

Condolences to UAE, Bahrain

The Sultanate of Oman expressed its sincere condolences and sympathy to the sisterly state of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Kingdom of Bahrain over the martyrdom of a number of members of the UAE Armed Forces and an officer from the General Command of the Bahrain Defence Force while performing their duties in the sisterly Federal Republic of Somalia, and expressed wishes for a speedy recovery for the injured. In a statement issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Sultanate of Oman renewed its firm position in condemning violence and terrorism in all its forms. – ONA



P11

JOHNSON
SNATCHES LATE
VICTORY FOR
SPURS



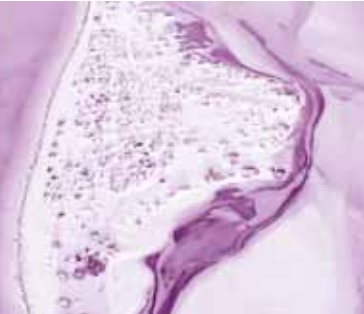
P13

STEADY
GROWTH IN
ELECTRICITY
CONSUMPTION



P20

WHEN IN BARR
AL HIKMAN, ALL
ROADS LEAD TO
WHALES HEAD CAMP



MUSCAT

OMAN AND RUSSIA TO BOOST TOURISM TIES

Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, and Olga Borisovna Lyubimova, Minister of Culture in the Russian Federation, discussed various aspects of the joint cooperation in areas of tourism, culture and heritage. They also discussed means of holding B2B meetings and reviewed ways to boost cooperation in the field of museum. The two sides also explored the possibility of expanding the tourism promotion of the Sultanate of Oman in Russia by opening a tourism representation office and framing cooperation in the field of capacity building and investments. **DETAILS ON P5**

9.6% RISE IN FISH CATCH

The total quantity of fish landed by artisanal fishing in the Sultanate of Oman till the end of November 2023 stood at 648,148 tonnes, reaching a value of RO 387,453,000, up by 9.6 per cent, compared to the same period in 2022, when its total quantity was 591,421 tonnes, according to the preliminary statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). The statistics also showed that the quantity of fish landed at the end of November 2023 through commercial fishing reached 46,287 tonnes, while the quantity of fish landed through coastal fishing reached 5,063 tonnes.

OPINION

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Asim Al Shidi
Navigating the roots for lasting peace

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Anatoly Motkin
Positioning Oman's tech industry

SAYYID THEYAZIN LAUNCHES 'TOGETHER WE MAKE PROGRESS' FORUM

Communication with society vital

MAI AL ABRI & AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 11

In response to the Royal directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik to foster communication with the public through open dialogue and involve society in shaping future visions and strategies, the Secretariat-General of the Council of Ministers organised the second edition of the "Together We Make Progress" forum under the auspices of HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, on Sunday.

The forum, which was held at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre and lasts for two days, also aims to review policies, development programmes and government initiatives, and



Dignitaries at the launch of the forum on Sunday.

provide citizens opportunity to express their opinions and suggestions, and share their concerns and challenges with officials in a participatory environment.

Speaking on the occasion, Shaikh Al Fadhl bin Mohammed al Harthy, Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers, said: "The 'Together We Progress' forum in its second edition

comes as an embodiment of the approach of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on the importance of strengthening communication between the government and society and

to complete the strengthening of the principle of community participation."

The General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers presented a questionnaire via an electronic link to provide the public with the opportunity to choose an axis from among three proposed axes, during which 4,664 people participated in the voting, and the human and society axis received the largest percentage of (2,248) votes.

He said that the labour market and employment were the most sought-after topics with 756 votes compared to other topics. Therefore, this version of the forum was expanded to be held over two days, and the number of people invited to attend has doubled to touch 1,200.

Exercise caution as more rain expected

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

In view of the adverse weather conditions the Sultanate of Oman is witnessing, and based on the public interest requirements, it has been decided that Monday will be an official holiday for employees of the units of the state's administrative apparatus and other legal persons and workers in private sector establishments in all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman with the exception of the governorates of Dhofar and Al Wusta.

Workers whose work requires them to be on duty on this day may be employed on the aforementioned day if necessary taking into account compliance with general precautions and occupational health and safety requirements, provided that they get compensated for this day.

Earlier, the Ministry of Education announced the suspension of classes in



Heavy rains are reported from various governorates on Sunday. PHOTO BY KHALFAN AL RUZAIKI

various schools in all governorates of Oman on Monday, with the exception of the governorates of Dhofar and Al Wusta. The decision was based on a weather statement indicating that Oman will be affected by heavy rains and rough

climatic conditions. Classes will resume on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, the latest weather maps and analyses of the National Multi-Hazard Early Warning Centre show the formation of stratus...

Oman rejects Israeli move to storm Rafah

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman voiced its categorical rejection of the Israeli occupation forces' move to storm the Palestinian city of Rafah, which is now sheltering hundreds of thousands of unarmed civilians displaced from the northern section of the Gaza Strip.

Oman noted that this chaotic situation was a direct outcome of Israel's brutal aggression that has left around 30,000 dead and tens of thousands wounded or missing.

In a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry on Saturday, Oman pointed out that Israel's action was in flagrant defiance of the international law and international human charters. It also warned against the serious fallout of this persistent and indiscriminate aggression against the Gaza Strip.

In the statement, Oman reiterated its plea to the international community to take concrete measures to put to practice the global political positions to address Israel's arrogance and force it to accept a ceasefire and provide humanitarian needs for the displaced population in the Gaza Strip.

Oman urged the international community to hold Israel fully accountable for the catastrophic targeting of civilians, property and facilities in the Gaza Strip.

Meanwhile, in refugee camps in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, Palestinians relying on the UN agency UNRWA fear key services will stop as donors have paused funding over accusations staff members took part in October 7 attack. — ONA



A Palestinian girl walks while carrying a bundle on her head on a busy street in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Sunday. – AFP

RAIN FAILS TO DAMPEN CYCLISTS' SPIRIT

MUSCAT: New Zealand's rider Finn Fisher-Black of the UAE Team Emirates put up a dominating performance to win the dramatic 170.4-km stage two of 13th edition for Tour of Oman on Sunday in Qurayat.

On a day of heavy rains, the Kiwi youngster picked up a spectacular victory after more than four hours of racing that began at Al Sifah in a cloudy weather. This is the second successive triumph for the rider Finn in Muscat following his earlier title of the second edition of Muscat Classic event last Friday after an impressive show.

The star of UAE Team Emirates claimed the overall leader's red jersey (general individual time) after he completed the race within 4 hours, 4 minutes, and 4 seconds ahead of the rider Luke Lamperti (USA) of Soudal Quick-step team who came in second place within a timing of 4 hours, 4 minutes and 6 seconds. **DETAILS ON P10**







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‘Together We Make Progress’ forum launched



FROM PAGE 1

The number of those registered through the forum's electronic platform reached 5,314, and a methodology was adopted in sorting that essentially reflects the percentage distribution of citizens in the governorates, in terms of age groups, work status, and academic qualifications.

