Oman Squash Open event. " It was a high class event as it featured participants from the international ranking players beside some local ranking players. It is very crucial to provide a proper environment for the domestic players to gain the right exposure and expertise by playing against top players. Really impressed with ORSC hard works since its formation in last July

towards boosting Racket Sports in the Sultanate of Oman," he said

THRILLING OUTCOMES

Dr Abdulrahim bin Musallam al Droushi, Chairman of (ORSC), affirmed that this event produced many thrilling outcomes. " Hosting this event under international recognition from PSA and BWF gave a great boost for the event. Oman has the right infrastructures with proper venues, human resources that can manage the hosting of the events beside an official Racket Sports Committee under supervision of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth. All these will put Oman in a better position to host bigger event in the forthcoming period," he added

The chief of ORSC concluded his statement with special thanks to the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for the continuous support. " Another thanks goes to all the overseas and local players who took part in the event and registered the success of this tournament," he signed out.

Villa up to second, Man City back in the groove

LONDON: Aston Villa got back to winning ways and climbed into second place in the Premier League on Saturday, while Manchester City concluded a remarkable year with a victory and reminder they remain firmly in the hunt for a record fourth straight title.

Unai Emery's Villa are title dark horses but looked like dropping points against visiting 10-man Burnley before an 89th-minute penalty from Douglas Luiz earned them a 3-2 win.

Villa's 15-match home winning streak in the league was ended by lowly Sheffield United in a 1-1 draw last week and they then lost 3-2 at Manchester United on Boxing Day having led 2-0.

Saturday's victory moved Villa level on 42 points with Liverpool, who lead on goal difference and host Newcastle United on Monday. Manchester City, who also have a game in hand on Villa, are third on 40 after a 2-0 win over Sheffield United.

After 20 games last season, not long into Spaniard Emery's reign, Villa had 28 points — underlining the resurgence the Midlands side have enjoyed in the past 12 months in which they have won a club record 32 games in all competitions.

Leon Bailey fired Villa in front against Burnley, who responded through Zeki Amdouni's volley two minutes later.

A simple finish from Moussa Diaby put the hosts back in front after 42 minutes before Burnley went down to 10 men when Sander Berge got a second yellow card for tugging Luiz's shirt.

Battling Burnley levelled late on through Lyle Foster but Luiz got the

chance to win the game from the penalty spot when Jhon Duran was fouled by Aaron Ramsey, although his spot kick only just found the net after thudding the underside of the bar.

SPECTACULAR YEAR

If Villa's year has been impressive, Manchester City's has been truly spectacular as they won a Premier League-FA Cup-Champions League treble last season and last week were crowned Fifa Club World Cup champions for the first time.

They barely had to engage third gear on Saturday to end a run of three successive home league draws by comfortably beating bottom club Sheffield United.

Phil Foden set up Rodri to open the scoring with a precise finish in the 14th minute and the England midfielder was instrumental in City's second goal just past the hour as his pass was tapped home by Julian Alvarez. After a wobble, City now appear to be back in the groove.

"So tight — we're not top of the league, Liverpool are better," City manager Pep Guardiola said. "We've had injuries and some problems, we won the titles, important ones, our level is really good I would say and we are there." "Now rest, we all need it. January is less intense than November and December so we prepare for what's next."

Chelsea kicked off the day's fixtures with a 3-2 victory at Luton Town to end a run of four successive away defeats.

Cole Palmer put Chelsea ahead in the 12th minute and was at the heart of the second goal in the 37th when he teed up Noni Madueke to score his second goal in two games. — Reuters



Aston Villa's Douglas Luiz celebrates scoring their third goal. — Reuters

Pistons end 28-game losing streak

MIAMI: The Detroit Pistons avoided an unwanted record when they ended their 28-game losing streak with a 129-127 win over the Toronto Raptors on Saturday.

The Pistons had equalled the record losing streak of the Philadelphia 76ers with their loss to the Boston Celtics on Thursday.

The 76ers had a 28-game skid spanning the 2014-15 and 2015-16 seasons.

Detroit's dismal run was the longest single-season losing streak in NBA history but a first win since October ensured the Pistons avoided another miserable milestone.

Cade Cunningham's 30 points and 12 assists helped Detroit recapture the winning feeling and although a three pointer from Gary Trent with a second remaining narrowed the deficit it was too late for a Raptors comeback.

Pistons head coach Monty Williams said the scenes in the locker-room after the win had been special.

"Guys were screaming, I was almost in tears. I'm just so happy for our guys, I'm happy for everybody in the locker-room," he said.

"I've been in a ton of locker rooms my whole life and that's a first for me to have that kind of, it wasn't relief, it was just like, 'Thank God, finally,'" added Williams.

Williams, the 2022 NBA Coach of the Year, said he hoped the win would prove to be a turning point



Scottie Barnes (4) shoots on Ausar Thompson (9). — USA TODAY Sports

for his team.

"Sometimes it just takes a win like that to get things started and I just have so much respect for our team."

"I think people may have thought that they were okay with losing. But they came in every day with a great spirit, and they wanted answers. They came in wanting to learn and try to get better."

"So I just respect the heck out of our guys. Really happy that we finally got a win because it's so hard to win in this league," he said.

LeBron James suffered defeat on his 39th birthday as the Los Angeles Lakers were beaten 108-106 at the Minnesota Timberwolves.

James, who was on court for 39 minutes, put up 26 points on 10

of 21 shooting from the field with Anthony Davis top scoring for the Lakers with 33 points, 17 rebounds and eight assists.

With 3.1 seconds remaining, James thought he had tied the game at 107-107 with a three point throw right on the line of the arc but to his frustration the referee ruled it to be only a two point effort.

Anthony Edwards, who top scored for Minnesota with 31 points, added a point from the free throw line before James was off-target with an attempted buzzer beater.

The Miami Heat's four-game winning streak came to an end with a 117-109 defeat at the Utah Jazz with star Jimmy Butler suffering another injury setback. — AFP

OERF concludes 11th race of the season



The Oman Equestrian and Racing Federation (OERF) launched the eleventh local race of the season 2023-24, the event

witnessed wide competition in eight rounds at Al Rahba Horse Racing Track in Barka.

Six rounds were allocated

for purebred Arabian horses, including three races for local production horses, and two rounds for purebred crossbred.

Defending champions USA beat battling Britain

SYDNEY: Jessica Pegula and Taylor Fritz had to fight through a deciding doubles match to conclude a 2-1 defeat of Britain on Sunday for the United States to stay in title contention at the United Cup.

The defending champions, who won the trophy last January over Italy, earned a 1-6, 7-6 (7/5), 10-7 mixed doubles win to claim victory in Perth after the sides split the singles.

"We have a team energy from last year here, we don't want to take a loss and let it die," said Fritz, who was broken twice in the opening set. World number five Pegula added: "To get a win in this fashion after such a long

day (on court) brings back a lot of memories."

"It was a big win today, especially after losing such a tough singles match."

Britain, who beat Australia to open their tournament account, took a 1-0 lead when Pegula crashed 5-7, 6-4, 6-4 to Katie Boulter in the singles.

It was Boulter's first win over a top-five player on her seventh attempt after she bounced back from a set and double-break down.

"This was a very hard match for both of us," said the 56th-ranked Boulter. "I play my best tennis when I'm smiling and having fun."