He said that the forum will address topics related to education sector, both school and higher levels, in addition to reviewing the issue of the health sector, the social protection system, and the social development sector, while Monday will be devoted to holding three dialogue sessions to discuss the topics — the labour market and employment, developing the youth sector and media and national identity.

He added that the activities of the forum will be accompanied by holding a special exhibition on Oman Vision 2040, and the national programmes concerned with government digital transformation, economic diversification, employment, investment and export development, and zero neutrality, with the aim of introducing them, their plans, and their role in achieving goals, in addition to allocating a corner for social protection system.

EDUCATION SECTOR

The initial session featured the Minister of Education, the Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation and the Chairman of the Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education. The session concluded with

valuable contributions from participants, and audience interaction proved lively and fruitful.

During her address, Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, highlighted that over one million students attend schools across the Sultanate of Oman, with 18,679 teachers hired between 2016 and 2023. She mentioned the ongoing efforts to construct 251 new schools, with 29 slated for completion this year. Additionally, plans involve replacing 5,000 current school buses with new ones from the Oman-based Karwa company in Al Duqm at a rate of 1,000 per year, with plans to increase the value of the bus contract to RO 600. There are also plans to shift all afternoon classes to morning sessions.

Dr Al Shaibaniyah outlined the strategic objectives of the national education policy, emphasising a high-quality educational system, community engagement, human capacity empowerment, and the cultivation of national competencies that can compete on a global scale.

Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, said that her ministry seeks to upgrade the quality of university education, supply the labour market with highly-qualified resources and enhance the human capital.

Dr Rahma added that the ministry's strategy seeks to align academic programmes with the requirements of the labour market. The strategy also aims



to achieve research excellence with the prime objective of generating the desired economic and social impacts. In addition, the ministry's strategy focuses on sustained development of vocational education and training programmes and to comply with national and international standards in this domain.

PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

She highlighted that six private universities entered the QS classification for the Arab region, and 17 private higher education institutions received institutional accreditation certificates from the Omani Authority for Academic Accreditation. Oman also achieved a progressive position, ranking 69th globally in the innovation index for 2023.

She also mentioned the consideration of a monthly stipend for students in private higher education institutions, the launch of a student sponsorship initiative, and plans to attract more

international students to Sultan Qaboos University to enhance its global standing.

For his part, Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, said that the strategic approach of the health sector in Oman lays emphasis on sustainability and centralisation of services, technical and medical systems, qualified human resources and the implementation of diversified and sustainable funding sources.

The health sector's programmes during the 10th-Five-Year Plan include comprehensive health coverage, governance and restructuring of the health sector and the establishment of a more efficient planning and financing system, said Dr Hilal.

He also said that plans are under way to open three pharmaceutical and medical solutions factories in Nizwa, Rusayl and Salalah.

TREATMENT

Dr Hilal added the ministry seeks to save citizens' time and

effort by providing treatment in their governorate or at a specialised hospital nearby, without the hassle of travelling to Muscat for treatment.

Meanwhile, Social Development Minister Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najar said that the priorities of Oman Vision 2040 include social care, family and community development, services for people with disabilities, self-employment, civil society institutions and social responsibility programmes.

Dr Laila added that the ministry is embarked on programmes to develop the services offered to people with disabilities, with the prime aim of facilitating their integration into society.

In a statement Nasser bin Khamis al Jashmi, Chairman of the Tax Authority, said that maternity leave insurance targets the health of both the mother and child, ensuring that there is sufficient time for the mother to dedicate herself to caring for her child. It also works to reduce discrimination against women in employment, as the employer will not be responsible for paying wages during the leave period. Instead, the fund will cover it, and the employer can contract with others to cover the work during that period. Regarding the latest figures for social protection, he mentioned that 1,391,061 beneficiaries received social protection benefits until January 2024, with a total amount of RO 37,916,749 spent until January 2024.

EVALUATION

For her part, Dr Jokha bint Abdullah al Shukailiyah, CEO of

Oman Authority for Academic Accreditation and Educational Quality Assurance, said that the authority's programmes focus on high quality and public partnership, as well as the continuous evaluation of school performance and educational efficiency.

Dr Jokha pointed out that the authority has endorsed a national system for academic programmes on accreditation, the application of standards of international bodies in the fields of external quality assurance and the assessment of basic programmes.

The forum saw the launch of an "Idea Makers" initiative, which aims to encourage citizens to develop homegrown innovative solutions that reflect the national identity and excellence in communication between the government and society. The initiative aims at considering creative ideas of youth as measures to achieve the future aspirations of Oman Vision 2040.

HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth will participate in the second session of the forum on Monday, which aims to engage with participants and address their aspirations and proposals.

Dr Abdullah bin Nasseral Harrasi, Minister of Information, and Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, will also participate. The primary topics of discussion include society and citizenship, education and learning, scientific research, national capabilities, welfare and social protection, health, youth sector development, labour market and employment, and local media.





INCLEMENT WEATHER: ROP, CDAA SOUND CAUTION

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) and the Civil Defence and Ambulances Authority (CDAA) have urged precautions to pedestrians as well as motorists to be watchful of any water clogs, overflowing wadi and adverse situations in the wake of the inclement weather.

Accordingly, the authorities reiterated that crossing the wadis

(valleys) or attempting to cross wadis or low-lying areas is a punishable offence and can invite serious repercussions of violating the law. The CDAA also urged beachgoers to exercise extreme caution and observe safety rules and guidance and to keep an eye on kids to avoid drowning incidents.

“Driving through the flash floods intentionally would attract punitive actions including fines and retention of vehicles

depending upon the nature of offence. Similarly, driving across an overflowing wadi is a criminal offence and the offenders will be booked for violating the instructions issued by the ROP and the CDAA,” a CDAA spokesperson told the Observer.

He added that CDAA is closely following up with the Oman Meteorology authorities and the authority is well prepared to act accordingly.

The spokesperson further said

that the majority of the drowning cases happened during the rains and there has been an increase in the number of drowning incidents and in 2022, more than 500 such incidents were reported.

“Most of the drowning incidents were reported during adverse weather conditions when people crossed wadis by walking or in vehicles, swimming in undesignated areas such as dams, water channels and water-logged areas, leaving children

unattended near water surfaces, and non-abidance by the safety instructions. These would prove fatal to one’s own life as well as the life of others,” he said, adding that there were over 500 calls of drowning accidents that CDAA water rescue teams had to deal with.

Major reasons behind such incidents were recklessness during the rains, inattentive to earning signs at water bodies, ponds or swimming pools or sea

and kids being left unattended which have contributed to the increasing number of drowning incidents in the Sultanate of Oman.

Reports suggest that children under the age of 5 are at highest risk of drowning in either wadis or water bodies and these deaths are frequently linked to daring the rains, wadis or water bodies, travelling over water on boats or ferries and fishing.



More rain expected, Monday declared holiday

FROM PAGE 1

... clouds since early morning with scattered rain falling at sea off the coasts of Muscat and Al Batinah South governorates and on the governorates of Musandam and Al Buraimi. The forecast indicates opportunities for rainfall to cover the rest of the northern governorates.

Aisha bint Juma al Qasmiyah, a Meteorologist at the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), told Oman News Agency (ONA) that forecasts indicate chances of heavy thundershowers with

downdraft fresh winds and hail that lead to flash floods. The weather condition’s peak impact is expected to be on Monday.

The weather condition is expected to affect the governorates of Musandam, Al Batinah North, Al Batinah South, Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah, Muscat, Al Dakhiliyah, Al Sharqiyah North, Al Sharqiyah South and parts of the governorates of Al Wusta and Dhofar.

Rainfall is expected to be concentrated along the coasts of the Sea of Oman and the governorates of Musandam and

Al Buraimi.

MORE RAINFALL

Muscat radar on Sunday had shown continued rainfall of varying intensity, covering the coastal areas of the Sea of Oman and parts of Al Hajar Mountains (Nakhal, Bidbid and Yanqul), with chances of it expanding.

The low pressure has also been bringing in rains in the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The weather forecast had expected the rains to appear after 4 pm but the heavy clouds brought down thundershowers

by afternoon causing the wadis to flow as in the case of wadi in the Wilayat of Nakhal, Al Batinah South, wadi in Al Amerat, Muscat Governorate and Wadi Faqara, Jaalan Bani Bu Ali, Al Sharqiyah South Governorate. Qurayat along with Bausher, Seeb, Al Wadi Al Kabir, Ruwi, Al Khuwair, Barka faced the sudden downpour making the motorists to switch on headlights and drive slow.

The weather conditions expected in the coming hours include thunderstorms with hail and heavy rains with active downdraft wind. Risk of flash

floods are expected in Musandam, Al Batinah North, Al Dakhiliyah, Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah, Muscat, Al Sharqiyah North, Al Sharqiyah South and parts of Al Wusta.

The Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority (CDAA) advised citizens and residents to be careful and avoid going near They also urged motorists to be exceptionally careful when passing near the mountains, or while on mountainous roads, and watch for falling rocks and landslides.

FULLY PREPARED

The Basic Services Sector at the National Committee

for Emergency Management (NCEM) completed its preparations to minimise the impacts of the current weather condition, which is expected to affect Oman’s governorates during the next three days.

The Basic Services Sector activated its operations centre to coordinate efforts of preparation and response to the weather condition.

Moreover, the Basic Services Sector oversees the following services including roads, electricity, communications, water and sewage, fuel and waste management.



The weather condition’s peak impact is expected to be on Monday.– Pictures by Khalfan al Ruzaiqi and ONA



Navigating rainy roads

ESSENTIAL

DRIVING TIPS



RECALL DATE: 12-02-2024

Recall

KIA
Mohave (HM)

Brand of Commodity	Year of Production*	#Number of Affected Commodities
Mohave (HM)	November 2007 ~ May 2013	249

*Not all vehicles in this production period, are affected.
#Subject to revision, based on the information received from the manufacturer, from time to time.

Recall consequence

On some Mohave (HM) of 2007-2013 MY produced within specific production date range provided in TSB, Insufficient adhesive may have been applied to secure the headliner plates to the headliner. As a result, under certain circumstances, the headliner plate(s) may detach from the headliner upon deployment of the side curtain airbags. An occupant may be injured due to potentially insufficient adhesive applied to the headliner plate(s). Estimated percentage of defect is 1% (defect ratio). However, Kia is conducting this recall as a preventive measure to avoid the risk during the deployment of side curtain airbags.

Recall Action

Verify affected Mohave (HM) vehicles as per the VIN list, inspect the headliner plates to the headliner and secure the headliner using adhesive as recommended by KIA. All affected vehicles will be inspected and repaired at no expense to the vehicle owner.

To check the serial Numbers of the affected commodities, please visit the website for Recalls & Warnings: <http://recall.pacp.gov.om>



Contact details: Toll free - 80073222
Working days: Sunday - Thursday
Working Time: 8.30 - 17.30 hrs.



BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, FEB 11

For some days now, few governorates of the Sultanate of Oman are facing a wave of bad weather accompanied by low temperatures, rainfall, and difficulty in horizontal visibility.

Car drivers face many risks while driving during rainy weather, as the rain hinders drivers' vision, which results in many accidents. It is difficult to control the car due to the presence of rainwater on the roads, especially the highways.

There are simple steps for driving safely, and below I offer some tips for driving safely during rains.

Drivers should check their car tires and replace them if they are worn out and have exceeded the kilometres they are supposed to travel so that it is easy to move the car in the rain safely and easily. Also to reduce the vehicle speed to avoid dangers and stop when you feel that danger lurks while driving.

Carefully inspect the car's exterior headlights and ensure they are working properly.



Handle the car with caution so that we make sure the brakes are accurate before moving the car. Conduct a simple brake test, and stop the car during the rain, as the stopping distance doubles when you press it, and you can lift your foot off the gas to reduce the vehicle's speed and then stop it.

In addition to cars that operate automatically, one should stay away from any car routing programmes.

Keep a distance between you and other cars when stopping at traffic lights or pedestrian crossings.

If the car slides while driving, try to control the car, avoid

pressing the brakes suddenly, and direct the steering wheel in the direction of the slide.

You must use signals indicating deviation at the appropriate time to secure your path and the path of others.

Do not be distracted by anything other than the road so as not to lose focus.

Avoid driving in the opposite direction or taking cars into illegal turns to prevent accidents.

Operating the spaces continuously to ensure clear vision.

Finally, do not ignore the instructions and warnings issued by official authorities.



Plan to set up tourism promotion office in Russia

MUSCAT: Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism received in his office on Sunday Olga Borisovna Lyubimova, Minister of Culture in the Russian Federation.

The meeting touched on aspects of the joint cooperation in areas of tourism, culture and heritage. They also discussed means of holding B2B meetings and reviewed ways to boost cooperation in the field of museum.

The two sides further explored the possibility of expanding the tourism promotion of the Sultanate of Oman in Russia by opening a tourism representation office and framing cooperation in the field of capacity building and



The two sides agreed to devise a joint executive programme – ONA

investments. They agreed to devise a joint executive programme through which joint meetings and events are organised in cooperation with relevant companies from

the private sector to open broader areas for cooperation.