"I kept trying to get over



Jessica Pegula and Taylor Fritz

the line. I thrive in a team atmosphere... so many tennis heads giving information. It helps you to think clearly."

Pegula's 10th-ranked teammate Fritz kept the tie alive despite a thigh strain he blamed on over-training, defeating Cameron Norrie 7-6 (5), 6-4. — AFP



Runner Hussein al Farsi also won the bronze medal in the 800-meter race

The 19th Asian Games

Oman won the bid to host the 2024 Hockey5s World Cup

The sailing team

Oman hosted the Ironman 70.3 competition in February

Oman hosted the Hockey5s Asia Cup 2023"

15th edition of the Arab Games, hosted by Algeria in July12

COUNTRY HOSTS TOP EVENTS, MAKE INTERNATIONAL SUCCESSES

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 31

Oman continues to host the most important and largest international tournaments in various sports in 2023. Organising such international sporting events in Oman presents a golden opportunity for participants and international delegations to become acquainted with the authenticity, heritage, and culture of the Omani people. Additionally, they can enjoy visits to various sites and tourist attractions in Oman, which will contribute to the revitalisation and promotion of tourism in the country. This hosting also reaffirms Oman's status on the international stage, highlighting its human, logistical, infrastructure, and organisational capabilities, qualifying it to host various international sports tournaments and events. Oman has received acclaim for hosting these global tournaments, putting Oman on the sports map in international federations in the near future. The success of these events confirm the confidence of these associations in nominating Oman to host the best tournaments.

Oman hosted the 20th edition

of the World Veteran Table Tennis Championships 2023 in January at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre. The championship, organised by the Oman Table Tennis Association in coordination with the International Table Tennis Federation and under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth, saw the participation of 1,600 players, ranging in age from 40 to 90, representing 69 countries from around the world.

Oman also hosted the World Amateur Chess Championship 2023, organised by the Oman Chess Committee in coordination with world chess body Fide, at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher in November. The event featured 427 players from 64 countries, including 356 male players and 71 female players.

Oman hosted the Hockey5s Asia Cup 2023, which took place at the Sultan Qaboos Youth and Culture Complex in Dhofar in August. It featured intense competition among 21 men's and women's teams. In the women's category, 10 teams participated, including Oman, Bangladesh, Chinese Taipei, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, and Iran. The teams from India, Thailand, and Malaysia secured qualification for the World Hockey5s Championship, which will be held in

January 2024 in Muscat. In the men's category, 11 teams participated, including Oman, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, and Pakistan. The teams from India, Pakistan, and Malaysia qualified for the World Championship, which will be held in January 2024 in Muscat.

WON THE BID

Oman won the bid to host the 2024 Hockey5s World Cup, receiving 13 out of 16 votes in competition with six other bids. The chairman of the Oman Hockey Association emphasised that winning the right to host this tournament is a significant achievement for the country and Omani sports since it will be the first global event of its kind for Hockey5s, putting Oman on the map of the tournament's history.

As part of its prominent initiatives to promote its tourism, cultural, and heritage assets on the international stage, Oman hosted the Ironman 70.3 competition in February. The event, represented by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, lasted for three days and took place at Qurum Beach, with the participation of over 800 athletes from 63 countries.

Oman achieved numerous successes

in the sports field at both the global and international levels during the current year. Thanks to good preparation, continuous training, and accumulating experience through international participation in various sports.

Oman garnered 14 medals at the end of its participation in the 15th Arab Games hosted by Algeria in July. More than 3,800 athletes from 22 Arab countries participated in 22 events. Oman finished 12th in the overall standings with 14 medals (5 gold, 4 silver, and 5 bronze). This positive achievement was recorded despite modest preparation and late scheduling for the Arab Games, affecting the physical and technical readiness of some teams.

Oman, represented by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth, achieved the gold medal in the individual category - under 21 years old - for the photographer Noof bint Salim al Siyabiyah for her artistic work titled 'Mystery', at the 41st International Youth Biennial of Photography (FIAP) held in Norway in 2023.

Oman, represented by the Oman Olympic Committee, participated in the 19th Asian Games held in Hangzhou, China in seven sports: athletics, weightlifting, aquatic sports, shooting, sailing, beach volleyball, and hockey.

Oman secured two medals (silver and bronze) in this edition, with 75 delegates, including 44 athletes. The sailing team, comprising sailors Musab bin Mohammed al Hadi and Walid bin Isa al Kindi, secured second place and a silver medal for the first time in the Olympic 49er boat races. Runner Hussein al Farsi also won the bronze medal in the 800-metre race.

Oman's para-athletics team has achieved remarkable success at the fourth edition of the Asian Para Games held in Hangzhou, China. The event featured participation from 44 countries, with over 5,000 athletes competing in 566 competitions across 22 different sports at 19 sporting venues.

The Omani contingent clinched a total of four medals. This includes two gold medals, both secured by star athlete Mohammed al Mashaikhi who won the lone medal for Oman in Paralympics. Al Mashaikhi came supreme in the shot put and javelin throw events in Hangzhou. Furthermore, Al Mashaikhi's outstanding performance also earned him a qualification in the shot put event at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games in France. Mohammed al Qassmi contributed to the team's success with two silver medals in shot put and javelin throw events.





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Oman targets 22,000 electric vehicles by 2030

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 31

A comprehensive strategy for the decarbonisation of Oman's transport sector targets, among other things, the introduction of an estimated 22,000 electric vehicles by 2030, up from a few hundred presently.

According to Eng Said bin Hamood al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, a combination of technological advancements and efficient charging infrastructure will help drive the uptake of electric vehicles (EV) in Oman going forward.

"The public electric charging infrastructure is currently undergoing upgrades, with emphasis placed on enhancing accessibility through user-friendly applications and fast, efficient chargers," Al Maawali said. "Technological advances have led to the development of dual-combustion vehicles, which have been implemented

locally within the Sultanate of Oman. These breakthroughs have greatly contributed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, estimated to have dropped by 40 per cent from trucks and heavy equipment," he added in an article on 'Green Mobility', published in the latest edition of 'Wealth', the newsletter of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

A 7-year road map unveiled recently by the Ministry envisions the potential for the large-scale retrofitting of heavy trucks to operate on a combination of diesel and hydrogen. Also known as 'Hydrogen Co-Combustion', this dual fuel is seen as a short-term decarbonisation solution for the heavy transportation sector. Dual-combustion vehicles, operating on 40 per cent hydrogen, slash carbon emissions by 40 per cent as well.

Furthermore, to support the electrification of the sector, EV charging infrastructure is proposed to be expanded to include a total of 350 public chargers distributed across key



Major ramp-up of EV charging infrastructure on anvil

arterial and public roads by 2026, said Al Maawali.

Commenting on plans for the decarbonisation of the maritime and aviation sectors, the Minister

stated: "Regarding ports, the government has developed a detailed road map including programmes and projects aiming at reducing emissions in ports and maritime sector. Furthermore, a collaborative plan with the Civil Aviation Authority has been set to use sustainable aviation fuel to decrease flight emissions."