The meeting was attended by the Secretary-General of the National Museum and the Russian Ambassador to Oman.

Meanwhile, Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs held a meeting at the general Diwan of the ministry on Sunday with Olga Borisovna Lyubimova, Minister of Culture in the Russian Federation.

The meeting reviewed aspects of cooperation between Oman and Russia in various fields, particularly in the areas of culture and museum.

The meeting was attended by a number of officials from both sides. — ONA

Repercussions of Israeli war on Gaza discussed

MUSCAT: Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs received at the general Diwan of the ministry on Sunday Daniel Benaim, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Peninsula Affairs.

The meeting discussed the repercussions of the Israeli war on Gaza and the efforts made to ceasefire.

The two sides also touched on cooperation between Oman and the US in various areas and means of developing them.

The meeting was attended by Ana Escrogima, Ambassador-designate of the United States of America to the Sultanate of Oman and a number of officials from both sides.



The two sides also touched on developing cooperation between Oman and the US in various areas. – ONA

Bahrain minister meets Omani business delegation

MANAMA: Abdulla Adel Fakhro, Minister of Industry and Commerce of the Kingdom of Bahrain received on Sunday a delegation of Omani business people currently visiting Bahrain.

The delegation is headed by Ridha bin Juma al Saleh, Member of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) Board of Directors.

The meeting reviewed the economic milieu in Bahrain, as well as the facilities provided to localise investment from the region and the world at large. It also touched on means of augmenting trade exchange between Oman and Bahrain.

Moreover, the delegation visited Salman City, which includes thousands of housing units and



The meeting reviewed the economic milieu in Bahrain, as well as the facilities provided to localise investment from the region and the world at large. – ONA

modern services that are established based on international standards. They were also introduced to the investment opportunities in the city.

Further, the delegation also visited Bahrain Economic Development Board. During the visit, the members of the delegation were briefed on prominent investment opportunities in Bahrain, in addition to various investment projects in the fields of industry, logistics, real estate, foodstuff, education and technology.

The meeting and the visits were attended by Dr Juma Ahmed al Kaabi, Ambassador of Bahrain to Oman. — ONA

REPORT ON DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN DISCUSSED



GENEVA: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRC) took part in the sessions of discussing Oman's national report on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The sessions took place in the United Nations' headquarters in Geneva. Oman's delegation discussed the steps taken by Oman Human Rights Commission to prepare the accreditation file which will be completed in May 2024. – ONA

OMAN NAMED HONORARY GUEST OF CAIRO BOOK FAIR

CAIRO: Khalifa bin Rashid al Shamsi, Minister Plenipotentiary and Deputy Head of Mission of Oman in Cairo, affirmed that Oman's selection as the honorary guest of the next edition of the Cairo International Book Fair confirms the strength and solidity of the common relations between the two sides at all levels, especially in the cultural field.

Al Shamsi, in statements to Al-Youm News Portal, said that Oman's continuous keenness to participate in the Cairo International Book

Fair translates the strength and strategy of the common relations between Egypt and Oman under the wise leadership of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

Al Shamsi mentioned that Oman participated in the fifty-fifth edition of the book fair with an official pavilion including the ministries of information, culture, sports and youth, awqaf and religious affairs to introduce Oman, its history, and civilisation in various fields, and to extend the existing communication

bridges between the two peoples and the two sisterly countries over the years.

He said that Oman's participation in the Cairo International Book Fair comes as part of efforts to enhance the distinguished relations between Oman and the Arab Republic of Egypt in various fields. "Oman participated in the fair with a unified pavilion featuring various publications in various fields of knowledge, aiming to introduce Oman, its literature and highlight the intellectual, literary, and historical aspects of Oman,

and to facilitate the access of Omani books to researchers, thinkers, and all segments of society," he said.

He pointed out that the Cairo International Book Fair is one of the most famous cultural exhibitions in the region and the Middle East, explaining that the importance of the Cairo International Book Fair historically stems from Egypt's importance regionally and globally, as it has witnessed continuous development through the programmes it offers to the public every year.



Oman's continuous keenness to participate in the Cairo International Book Fair translates the strength and strategy of the common relations between Egypt and Oman.



Sultanate of Oman سلطنة عُمان
وزارة التراث والسياحة
Ministry of Heritage and Tourism

Tender Announcement

Tender No.	26/2024/MHT/HQ-7	Tender Name	Development of Hayour Cave Area at Samhan Mountain Mirbat, Governorate of Dhofar
Fees of Tender Documents	30 O.R		
Tender Document Sales End Date	25/2/2024		
Last Date for Bid Submission	19/3/2024		
Grade	Second, Third		
E-Tendering Portal	https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om		

- Interested Companies registered with Tender Board (in the mentioned Grade) may obtain Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>, against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document.
- The Tenderers must acknowledge commitment to the bid.
- The Ministry shall not be obligated to accept the lowest or any other bids
- The bid submission period starts after the end of the inquiry period shown in the e-tendering system, until the last date for submitting bids before (10:00 am, Oman time).

Support and inquiries	For more information, related to the tender, kindly communicate through the website of the e-tendering system: https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om
	For inquiries related to the technical support for the e-tendering system, kindly communicate through etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om or 24402200
For further information	Email : sofic@mht.gov.om Phones : 22088348 - 22088085



Pakistan police clash with Khan supporters at election protests

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan police warned on Sunday they would come down hard on illegal gatherings after the party of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan urged supporters to protest against alleged rigging in last week's election.

Independent candidates — most linked to Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party — took the most seats in the polls, scuppering the chances of the army-backed Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) to win a ruling majority.

However, independents cannot form a government and the country faces weeks of political uncertainty as rival parties negotiate possible coalitions.

PTI leaders claim they would have won even more seats if not for vote rigging.

A nationwide election-day mobile telephone blackout and the slow counting of results led to suspicions the military establishment was influencing the process to ensure success for former premier Nawaz Sharif's PML-N.

"Throughout Pakistan, elections were manipulated in a subtle way," PTI chairman Gohar Ali Khan told a news conference Saturday, calling on supporters to "protest peacefully" on Sunday.

Authorities warned they would take strict action, saying so-called Section 144 orders were in place — a colonial-era law banning public gatherings.

"Some individuals are inciting illegal gatherings around the Election Commission and other



Supporters of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf stage a protest outside the office of a Returning Officer in Islamabad amid claims the election result delay is allowing authorities to rig the vote-counting. — AFP

government offices," a statement from Islamabad's police force said on Sunday.

"Legal action will be taken against unlawful assemblies. It should be noted that soliciting for gatherings is also a crime."

A similar warning was also issued in the city of Rawalpindi, just south of the capital, while dozens of police equipped with riot gear assembled near Liberty Market in Lahore in the east.

AFP correspondents saw several small protests by PTI and other parties across the country — most no bigger than a few hundred people — but by Sunday afternoon they were without incident.

Imran Khan's party defied

Independents cannot form a govt and the country faces weeks of political uncertainty as rival parties negotiate possible coalitions

a months-long crackdown, which crippled campaigning and forced candidates to run as independents, to emerge as the winners of Thursday's vote.

Final results were announced Sunday, with independents winning 101 seats, PML-N 75, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) 54, and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) 17.

Ten minor parties mopped up the remaining 17 seats, with two remaining vacant.

"The results have clearly indicated that no single party possesses a simple majority to establish a government," said Zahid Hussain, a political analyst and author.

"The political future of the country from this point onward is highly uncertain."

Still, PTI leaders insist they have been given a "people's mandate" to form the next government. "The people have decided in favour of Imran Khan," party chairman Gohar Ali Khan told Arab News in an interview.

— AFP

Prabowo expects to win Indonesian presidential vote

JAKARTA: Indonesia's leading presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto said he is confident of winning next week's election in a single round to lead the world's third largest democracy, Al Jazeera news channel reported on its website.

Prabowo, an ex-special forces commander, is one of three candidates contesting the February 14 election. A candidate needs a simple majority or more than 50 per cent of votes and at least 20 per cent of votes in over half the country's provinces to win. Barring this, a run-off between the top two candidates would be held in June.

Prabowo, 72, is projected by some opinion surveys to pip the 50 per cent threshold, though the chance of a second round lingers. His rivals, ex-Jakarta governor Anies Baswedan and ex-Central Java governor Ganjar Pranowo, trail more than 20 points behind him.

"All the figures show that we will go in one round," Prabowo, currently defence minister, told Al Jazeera after a rally that attracted hundreds of thousands of supporters in the capital Jakarta on Saturday, the last day of campaigning.

He also defended running with outgoing President Joko Widodo's

36-year-old son, something made possible only in October, when a top court led by the president's brother-in-law tweaked eligibility criteria for vice presidential candidates.

"In Indonesia it has become some sort of an issue, not because he is under 40 but because he is the son of President Joko Widodo, which makes some circles feel bad. But that's politics. You cannot please everyone all the time," he said.

Jokowi, as the president is popularly known, has faced allegations of interfering to try to sway the outcome of the election by making highly publicised appearances with Prabowo.

Jokowi has responded that a president has the right to support any candidate, while saying he did not plan to campaign for anyone.

Indonesia's presidential election will be held on February 14, with three candidates battling to lead Southeast Asia's biggest economy and the third-largest democracy in the world. The relocation of the archipelago's capital from Jakarta to Nusantara on Borneo island and the fight against corruption are two key issues to succeed President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo after a decade in power.

— Reuters



Indonesia's presidential candidates Ganjar Pranowo (L), Prabowo Subianto, and Anies Baswedan in Tangerang. — AFP

Yemen to receive \$250 m tranche of Saudi grant

DUBAI: Yemen will receive a second \$250 million instalment from a Saudi one-year \$1 billion grant on Sunday or Monday to support salary payments, its central bank governor said.

Ahmed bin Ahmed Ghaleb Al Maabqi said the remaining \$500 million of the grant, from which the first \$250 million was paid out last August, has yet to be transferred to the bank, based in the southern port of Aden.

The bank supports the government as it struggles with a weak currency and high fuel and commodity prices.

Riyadh's ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed al Jaber, said in a post on social media platform that the second \$250 million instalment was transferred to help with paying salaries and "operating

expenditures and food security," in Yemen.

Al Maabqi said the money would only cover salaries for a few months to help people buy essentials such as food.

He said attacks by the Ansar Allah on commercial vessels in the Red Sea since November had worsened an economic crisis in war-shattered Yemen.

"The situation is getting more difficult," he added on the sidelines of the 2024 World Governments Summit in Dubai.

Ansar Allah say they will persist with their strikes until a ceasefire is agreed between Israel and Hamas, and food and medicine are allowed into the enclave without restrictions to ease a humanitarian emergency.

— Reuters

POWERFUL DEMOLITION TRANSFORMATION

This combination of pictures shows the cooling tower, the historic 'big tower' of the Emile Huchet coal-fired power station undergoing demolition by explosive blast, in Saint-Avold, northeastern France. According to the site's operator, Gazel Energie, this coal-fired power station is being converted into an 'eco-platform'.

— AFP



MANILA

Philippines landslide toll jumps to 54 dead

The death toll from a massive Philippine landslide near a gold mine abruptly rose to 54 on Sunday, local officials said. Nineteen bodies were recovered from beneath the rubble in the southern mountain village of Masara, with 63 other miners and residents still missing, said the municipality of Maco, and provincial disaster official Randy Loy. The previous death toll given stood at 35. The landslide buried a bus terminal for employees of a gold mining firm and 55 nearby houses on Tuesday night, leaving 32



other people injured. Rocks, mud and trees slid more than 2,300 feet down a steep mountainside near the Apex Mining Co concession, burying an 8.9-hectare section of the Masara community. — AFP

TURIN

Italy bids quiet farewell to Vittorio Emanuele

Hundreds of mourners attended the funeral in the northern Italian city of Turin of Vittorio Emanuele of Savoy, the only son of Italy's last king, who died last week aged 86. Among those present in the city's main cathedral were Prince Albert of Monaco and Spain's former Queen Sofia, while small groups of well-wishers braved the rain outside holding up placards with slogans such as "Safe Journey, Prince".

A message of condolence from



Pope Francis was also read out but the service attracted only limited interest in Italy, reflecting the fact that Vittorio Emanuele lived much of his life in exile in Switzerland. — Reuters

PORT OF SPAIN

Oil spill in Trinidad after mystery shipwreck

Emergency workers in Trinidad and Tobago were scrambling to clean up a massive oil spill after a mysterious vessel ran aground near the Caribbean island earlier this week. At least 15 kilometres of coastline have been affected by the disaster, and authorities are considering declaring a national emergency, Farley Augustine, chief secretary of the Tobago House of Assembly, told reporters. Environmental officials say the spill has



damaged a reef and beaches on the Atlantic coast, boding ill for the island's resorts and hotels, the lifeline of the local economy during Carnival season. — AFP



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In brief

VATICAN CITY



POPE CANONISES FIRST FEMALE ARGENTINE SAINT

Pope Francis canonised the first female saint from his native Argentina, an event that brought his former fierce critic, Argentine President Javier Milei, to the Vatican. Francis led a canonisation Mass in St Peter's Basilica for Maria Antonia de Paz y Figueroa, better known as 'Mama Antula', an 18th century consecrated lay woman who renounced her family's riches to focus on charity and Jesuit spiritual exercises.