To support energy transition objectives in the ports and maritime sectors, the Ministry is advocating for the electrification of port cranes, as well as the deployment of smart applications to reduce emissions during port operations. One such initiative, dubbed the "Future of Mobility" programme, calls for connecting ships to electrical power when they are at berth — a move that will make a significant contribution to decreasing carbon emissions, he noted.

"These plans provide electric car owners with special benefits, including tax exemptions, no custom charges, and free registration. (The Ministry) also collaborates with commercial agencies in the Sultanate of Oman to offer exclusive deals on electric vehicles," Al Maawali added in conclusion.

Oman's immediate goal is to cut greenhouse gas emissions associated with the transportation sector, currently estimated at around 22 million tonnes per annum, by 3 per cent in 2030.

Growth in motor fuel, petrochem exports

MUSCAT: Refining and petrochemicals production in the Sultanate of Oman saw a 6.6 per cent increase by the end of November 2023 compared to the same period in 2022.

Preliminary statistics released by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) revealed that the production of regular automobile fuel (91) climbed 16.3 per cent by the end of November 2023, while sales rose 11.7 per cent. Liquefied petroleum gas, paraxylene, and gasoline products led the boost in exports, with increases of 103.8 per cent, 214.7 per cent, and 95.9 per cent, respectively.

Automobile fuel (91) production reached around 14.734 million barrels by the end of November 2023, with sales amounting to 13.397 million barrels. In contrast, the



Petrochemical exports were as follows: Paraxylene – 466,800 metric tonnes, and Polypropylene exports – 206,900 metric tonnes. — ONA

production of automobile fuel (95) decreased by 20.7 per cent to 10.659 million barrels, while sales dipped to 11.086 million barrels.

Gas oil (diesel) production witnessed a 5.9 per cent increase, reaching 31.155 million barrels, with sales totalling 13.137 million barrels. Aviation fuel production also experienced a notable 32 per cent rise to reach 9.292 million barrels, while sales amounted to 4.048 million barrels. Liquefied petroleum gas production

increased by 20.9 per cent to reach 7.413 million barrels.

In the petrochemicals sector, paraxylene production reached 465,100 metric tonnes, reflecting a 216.6 per cent increase. Polypropylene production decreased by 2.1 per cent, recording 222,900 metric tonnes.

Oman's exports of automobile fuel (91) until the end of November 2023 amounted to 1.221 million barrels, while fuel (95) exports reached about 580,400 barrels. Diesel exports amounted to 17.800 million barrels, and aviation fuel exports totalled 5.233 million barrels. LPG exports amounted to 449,200 barrels.

Petrochemical exports were as follows: Paraxylene — 466,800 metric tonnes, and Polypropylene exports — 206,900 metric tonnes. — ONA

Singapore economy grows 1.2 per cent in 2023

SINGAPORE: Singapore's economy avoided a recession and expanded 1.2 per cent in 2023, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said on Sunday, warning however that geopolitical risks will weigh on next year's growth. The affluent city-state's economic performance is often seen as a barometer of the global environment because of its reliance on international trade.

"We made 1.2 per cent growth this year, avoiding a recession," Lee

said in his New Year's message.

For next year, growth is projected to come in at 1.0-3.0 per cent "but much will depend on the external environment," he added, pointing to the continuing war in Ukraine and Israel's conflict with Hamas.

The economy has been hurt by softer global demand for its exports, with the return of air travel after the Covid-19 pandemic boosting domestic growth. "For some years to come, we must expect the external

environment to be less favourable to our security and prosperity. Geopolitical uncertainties will continue weighing on the global economy," he said.

"In our own region, there are tensions and risks over rival claims in the South China Sea, and because of the cross-Strait situation. These can affect confidence in the region, and hence our growth."

Maritime tensions have risen recently in the sea after China and

the Philippines traded blame for a series of incidents in the area, including a collision between their vessels. Lee also cited climate change as another challenge for the low-lying island-state.

"We are already feeling its effects," he warned. "Singapore needs to adapt to and prepare for rising temperatures and sea levels, and to transition our economy to net-zero carbon emissions. It will be costly and demanding." — AFP

UK economy left on 'knife edge' as rate hike torrent takes its toll

LONDON: The British economy experienced a welcomed abatement in inflation during 2023, yet it remains precariously poised to conclude the year with a recession, grappling with intensified pressure from a relentless onslaught of interest rate hikes. Experts caution that the economic landscape is on a "knife edge," setting the stage for a challenging entry into 2024.



The British economy experienced a welcomed abatement in inflation during 2023

In 2023, inflation emerged as a critical battleground for both the Bank of England and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, as surging prices posed a substantial threat, triggering industrial action reminiscent of the scale witnessed in the 1970s. In January, Sunak underscored the importance of curbing inflation, making it one of his five key pledges to halve it by year-end.

Confronted with the seemingly formidable task of restoring inflation to its 2% target, the Bank embarked on an unwavering campaign of interest rate increases, propelling borrowing costs to levels unseen in over 15 years. Homeowners bore the brunt of this strategy, enduring 14 consecutive rate hikes

that culminated in a peak of 5.25% in August. The Bank, however, hit the pause button as inflation retreated.

Beginning the year at 10.1% in January, inflation experienced a sharp decline, reaching 4.6% by October, allowing Sunak to declare an early victory in achieving his inflation reduction goal. November witnessed a further decrease, with inflation dropping to 3.9% as fuel prices fell, and the pace of food cost increases slowed.

Despite this positive trajectory, Bank governor Andrew Bailey tempered the government's optimism by cautioning that the battle against inflation was far from over.

There is still a considerable distance to cover before returning to the 2% target. — dpa

Abraj Energy adopts robust records management framework

MUSCAT: Abraj Energy Services, Oman's leading provider of drilling and well services, has announced a collaborative arrangement with the National Records and Archives Authority (NRAA) to support the adoption of Records Management Manual and Retention Schedules. In effect, Abraj becomes the country's first drilling and well services provider to comply with national records regulations.

By collaborating with NRAA, Abraj demonstrates an unwavering commitment to operational excellence, transparency, and responsible information management. The newly adopted framework establishes a transparent and efficient system for document control, storage, retrieval, and archiving, ensuring implementation with



Abraj Energy adopts robust records management framework

the provisions of the Archives and Records Law (Royal Decree 60/2007) and its amendments (Royal Decree 52/2022). "Implementing this robust Records Management Manual reinforces our dedication to upholding the highest standards in all aspects of our operations,"

stated Eng Saif al Hamhami, CEO of Abraj Energy Services. "This initiative further optimises our internal processes, enhances our operational efficiency, ultimately enabling us to deliver the highest quality service to our clients. We are proud to be

pioneers in our industry, leading the way in regulatory compliance and aligning our strategies with Oman's Vision 2040."

The significance of Abraj's initiative extends beyond operational benefits. As a publicly listed company, Abraj recognises the importance of fostering trust and confidence with shareholders. Implementing this robust Records Management framework demonstrates Abraj's commitment to long-term value creation for all stakeholders. This proactive approach to compliance positions Abraj as a leader in transparency and corporate governance within the oil and gas sector, ultimately attracting environmentally and socially conscious investors and paving the way for a sustainable future.

U-Capital signs Liquidity Provider pact with Sohar International



MUSCAT: Sohar International has named Ubhar Capital (U-Capital), a leading brokerage firm on the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX), as its Market Liquidity Provider, facilitating the continuous flow of supply and demand orders for Sohar International shares.

Ahmed al Musalmi, Chief Executive Officer of Sohar International, stated, "At Sohar International, our steadfast commitment revolves around enriching shareholder value. This collaboration harmonises with MSX strategies and initiatives aimed at fostering public offerings, broadening capital market solutions, and catalysing investment, thus facilitating market enhancements and revitalising the role of capital markets in the economic advancement of the Sultanate of Oman. It also underscores the bank's unwavering dedication to nurturing innovation and attaining excellence in a dynamic market landscape. Moreover, this collaboration ushers in a realm of possibilities, further empowering our stakeholders. The amalgamated expertise is poised not only to augment the liquidity of Sohar International shares but also to propel innovation within Oman's financial domain."

The primary objective of this partnership is to strengthen and optimise the liquidity of Sohar International shares, which are listed on MSX. This collaboration strictly adheres to the regulatory guidelines established by MSX for the financial market

industry. By joining forces with U-Capital, Sohar International positions itself to unlock new opportunities, elevate shareholder value, and enhance liquidity, reaffirming its position as a pioneer in Oman's financial sector. Sohar International's post-merger market capitalization stands at approximately \$1.5 billion (RO 500 million), with an asset size of over RO 6.5 billion,

This strategic alliance is poised to set a cutting-edge standard within the industry, and our collective efforts will introduce an unmatched experience for the shareholders of Sohar International

an increase in market share of 50%.

On this occasion, Shaikh Abdulaziz bin Khalifa al Saadi, Chief Executive Officer of Ubhar Capital, said "We are profoundly thrilled about our collaboration with Sohar International, which presents a significant opportunity to deliver substantial value to its shareholders. This strategic alliance is poised to set a cutting-edge standard within the industry, and our collective efforts will introduce an unmatched experience for the shareholders of Sohar International."

Discover new experiences with Ford Territory SUV

MUSCAT: Ford Territory SUV enhances the joy of driving with its impressive style, confident stance and array of features and technology. The Territory is a great companion to navigate what the city or the country roads have in store.

The Ford Territory was the outcome of Ford's new 'Progressive Energy in Strength' design philosophy, which is based on the rich heritage of the brand and its iconic aesthetics. It embodies three fundamental design principles: commanding, agile, and responsive.

The Ford Territory has an eye-catching exterior design highlighted with an integrated grille and signature light — balanced with lower graphics, with full LED lighting, which drives the focal point higher and communicates purpose, stability, and capability. The headlamps show off a unique design, with daytime running LED lights incorporated with a strong horizontal grille bar, which adds to the eye-catching



appearance.

Adding comfort and indulgence on every journey is the territory's impressive interior. The horizontal coast-to-coast design evokes a connecting space in an embracing gesture, creating openness and spaciousness. Comfort and function are maximised through Premium Leather seats, with a 10-way

adjustable ergonomic driver's seat.

Powering the Territory is an EcoBoost 1.8L engine, delivering 320Nm torque using moderate fuel and impressive power up to 190 hp. The vehicle is equipped with Seven-Speed automatic transmission providing smooth, responsive gear shifting.

The Territory SUV is

equipped with four driving modes — Eco, Normal, Sport, and Mountain — to provide customers the ability to tailor their driving experience across a range of situations, whether driving in crowded urban areas or across the open highway on long-distance journeys.

In Oman, Ford vehicles are brought to you by Arabian Car Marketing Co. LLC.

'Asef with OQ' initiative benefits 2,000 Omani volunteers

MUSCAT: OQ Exploration & Production, a subsidiary of OQ Group, recently wrapped up the second edition of the "Asef with OQ" initiative, which spanned across 10 governorates in Oman. The primary objective of this year's programme was to train around 2,000 individuals from various governmental and civil society organisations, focusing on first aid, emergency medical response, and injury management. This initiative is a key component of OQ's corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy, embodying the group's deep-seated commitment to fostering a sustainable, positive societal impact.

This endeavour aimed to raise health and safety awareness within the community and establish a sustainable community involvement culture. Achieving

this objective involved empowering different segments of local communities with the necessary skills to respond quickly and effectively in emergencies, including administering first aid to individuals experiencing cardiac arrests.

The "Asef with OQ" initiative engaged various participants, including volunteer and charity teams, youth clubs, health professionals, school health nurses, and members from different community and sports teams. Physical education teachers, laboratory technicians, school bus drivers, and students were also integral to the programme. These diverse groups honed 24 essential skills: first aid, rescue operations, emergency response, safe vehicle and school bus driving, time management in crisis situations, and upholding personal and



public safety standards.

Notably, the initiative positively impacted 10 youth volunteer and charitable teams and 15 school teaching staff in the participating governorates. This collaboration effectively reinforced community partnerships, involving over 15 government entities and civil society institutions, thereby enhancing the initiative's reach and impact across the region.

The initiative notably featured a comprehensive training suite, including a Basic Life Support course specifically designed for health practitioners, resulting in a recognised certification. This was complemented by two additional programmes: the Paramedic Programme for the Regular Responder and the Emergency Response Programme, each providing two-year valid

certifications accredited by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

The workshops played a pivotal role in arming participants with essential knowledge and skills for effectively planning and managing emergencies, particularly in scenarios such as severe weather conditions and safety and rescue, executed in partnership with the Traffic Safety Institute of the Royal Oman Police. These sessions were designed to educate students and bus drivers on safe driving practices, with a strong emphasis on ensuring the safety of students during transportation. Integral components of these workshops included emergency first aid and rescue techniques, equipping participants to adeptly handle injuries or health emergencies that might occur in schools.



Oil prices drop 10% in 2023 amidst global concerns



NEW YORK: The crude futures market faced a significant 10% decline in 2023 due to geopolitical uncertainties and worries over the oil output levels of major global producers.

On the last trading day, Brent crude settled at \$77.04 a barrel, down 0.14%, while US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude settled at \$71.65 a barrel, down 0.17%. Both closed the year at their lowest levels since 2020, in contrast to the previous year's 10% increase in Brent and 7% climb in WTI.

A Reuters survey of 34 economists and analysts forecasts a 2024 average of \$82.56 for Brent, reflecting concerns about weak global growth limiting demand. Geopolitical tensions may, however, offer some support to prices.

Questions persist about OPEC+ commitment to supply cuts, currently at 6 million barrels per day, constituting 6% of global supply. OPEC faces reduced demand in the first half of 2024, coinciding with a decline in global market share.

The Middle East conflict raises fears of supply disruptions into 2024, adding volatility. Recent Red Sea attacks forced shipping reroutes, with some opting for Africa routes to avoid conflicts. — **Reuters**

Xi says economy is 'more resilient and dynamic'

BEIJING: President Xi Jinping stated on Sunday that the Chinese economy had become "more resilient and dynamic" in 2023, despite ongoing disappointments in financial figures as the post-Covid recovery stalls. In a bullish New Year's address to the nation, he also pledged that China would "surely be reunified," alluding to the self-ruled island of Taiwan, claimed by Beijing as its own and vowed to seize.

Xi faced a challenging year in 2023 at the helm of the world's second-largest economy, with his administration struggling to sustain an economic rebound since abruptly abandoning its onerous zero-Covid policy a year ago.