Milei had a front row seat for the service, and at the end of it, exchanged a few words with the pope, as they shook hands and hugged. The president is due to have a private audience with Francis on Monday. — Reuters

LONDON



RUSSIA LIKELY LACKS MEDICAL WORKERS DUE TO WAR

Russia probably lacks health care personnel throughout the country, partly due to its war against Ukraine, the UK Ministry of Defence said in its daily update on the conflict on X.

The Russian Ministry of Health had already determined in November that the country's medical sector was short of around 26,500 doctors and 58,200 nurses, the MoD said. There are signs that the Russian war in Ukraine is contributing to this shortage, the British said. Shortly after the partial mobilisation of the Russian armed forces in September 2022, healthcare workers were warned not to leave the country. — dpa

HELSINKI



FINLAND'S STUBB SEEN AS FRONTRUNNER IN RUN-OFF

Centre-right Alexander Stubb of the National Coalition Party is the frontrunner in Finland's presidential run-off on Sunday, according to opinion polls, as the Nordic country elects a new leader of its security and foreign policy. Nearly 46 per cent of those entitled to vote cast their ballots in advance of Sunday, official data showed, with the first results from advance votes to be published shortly after polls close at 1800 GMT. The winner is expected to be known by around 2100 GMT. The vote marks a new era in Finland, which for decades has elected presidents to foster diplomacy, in particular with neighbouring Russia. — Reuters

EU President condemns Trump's Nato threat

BRUSSELS: Donald Trump's threat to stop defending Nato countries that fall short of spending commitments if re-elected in the US is "reckless", said European Council President Charles Michel on Sunday.

"The Transatlantic Alliance has underpinned the security and the prosperity of Americans, Canadians and Europeans for 75 years," said Michel on X, formerly Twitter.

"Reckless statements on #Nato's security and (Article) 5 solidarity serve only Putin's interest" and "they do not bring more security or peace to the world", he added.

"On the contrary, they re-emphasise the need for the #EU to urgently further develop its strategic autonomy and invest in its defence," he continued.

Article 5 stipulates that if a Nato country is victim of an armed attack, each member of the Alliance must consider the act as an attack against the whole group and take measures to provide aid to the country under threat.

Trump threatened on Saturday,



Former US President and 2024 presidential hopeful Donald Trump attends a 'Get Out the Vote' Rally in Conway, South Carolina. — AFP

Reckless statements on #Nato's security and solidarity serve only Putin's interest and they do not bring more security or peace to the world

CHARLES MICHEL
European Council President

in the event he is re-elected in the United States, that he would not defend Nato members who had not met their financial obligations, and going further would "encourage" Russia to attack them.

The former US president has regularly criticised allies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization for underfunding the group.

During a meeting in South Carolina, Trump said he had a

conversation with the head of state of a Nato member, without naming them.

This statement came after Trump, likely the candidate to face Democrat President Joe Biden in November's election, put pressure on Republicans in Congress to block a bill to provide new aid to Ukraine.

The White House reacted sharply to Trump's remarks. "Encouraging invasions of our closest allies by murderous regimes is appalling and unhinged," White House spokesman Andrew Bates said on Saturday night.

Meanwhile, any suggestion that Nato allies would not defend each other undermines all of the alliance's security and puts US and European soldiers at risk, Nato chief Jens Stoltenberg said in a statement on Sunday.

"Any attack on Nato will be met with a united and forceful response", he added, reacting to comments former US President Donald Trump made about not protecting Nato allies who aren't paying enough. — Reuters

Berlin holds partial re-run of 2021 federal election

BERLIN: Voters in hundreds of Berlin constituencies headed to the polls on Sunday for a partial re-run of the 2021 federal election, after numerous mishaps the first time round. In December, Germany's Constitutional Court ordered a repeat after the botched elections in the city-state on September 26, 2021, including ballot papers being incorrect or going missing altogether.

Queues formed outside polling stations beyond the supposed close of voting when projected results had already been announced.

So on Sunday, 549,549 Berliners may cast their ballots in 455 of the city's 2,256 constituencies and associated postal voting districts, or around a fifth of the overall number.

Stephan Bröckler, the state elections supervisor, believes that precautions were taken to ensure that everything runs

smoothly this time around.

"The mistake must be rectified and only we, the citizens, can do that," said Bröckler on Sunday morning as he cast his vote.

The vote will not alter the majority of Chancellor Olaf Scholz's centre-left governing coalition as it affects only 0.9 per cent of voters nationwide.

However, the capital's voters could make minor changes in the make-up of the Bundestag, as the German parliament is known. Berlin currently has 29 of the 736 lawmakers in the national parliament and some lawmakers are at risk of losing their seats while others might be returned for the first time.

At a broader level, the vote is seen as marking the start of a key election year in Germany, with European elections scheduled for June 9, then state elections in Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg in September. — dpa

MINISTER SURVEYS WAR'S AFTERMATH



Member of the International Working Group on the Environmental Consequences of War and former Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström stands next to an apartment building heavily damaged during Russia's attack on Ukraine, in the town of Borodianka, Kyiv region, Ukraine. — Reuters

Charles thanks well-wishers after cancer diagnosis

LONDON: Britain's King Charles III on Saturday expressed his "heartfelt thanks" to well-wishers, in his first statement since his shock announcement that he has cancer.

Buckingham Palace said on Monday that Charles had begun treatment, but did not specify what type of cancer he has.

"I would like to express my most heartfelt thanks for the many messages of support and good wishes I have received in recent days," the king wrote in a message to the public.

"As all those who have been affected by cancer will know, such kind thoughts are the greatest comfort and encouragement," he added.

The note was published on the 75-year-old monarch's website and the royal family's official page on social media platform X.

Charles added that it is "equally heartening to hear how sharing my own diagnosis has helped promote public understanding and shine a light on the work of all those organisations which support cancer patients and their families across the UK and wider world."

"My lifelong admiration for their tireless care and dedication is all the greater as a result of my own personal experience," he concluded, signing the letter "Charles R."

Britain's National Health Service reported this week that the king's diagnosis had sparked a surge in online searches for advice about the disease.

Charles has taken an indefinite break from public duties while he receives treatment and is currently staying at the royal country residence of Sandringham, in the east of England.

He is continuing some administrative duties and held his weekly audience with the prime minister via phone this week.

Charles is not thought to have prostate cancer, since after his recent hospital procedure for a



Britain's King Charles III and Britain's Queen Camilla leave after attending a service at St Mary Magdalene Church on the Sandringham Estate in eastern England. — AFP

"MY LIFELONG ADMIRATION FOR THEIR TIRELESS CARE AND DEDICATION IS ALL THE GREATER AS A RESULT OF MY OWN PERSONAL EXPERIENCE," KING CHARLES III CONCLUDED, SIGNING THE LETTER "CHARLES R

benign prostate enlargement the palace said that "a separate issue of concern was noted", adding subsequent tests had identified "a form of cancer".