Despite the difficulties, Xi, speaking on state broadcaster CCTV, asserted that the economy had "weathered the storm" and had become "more resilient and dynamic than before." He praised the promotion of "high-quality development" and the growth of emerging industries such as electric vehicles, lithium batteries, and solar panels.

In his address, Xi emphasised the need to "consolidate and enhance the positive trend of economic recovery" in the coming year and achieve long-term economic stability. However, he acknowledged the existence of challenges, noting, "some companies are facing operating pressure, and some people are encountering difficulties in employment and living conditions."

He expressed concern, stating, "All of these things concern me greatly," and emphasised that the ultimate goal is to "help people live better lives."

This year witnessed record youth unemployment and a persistent debt crisis in China's crucial property sector, constraining the country's growth. Official figures released



Consolidate and enhance the positive trend of economic recovery. Companies are facing operating pressure, and are encountering difficulties in living conditions

XI JINPING
Chinese President

on Sunday indicated a deepening decline in nationwide factory activity in December, marking the third consecutive month of contraction. Analysts suggest that Beijing may struggle to achieve its stated annual growth target of around five per cent, the lowest in years.

Regarding Taiwan, Xi briefly mentioned it weeks before the island's elections on January 13. China has intensified its pressure campaign against Taiwan, with tensions running high as independence-leaning candidate

Lai Ching-te leads in opinion polls. Xi declared in his Sunday speech that "the motherland will surely be reunified," urging compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait to share in the glory of national rejuvenation. He reiterated China's stance, stating that the use of force to bring Taiwan under its control is not ruled out.

Xi also conveyed New Year greetings to Russian President Vladimir Putin, highlighting the strengthening ties between China and Moscow in 2023.

The two long-time allies have grown closer in recent years, particularly as Western countries have distanced themselves from Russia due to its attack of neighbouring Ukraine. Xi noted that the material and public opinion foundation of the China-Russia relationship had strengthened, emphasising the healthy and stable development of their relations despite the complex international situation. He highlighted the deepening of political mutual trust, closer strategic coordination, and the continued achievement of new results in mutually beneficial cooperation under their joint leadership. — **AFP**

Maersk pauses Red Sea sailings after attack on container ship

COPENHAGEN/DUBAI: Ansar Allah fighters attacked a Maersk container vessel with missiles and small boats, prompting the company to pause all sailing through the Red Sea for 48 hours, Maersk said on Sunday.

The crew of the Maersk Hangzhou crew was safe and there was no indication of fire onboard the vessel, which was fully manoeuvrable and continued its journey north to Port Suez, Maersk said.

The attacks have disrupted world trade, with major shipping companies taking the longer and costlier route around the Africa's Cape of Good Hope rather than through the Suez Canal.

The Red Sea is the entry point for ships using the Suez Canal, which handles about 12 per cent of global trade and vital for the movement of goods between Asia and Europe.

The United States launched Operation Prosperity Guardian on December 19, saying more than 20 countries had agreed to participate in the efforts to safeguard ships in Red Sea waters near Yemen.

In response, Maersk said on December 24 it would resume sailings through the Red Sea. However, attacks have continued and US allies have proven reluctant to commit to the

coalition, with nearly half not declaring their presence publicly.

Maersk, one of the world's major cargo shippers, said on Sunday it would delay all transits through the area for 48 hours, after the Maersk Hangzhou was struck by a missile at around 1730 GMT on Saturday 55 nautical miles southwest of Al Hodeidah, Yemen.

Later at around 0330 GMT on Sunday, the same ship was attacked by fighters in four small boats. An attempt by the attackers to board the vessel was averted after its security team and helicopters from the USS Eisenhower and USS Gravelly, responding to distress calls, returned fire, according to statements by Maersk and CENTCOM.

The helicopters sank three of the fighter boats, with no survivors, while the fourth boat fled the area, CENTCOM said in the statement.

The Singapore-flagged Maersk Hangzhou with capacity to carry 14,000 containers was en route from Singapore.

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron said on Sunday that he had told Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian in a call that Iran should help stop the attacks in the Red Sea. — **Reuters**



Maersk's logo is seen in stored containers at Zona Franca in Barcelona. — **Reuters File**

2023 Oman economy: a year of progress and resilience

MUSCAT: As the year draws to a close, the Sultanate of Oman can look back on a period of remarkable economic achievements. Aligned with national priorities, the 10th Five-Year Development Plan, and the ambitious goals of "Oman Vision 2040," the country witnessed a year of significant growth and progress, bolstering the performance of the Omani economy and improving the lives of its citizens.

Nasser bin Rashid al Maawali, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Economy, highlighted the positive economic indicators that paint a promising picture for the future. "The Omani economy concludes the year with qualitative improvement and reassuring indicators," he stated, attributing this success to effective economic and financial policies.

The total added value of oil activities at constant prices increased by 0.5% to constitute 34.3% of the gross domestic product until the end of the third quarter of 2023, he said.

Despite a slight decline in oil production, the overall GDP at constant prices grew by 2% to



This growth was driven by a vibrant non-oil sector, which saw its added value increase by 2.7%, constituting 68.8% of GDP.
Pic by Hussein Muqbal

reach RO 26.4 billion by the third quarter of 2023. This growth was driven by a vibrant non-oil sector, which saw its added value increase by 2.7%, constituting 68.8% of GDP. The growth rates ranged between 26.8% for communications and information activity, and 0.6% for housing and food services activities. On the other hand, construction activity, manufacturing activity, financial activities, and insurance activities

recorded a decline of 5%, 2.6%, and 9%, respectively.

Proactive government measures effectively mitigated the global inflationary pressures, keeping Oman's inflation rate within manageable limits. The consumer price index recorded a modest 1.03% increase in the January-November 2023 period, a significant drop compared to 2.9% in the same period of 2022.

Commenting on the

performance of public finances, the Under-Secretary stressed the continued improvement of the financial situation during the year 2023. Public revenues declined 17.4% to reach about RO 9.8 billion until October 2023, due to the decline in average oil prices to reach \$81 per barrel.

Public spending also decreased by 15.8% to reach about RO 9 billion as a result of the continued implementation of financial

control measures.

This led to the state's general budget achieving a financial surplus of RO 830 million, compared to a financial surplus of RO 1.21 billion in the same period in 2022.

As a result of effective debt management measures, the total public debt of the Sultanate of Oman was further reduced by about RO 1.3 billion - or 7.4% lower from the end-2022 level - to reach about RO 16.3 billion at the end of October 2023.

The improving credit rating of the Sultanate of Oman was also reflected in the outlooks issued by the main international rating institutions. Fitch raised its credit rating for Oman in September 2023 to BB+ with a stable future outlook. Standard & Poor's credit rating in September 2023 was upgraded to BB+ with a stable outlook as well. Likewise, Moody's raised its credit rating in May 2023 to Ba2 while maintaining its positive outlook, as a result of the improvement in public financial performance indicators and the continued implementation of financial

control measures.

These improvements in the credit rating of Oman will reflect positively on creating an attractive environment for investment, attracting the largest number of qualitative foreign investments, and improving the image of the Omani economy with international organisations, the data of which investors rely on to decide whether or not to invest in a particular country, he noted.

Three years into the 10th Five-Year Development Plan, Oman remains firmly on track to achieve the ambitious goals of "Oman Vision 2040."