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has said the condition was "caught early".

On Thursday, Charles's wife Queen Camilla said that her husband was doing "extremely well" under the circumstances.

Charles's diagnosis comes just 17 months into his reign following the death of his 96-year-old mother, Queen Elizabeth II, on September 8, 2022. He has generally enjoyed good health, barring injuries from polo and skiing. — AFP

Stay motivated through online communities



Sandhya Rao Mehta

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February is the month when all the resolutions made early in the New Year are unravelling for most. Be it reading more, losing weight, doing new courses or any other promise, we find it difficult to stay with it. The reasons are always the same — lack of time, absence of support or just losing interest. But of late, staying motivated to one’s goal has become much easier thanks to a plethora of online communities.

At its simplest level, an online community consists of a group of people who share a common interest and use social media to communicate, share ideas, work on a project or just keep each other going by egging them on.

During the global pandemic, it was even common for university students to just log into a call and do their own work. Just knowing that there was somebody out there doing a similar task was comforting.

As early as 1996, a Harvard Business Review article maintained that online communities “serve consumer needs for communication, information, and entertainment”. Today, they are more

important than ever before in offering the sense of a community with a shared goal.

Online communities are used to fulfil multiple purposes: sharing content like news and information; communicating about news and current events or other content; for instant feedback and motivation. Today, online communities are indispensable to various areas of life, ranging from job searches, sharing recipes, being on a diet or sharing an academic course. All of these are everyday routines in which individuals resort to online communities for motivation and focus.

Research suggests that the primary benefit of online communities is exposure to a variety of people from across the world with similar interests and facing identical challenges. Most people stay on a site because they see themselves benefiting from it — whether tangibly or through ideas and encouragement.

While more than 80 per cent of participants in an online community stay as passive spectators, the rest participate in varying degrees depending on the topic of conversation or the focus of a project at a given time. It is often the role of the host to

ONLINE COMMUNITIES SHARE A COMMON PURPOSE AND DESIGN, EVEN THOUGH THEIR STRATEGIES MAY VARY WHILE THESE GROUPS MAY SPAR AT TIMES, PARTICULARLY THOSE FOCUSING ON CURRENT EVENTS

encourage participation by providing engaging activities, sufficient motivation and encouraging feedback. Online engagement varies considerably in any platform. Staying committed to one platform is challenging for the hosts, but for participants, it offers competitive, real time motivation to stay on course in any task.

Knowing that others are facing similar challenges and obstacles, gaining insight into how others are coping, and getting daily tips, quotes and prompts keeps one committed to a project.

There are many forms of online communities: those based on learning, networking, social, and even fan communities. What they all share is a common purpose and design, even though their strategies may vary. These groups may spar at times, particularly those focusing on current events and social issues, but the factors that unite them are often larger than the issues which they disagree with. Online communities may have many negative repercussions as well, including disengaging the young from the real world outside, but in so far as it helps people to connect to others, share ideas and stay motivated, it is a platform that is not going away.

Eliminating extremism: Navigating the roots for lasting peace



Asim bin Salem Al Shidi

The writer is Editor-in-Chief, Oman Arabic daily

The biggest issue that worries the entire world is that of extremism, violence, and terrorism. Yet, it is the issue that the world deliberately avoids treating its original source and real causes, and goes every time to try to treat the results using lethal weapons.

By treating the issue this way, whether the world knows or does not know, it is sowing the seeds of new extremism and violence and will necessarily lead to bloody terrorism that undermines the gains of human civilisation and the values of peace, security and human rights. It also makes the world revolve in a vicious circle that does not reach a safe end.

Many human experiences have proven that extremism and terrorism were never seeds, but were always the rotten fruits of a complex interaction between historical injustices, social and economic disparities, and political interventions that lack wisdom, integrity, and the values of justice and equality.

If the world, which today celebrates the “the International Day for the Prevention of Violent Extremism as and when Conducive to Terrorism,” is serious about eliminating these toxic plants, then it must work to eliminate their roots.

This requires finding out the real causes of extremism and violence, and the role of some countries in the world in sponsoring the same threats that they seek to eliminate. Failing to do so will result in the phenomenon revolving around itself, and the world will witness forms of “plants and fruits” of terrorism that are more extreme and capable of destroying human civilisational gains.

The most destructive extremism emerges from the state of despair that man reaches, and the alienation in his home. This extremism feeds on the grievances of the marginalised and the downtrodden who lose all means of livelihood and dignity due to the absence of true human values and principles of the global system, and find themselves on the margins of prosperity, security and peace, without them feeling it.

The roots of despair and alienation that ignite the embers of extremism and violence are deep and diverse in many societies and go back to colonial periods. And it continues today through economic exploitation, and flourishes amidst contemporary geopolitical strategies that support countries and political entities in the complete absence of the values of justice and equality.



In this context, we can review the reasons behind the emergence of terrorist organisations such as ISIS in Iraq in order to understand the paths of the existence of violence, extremism, and terrorism.

The organisation arose under Western interventions that came under the guise of the illusion of spreading democracy. The difficult circumstances that Iraq experienced in light of the American/British invasion, in which the Iraqis lost all means of living with dignity and all horizons of the future, led to the strengthening of extremism and violence, which over time led to a highly ‘extremist’ version of terrorism. That version was later fed by various countries of the world and took the path that everyone now is aware of.

What happened in Iraq left scars that cannot be erased from the memory of Iraqis, Arabs and Muslims, scars that perpetuate hostilities and turn over time into cycles of violence and extremism.

Starving people and widening the gap between the rich and the poor within and between countries create a class division that is susceptible to building extremist and violent tendencies at the moment when a person feels that his economic rights have been taken away and he has no hope of obtaining them.

This is not for reasons related to him personally, but rather as a result of the values that were adopted by the society to which he/she belongs. At this moment when he/she feels despair, all they find before them is violence and extremism, and feelings of hatred rage within them leading to terrorist acts.

If the ideological trends and some of the values of globalisation and the modern Western neoliberalism, in which state control is absent in favour of private sector institutions, are trends that sometimes fuel extremism as a result of the absence of justice, equality, and human dignity, they also pave the way for the community of arms manufacturers and dealers to play a fundamental role in stimulating violence, extremism, and terrorism by drowning troubled areas with weapons.

Some developed countries indirectly

contribute to perpetuating the conflict for reasons related to the economy and building new geostrategic balances. This is clearly revealing how economic interests often trump the pursuit of peace, which appears in flashy slogans without being present in practice.

At this historical moment when the world is experiencing a digital revolution, social media and artificial intelligence applications are playing a malicious role in fuelling violence and extremism and calling for terrorism at a time when they could have played a different role by increasing awareness and disseminating the values of education and enlightenment.