The GDP at current prices reached RO 31.4 billion, signifying the country's progress towards a diversified and sustainable future.

Dr Al Maawali emphasised that the Omani economy is well-positioned for further success in the coming year and beyond. With its commitment to sound policies, diversification, and fiscal responsibility, Oman is poised to cement its place as a thriving economic hub in the region. — **ONA**

Boom in AI prompts a test of copyright law



J EDWARD MORENO

The writer is the 2023 David Carr fellow at NYT

The boom in artificial intelligence tools that draw on troves of content from across the Internet has begun to test the bounds of copyright law.

Authors and a leading photo agency have brought suit over the past year, contending that their intellectual property was illegally used to train AI systems, which can produce humanlike prose and power applications like chatbots.

Now they have been joined in the spotlight by the news industry.

The New York Times filed a lawsuit accusing OpenAI and Microsoft of copyright infringement, the first such challenge by a major American news organisation over the use of AI.

The lawsuit contends that OpenAI’s ChatGPT and Microsoft’s Bing Chat can produce content nearly

identical to *The Times* articles, allowing the companies to “free-ride on *The Times*’s massive investment in its journalism by using it to build substitutive products without permission or payment.”

OpenAI and Microsoft have not had an opportunity to respond in court. But after the lawsuit was filed, those companies noted that they were in discussions with a number of news organisations on using their content — and, in the case of OpenAI, had begun to sign deals.

Without such agreements, the limits may be worked out in the courts, with significant repercussions. Data is crucial to developing generative AI technologies — which can generate text, images and other media on their own — and to the business models of companies doing that work.

“Copyright will be one of the key points that shapes the generative AI industry,” said

Fred Havemeyer, an analyst at the financial research firm Macquarie.

A central consideration is the “fair use” doctrine in intellectual property law, which allows creators to build upon copyrighted work. Among other factors, defendants in copyright cases need to prove that they transformed the content substantially and are not competing in the same market as a substitute for the work of the original creator.

A review quoting passages from a book, for example, could be considered fair use because it builds on that content to create new, unique work. Selling extended excerpts from the book, on the other hand, may violate the doctrine.

Courts have not weighed in on how those standards apply to AI tools.

“There isn’t a clear answer to whether or not in the United States that is copyright

infringement or whether it’s fair use,” said Ryan Abbott, a lawyer at Brown Neri Smith & Khan who handles intellectual property cases. “In the meantime, we have lots of lawsuits moving forward with potentially billions of dollars at stake.”

It could be a while before the industry gets definitive answers. The lawsuits posing these questions are in early stages of litigation. If they don’t produce settlements (as most litigation does), it could be years until a US District Court rules on the matter.

Those rulings would probably be appealed, and appellate decisions could vary by circuit, which could potentially elevate the question to the US Supreme Court.

Getting there could take about a decade, Abbott said. “A decade is an eternity in the market that we’re currently living through,” he said.

The Times said in its suit

that it had been in talks with Microsoft and OpenAI about terms for resolving the dispute, possibly including a licence. The Associated Press and Axel Springer, the German owner of outlets like Politico and Business Insider, have recently reached data licensing agreements with OpenAI.

Taking cases to trial could answer vital questions about what copyrighted data AI developers are able to use and how. But it could also simply serve as leverage for a plaintiff to secure a more favourable licensing deal through a settlement.

“Ultimately, whether or not this lawsuit ends up shaping copyright law will be determined by whether the suit is really about the future of fair use and copyright, or whether it’s a salvo in a negotiation,” Jane Ginsburg, a professor at Columbia Law School, said of the lawsuit by *The Times*. — *The New York Times*

California leads the way on climate



LAURA TYSON

A former chair of the President’s Council of Economic Advisers during the Clinton administration, is a professor at the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley, and a member of the Board of Advisers at Angelino Group.



LENNY MENDONCA

Senior Partner Emeritus at McKinsey & Company, is a former chief economic and business adviser to Governor Gavin Newsom of California and chair of the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

AS A CENTRE OF INNOVATION, CALIFORNIA HAS A LONG HISTORY OF DEVELOPING SOLUTIONS TO GLOBAL WARMING, INCLUDING ITS DECADE-OLD CAP-AND-TRADE SYSTEM. THE STATE’S SUSTAINED COMMITMENT TO THE GREEN TRANSITION HAS HIGHLIGHTED THE POWER OF SUBNATIONAL GOVERNMENTS TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS TOWARDS NET-ZERO EMISSIONS



have fallen by 14% (although other complementary state policies have also contributed to this decline). The Canadian province of Québec linked its own cap-and-trade programme to California’s system in 2014, and Washington State plans to join them, creating an even larger transnational carbon market. Cap-and-trade systems, as well as environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards and net-zero commitments, depend on the monitoring, reporting, and verification of carbon dioxide emissions. California is also forging ahead on this front. In September, Newsom signed two bills that require companies to disclose their GHG emissions and their climate-related financial risks — the first legislation of its kind in the US. The US Securities and Exchange Commission has proposed but not enacted similar rules.

Combating climate change requires setting ambitious renewable-energy targets and devising major emissions-reduction initiatives, both of which California has done. The state aims to achieve 100% clean electricity by 2045 and

under its Renewable Portfolio Standard, will require utilities to obtain 60% of their energy from renewable sources by 2030. California has also invested heavily in large-scale solar plants, such as Topaz Solar Farm, one of the largest single solar projects in the world.

Moreover, California’s Zero-Emission Vehicle programme, which reached its goal of 1.5 million in-state sales of ZEVs two years ahead of schedule, has led automakers to move away from the internal combustion engine and spurred the adoption of electric vehicles nationwide. More recently, Newsom announced new ambitious targets for the programme, including that all new passenger vehicles sold in the state are ZEVs by 2035. Being at the forefront of tackling climate change is nothing new for California, which has a long history of setting energy-usage standards, from appliances to building codes, for the country. It was the first state to implement minimum energy-efficiency standards in 1974 — years before federal regulations were adopted — and to establish an energy regulation commission. This is

partly why California has one of the lowest per capita energy consumption rates in the US. In fact, if the rest of the country had kept pace with California in reducing fossil-fuel use, GHG emissions would be almost 25% lower. As a centre of innovation, California has played a vital role in shaping national research-and-development policies. Reflecting its formidable R&D capabilities in its world-class public and private universities and national labs, the state was recently selected as a hydrogen hub. As a result, it will receive \$1.2 billion from the federal government to accelerate the development and deployment of green hydrogen, a potentially transformative clean fuel that could help decarbonise heavy industry and transport and improve domestic energy production.

Silicon Valley has been instrumental to California’s innovation and forward-thinking approach, while also influencing its regulatory climate. The state has enacted legislation and rules to address emerging tech issues, from data privacy to autonomous vehicles. For example, the California Consumer Privacy Act

is one of the most comprehensive laws of its kind in the US, granting individuals greater control over their personal data.

The state has also worked to ensure that the tech sector serves the public interest, including by suing Meta for harming children’s mental health. Consider, for example, generative artificial intelligence. Newsom recently issued an executive order recognising that the state, home to 35 of the world’s top 50 AI companies, has a unique responsibility to promote innovation and develop responsible policies and regulations. Given the potential for AI to be a key tool in the fight against climate change, California is wise to identify and promote its beneficial uses. Far too many Americans have grown accustomed to government dysfunction and Congress’s inability to pass legislation. Nevertheless, when national — or even international — efforts to limit global warming fall short, subnational governments, especially the state of California, are making meaningful progress both within and beyond their borders. *Project Syndicate @2023*

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INDIAN male 14 years experience light/heavy driver. Looking for suitable opening currently in Oman. Contact: 77050986/ 91280205, email: kokkadmou@gmail.com

MBA Finance, Bcom, Diploma in HR, 22yrs experience in Accounts/ Finance in Muscat; seeking Senior/Middle level post. Please contact 91245950.

UAE and GCC experienced Indian graduate in sales and marketing division seeks suitable placement. Holding UAE driving licence knowledge in accounting. Worked with pharmaceutical, healthcare, food, cosmetics and equipment companies. Contact: 93865254.

ACCOUNTANT & sales Executive, Indian male, 31 years, BA English, specialised in Accounting. 2 years experience in India & 6 years experience in Oman. Seeking position in Accounts/ Sales fields (has Oman license). Mob: 78805951. Gmail: akhilgopinath2017@gmail.com

M.COM graduate with Oman driving licence, residing in Muscat with 1 year and 4 months work experience as Media Finance Executive in India, seeking for Accounts Assistant or other related eligible jobs. Contact: 71755901, E-mail: krishnanmahesh02@gmail.com

MECHANICAL engineer, 24 years Indian male with certification in AutoCAD, solid works, creo, REVIT MEP, Catia is looking for suitable job. Contact: 77190265

LOOKING for accounts or sales job having 2 years experience in sales at Koski in Bangalore India and 7 years experience of inventory and also worked as a junior accountant at grand modern super market in India. Contact: +968 78741069, email: abubakergufran@gmail.com

SITUATION WANTED Finance Manager

Chartered Accountant with 8 years of experience in Oman, well versed with Budgeting, Finalization, Insurance, VAT seeks suitable opportunity.

Available immediately **+968 91282051**

PART time accountant 22 years in Muscat. Please contact: 78293476

A SUDANESE resident in Salalah, Bsc of administrative sciences with 21 years of experience in the fields of (sales/ management/ logistics and fleet). Contact: +968 98510880



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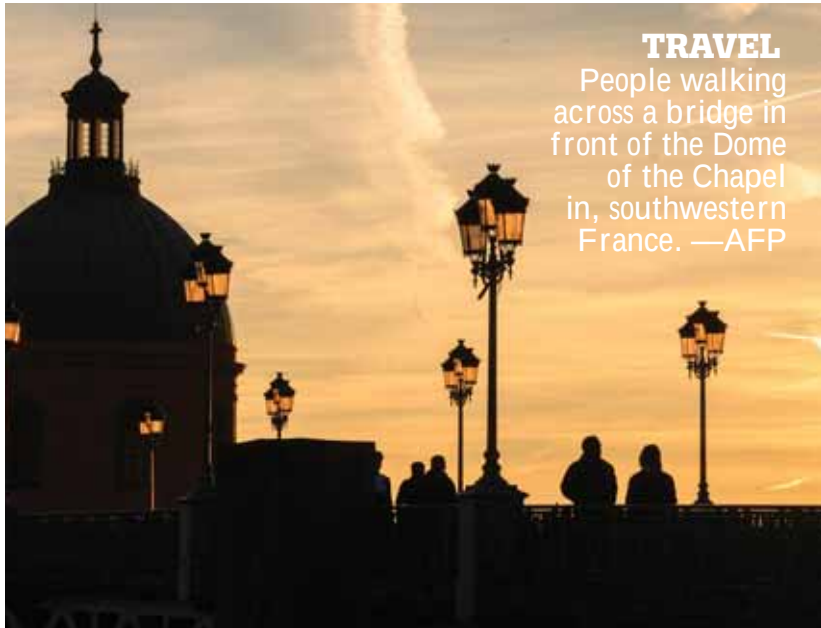
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LIFESTYLE
Children play on the beach after the sun has set in the Kerobokan district on Indonesia's resort island of Bali. — AFP



TRAVEL
People walking across a bridge in front of the Dome of the Chapel in, southwestern France. —AFP



ART
Displaced Palestinian children stand next to a mural painting by artist Amal Abo in Rafah in the southern of Gaza Strip. — AFP

art & life

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Beauty obsession fuels the surge in cosmetic surgery

Women save their money to perform a type of cosmetic surgery called body sculpting or (contouring)...P20

Poisonous snake stops play at Australia tennis tournament

DOMINIC THIEM'S Brisbane International qualifying match against Australian James McCabe was suspended for 40 minutes on Saturday after a poisonous snake slithered court-side. McCabe had just wrapped up the first set 6-2 against the Austrian 2020 US Open champion when the reptile — reportedly an eastern brown snake — was spotted among electrical wires on the side of the court in front of spectators. Play was halted until a

snake catcher arrived and managed to tease it into a bag. Eastern browns are capable of delivering a potent bite and their venom can result in progressive paralysis and uncontrollable bleeding, according to the website of the Australian Museum. Australia is home to 20 of the world's 25 most venomous, but deaths from bites are rare. Thiem eventually won the match to move within one victory of the main draw. — AFP



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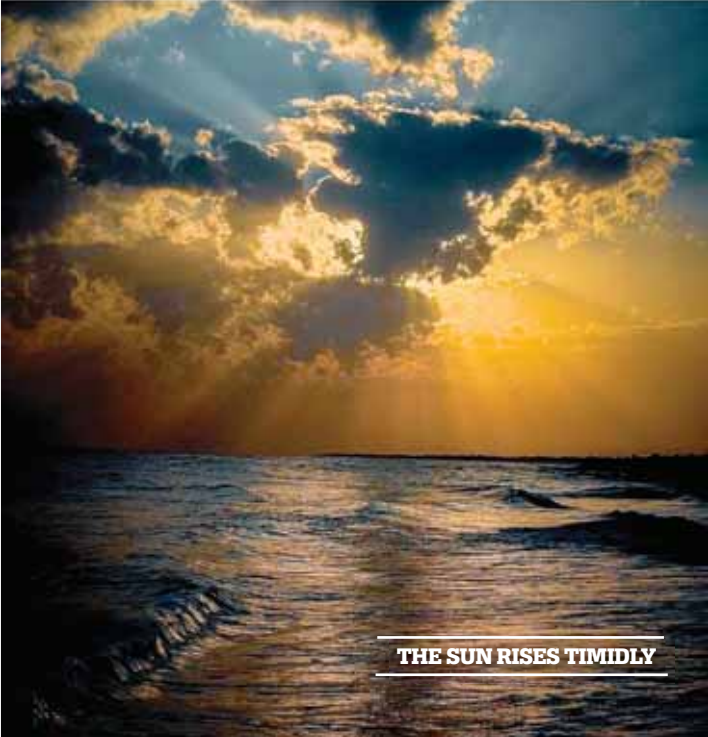
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AROUND THE WORLD



Ivory Coast chefs cook up new twist on African food

IN THE KITCHEN of his Abidjan restaurant, Ivory Coast chef Charlie Koffi prepares his country's staggering tropical bounty with the techniques of fine French cuisine. And he's far from alone.

A growing number of his fellow chefs in the West African nation are retouching local specialties with cooking skills picked up elsewhere.

One of Koffi's signature dishes is an adaptation of gougouassou sauce, a local specialty.

In his version, a rabbit is stewed with African eggplants, spicy oil, powdered akpi seeds and local fefe pepper.

"It is one of the dishes I really loved as a child," Koffi told AFP. "As a chef, it was almost an obligation to come back to it."

Koffi was trained in France before opening his Abidjan restaurant, Villa Alfira, in 2017 to showcase his country's cuisine.

In the well-lit main dining room overlooking a pond where fish on the menu swim, Eric Guei tucked into a gougouassou casserole.

"I find taste and audacity in this dish," the happy customer said. "It mixes Western know-how with local flavours."

Guei enjoyed the copious but beautifully presented meal with his friend Yasmine Doumbia. "Gougouassou is a very traditional Ivory Coast dish, and to see it in a restaurant like this is a real pleasure," she said.

Villa Alfira is a change from the "maquis", typical animated local eateries where braised chickens and fish are eaten by hand, along with traditional sauces, manioc polenta, and fried plantains.



GRILLED OKRA AND CASSAVA CHIPS

A few kilometres away, a chef at the upscale restaurant La Maison Palmier is working on her new creation: a taster dish inspired by placali, a typical Ivorian dish made with sticky gumbo sauce, bits of meat and dried fish, accompanied by fermented manioc paste.

Hermence Kadio, who trained locally, has her own much lighter take on the classic. She grilled the gumbo (okra), while the cassava is puffed up and turned into chips.

Every week the restaurant's French head chef Matthieu Gasnier offers amuse-bouche — small bite-sized appetisers — like these to "re-awaken the memories of people who grew up with these dishes". About half his clientele is Ivorian, he said.

"Even if our restaurant's cuisine is intended to be international since we are in a five-star hotel, I think it would be wrong not to take advantage of all these beautiful products that surround us," he said.

Grains such as fonio and sorghum

grow in the Ivory Coast's hot dry northern savannas, said Koffi, while the forested south produces local varieties of spinach and typical tropical products such as bananas and yams.

HEALTHIER AND TASTIER

N'cho Yapi, who founded the group Chefs: Creators of Emotions, said Ivorian cooks began going back to their culinary roots just after the turn of the century.

Before that, chefs at fancy restaurants "had the habit of offering Western dishes with imported products," he said. "But the cost of living kept going up," so they turned to less-expensive products "they had just under their noses".

And local specialties are appearing more and more on the menus of the luxury restaurants that have mushroomed across Abidjan in recent years, Yapi added.

Valerie Rollainth, an Ivorian chef trained in France at the famous Institut Paul Bocuse, insisted that typically hearty Ivorian cuisine is no longer suited to the capital's increasingly sedentary lifestyle.

"There are too few vegetables, a shocking quantity of oil, and the dishes are cooked too long" and lose their nutrients, she said.

At the nutritional workshops she organises she urges people to eat local products in new ways, such as raw okra, which "is very good against diabetes".

"Some diseases are linked to eating habits," she said. "In the Ivory Coast, not everyone has access to health care, but everyone has access to healthy food."

— AFP

SHARK ATTACK



Shark kills teenage boy in South Australia

A SHARK ATTACKED and killed a 15-year-old boy at a remote surfing spot in South Australia, police said on Friday.

The marine predator struck on Thursday afternoon near Ethel Beach on the Yorke Peninsula, state police said in a statement.

"Sadly, the body of a teenage boy was recovered from the water," they said.

Police said they were preparing a report for the coroner but gave no details of the attack on the boy, who was from a southern Adelaide suburb.

Adelaide's The Advertiser newspaper quoted an unidentified Ethel Beach local as saying another surfer had paddled out to help after the boy was bitten on the leg.

"The shark was circling them as the guy pulled the boy out of the water. There was a lot of blood," the resident said.

There were no details on the shark involved, but great white sharks are known to prowl South Australia's coastline.

In late October, witnesses saw a shark grab a 55-year-old surfer in its jaws at the state's Granites Beach. His body was not recovered. A large great white was seen nearby.

A 46-year-old teacher was attacked by a shark in May as he surfed at South Australia's Walkers Rock Beach. His body was never found but search teams discovered a piece of wetsuit. — **AFP**

Beauty obsession fuels the surge in cosmetic surgery



HEALTH

BY Balgees Aloraimi

The rise of social media has played a pivotal role in shaping unrealistic beauty ideals, creating an unattainable standard for both men and women. The portrayal of flawless faces and perfectly sculpted bodies by celebrities has led to an unprecedented surge in the demand for cosmetic procedures.

Maryam al Balushi, a student at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS), observed that the obsession with plastic surgery has transformed into an addiction and imitation. Models and celebrities, whose faces bear the scars of excessive surgeries, become unwitting icons, influencing others to pursue these alterations as a status symbol.

Body sculpting, also known as contouring, has become a popular choice, often discussed fervently in women's circles. This expensive procedure has garnered attention due to its prevalence on social networking sites, where celebrities use their altered appearances as promotional tools.

"We see there are models and celebrities whose faces have been disfigured by plastic surgery, and this is due to addiction to beauty products. Women save their money to perform a type of cosmetic surgery called body sculpting or (contouring). This type of operation are women talk in every gathering; it is an expensive operation, noting that social networking sites and celebrities have played a major role. In highlighting this trend, they are always a face for the camera and the face of companies for promotion, so their work requires that," she says.

The obsession with plastic surgery has led to a noticeable similarity in facial features, especially with those obsessed with this type of surgery, especially girls; try to imitate Arab and international singers and artists.

Dr Lakshmi Indusri, a Specialist Dermatologist at Aster Al Raffah Hospital, Ghubra, highlights how the fear of aging and societal pressure to meet beauty standards

have fuelled this obsession.

"The pursuit of an idealised image, perpetuated by influencers and celebrities, has led to a noticeable homogeneity in facial features, particularly among young girls. Driven by a desire to emulate Arab and international singers and artists, individuals undergo surgeries to mimic the perceived epitome of beauty," she says.

Dr Induri urges caution against resorting to unlicensed and unsafe products, emphasising the potential for serious skin problems resulting from such choices.

A surprising catalyst for the recent surge in cosmetic procedures is the global Covid-19 pandemic. As per the British Society of Plastic Surgeons, cosmetic proce-

cosmetic Botox injections administered to teenagers in 2020.

Amidst the wave of beauty obsession, it's crucial to recognise that cosmetic surgery can serve as a necessity for individuals aiming to repair, conceal, or mitigate damage to visible body organs caused by diseases, accidents, or other fac-

tors. Striking a balance between embracing one's natural features and making informed choices about cosmetic interventions is essential to foster a healthier relationship with self-image in an age dominated by the pursuit of perfection.



dures doubled in 2022 compared to the previous year. The pent-up demand caused by lockdowns contributed to this spike, but even as the world emerged from the pandemic, cosmetic surgeries continued to rise.

The International Society of Plastic Surgery reported a staggering 17.5 million cosmetic procedures worldwide in 2021, marking a one-third increase over surgical procedures. The American Society of Plastic Surgeons noted a concerning trend with around 12,000