Adopting the idea of ‘us versus them’ which strips the other person of his humanity and justify aggression as presently taking place during the war waged by the Zionist entity on the Gaza Strip where the West supports the aggression stripping the Palestinians of their humanity in search of justifications for the aggression even though it has gone beyond the definition of terrorism to a level worse than genocide.

For many years, Israeli and Western narratives have sought to manipulate information and spread misleading data which contributed to building an atmosphere characterised by fear of others and hatred all of which feed the Western citizen’s view of the Palestinian people.

Addressing the roots of extremism and violence in today’s world requires a multi-faceted approach that surpasses military solutions that failed to eradicate terrorism or remove feelings of hatred but heightened tension instead. Any serious treatment requires re-evaluating foreign policies that prefer military intervention to diplomatic action. The world must move towards enhancing understanding and dialogue between cultures, addressing the lack of social and economic inequality that generates despair, restoring rights to their owners including the right to land, homeland, history and dignity. All those steps can lead to peace.

In today’s world there are many international experiences that deserve a serious pause to study them in depth and to find out how they were able to build a society free of all forms of extremism and intolerance and consequently terrorism.

Among these models, it is possible to study the Omani experience that managed to achieve a society free of any manifestations of extremism and terrorism.

This experience is not the result of the past few decades but rather the result of long centuries in which the Omani state endeavoured to establish the principles of justice and the values of equality and to incite a sense of true partnership in the homeland and on the paths of the future.

Therefore, there is no mention in history books of a conflict that broke out in Oman for an ideological or sectarian reason. This matter is deeply rooted in Omani society until Oman became known as a country completely free of terrorism despite being in the middle of a region filled with variables and conflicts and not devoid of extremism, violence and terrorism in many periods of time.

Despite the values established by the Omani society, the matter was not left without legal restrictions.

Hence, all ideas of extremism and violence were criminalised in the Omani laws since the dawn of modern renaissance prior to which they were criminalised by the customs and values of the society and in its religious texts from which it derives these values and principles. Years ago, an independent Omani law was enacted to combat terrorism.

A national committee was formed to combat terrorism and another was formed to combat money laundering and terrorist financing. With the Omanis feeling that their dignity in their homeland is preserved and that they live in a society governed by the values of justice and equality, all causes of extremism and violence are non-existent making Oman a country of zero-terrorism since the onset of the Global Terrorism Index to date.

The Omani experience deserves to be studied globally and lessons should be drawn from it. Although some countries call for combating violence, extremism and terrorism but at the same time water and nourish its seeds and they know how to eradicate it completely and the Omani lesson is clear to them, however they are unwilling to try it for reasons pertaining to their immediate agendas and gains.

The path to eliminating extremism and violence is fraught with challenges and requires a qualitative shift in the way countries interact with each other and with their citizens.

It entails embracing the principles of respect, justice, fairness, and equality so that they become the guiding values for actions taken by the international community and its global system.

THE ROOTS OF DESPAIR AND ALIENATION THAT IGNITE THE EMBERS OF EXTREMISM AND VIOLENCE ARE DEEP AND DIVERSE IN MANY SOCIETIES AND GO BACK TO COLONIAL PERIODS

A spotlight on the journey of relief!

Challenges keep creeping in frequently throughout lifespan; regardless how big or small they are, they need our attention, time and efforts. Every dawn comes with a different surprise that might be a frustrating shock or a wonderful blessing! What matters is how we handle every challenge that comes across our way, every time. Those challenges could be at our workplace or due to different attitudes of people or issues related to making a living. Nothing in life can be taken for granted.

It happens like anything else in life; days are not always the same. Yet, it is us who control how we run everyday life, regardless of what happens around us! Being optimistic and looking at the positive side of each experience we come across is the best way to overcome the disappointing moments. Though it is not easy to control our reaction, attitudes and feelings, but we should always try to live the moment.

Looking back at the old days of history, let's reflect on the story of the Ascension Day of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The so-called Al Isra'a Wal Miraj day was a two-part night journey arranged by the Almighty Allah to the Prophet. The first part, Al Isra'a, was a travel on the back of a winged mule-like white beast, called Buraq, from Mecca to Jerusalem in Palestine where he led the past Prophets in a prayer. The second part was ascension of the Prophet to Heaven where he was instructed by Allah of the duty for Muslims to pray five times a day, which marks a pillar of Islam.

The story of Al Isra'a Wal Miraj is described in the Holy Quran, "Glory to Him Who carried His beloved by night from the Sacred Masjid to the Furthest Masjid, whose precincts We have blessed, to show him of Our wonders! He it is Who is All-Hearing, All-Seeing! Remember when We said to you that your Lord encompasses mankind in His knowledge. Nor did We make the



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BEING OPTIMISTIC AND LOOKING AT THE POSITIVE SIDE OF EACH EXPERIENCE WE COME ACROSS IS THE BEST WAY TO OVERCOME THE DISAPPOINTING MOMENTS

vision We showed you except as a test to people, as also the accursed tree in the Quran."

It has been believed that Al Isra'a Wal Miraj was not only a physical journey, but of a high spiritual level for the Prophet made the journey through spiritual vision. During his ascension, he was met by the past Prophets Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus and others as well. It is also stated that the Angel Gabriel accompanied him to some extent of the ascension.

The ascension was a matter of seeing Heaven and Hell and of getting new revelations from Allah. Before the night was over, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had returned to Mecca where his journey began. The Al Isra'a Wal Miraj journey was a relief to the Prophet after he lost his wife Khadija and his uncle, Abdulmotalib, who was signifying the real family support to him. This historical event is observed by Muslims all over the world on the 27th of Rajab, the seventh month in the Islamic Calendar. The anniversary of this ancient story signifies the importance of patience while facing challenges of life. It teaches humans how strong they should be like all the Prophets of Allah who were struggling with their people. They were sparing no effort to guide their people and teach them the religions and messages from Allah.

All Prophets had a mission to accomplish and a message to convey, so they were patient enough to tolerate the disobedient people to their command and overcome all kinds of struggles in their lifetime. That journey of relief remains as a lesson to all people to be patient and wisely deal with challenges and disappointments.

All will run into unavoidable challenges along our journey. It is true that we may encounter many defeats, but we must not be defeated. When you feel that all roads are closed, Allah's kindness will come to you from the impossible path.

A VIGIL FOR GAZA!



A woman participates in a silent procession in London, Britain, during a vigil for Gaza on Sunday. – Reuters

Strengthening Africa's community health programmes

In 2017, African Union heads of state pledged to deploy two million community health workers (CHWs), recognising their role in advancing health for all. Seven years on, as African leaders prepare to convene in Addis Ababa, we must reflect on our progress. By 2030, Africa will face a shortage of six million health workers, making CHWs a key component and a fast solution to bridging the continent's health needs. Developing resilient community health-worker programmes across Africa has never been more urgent.

We have witnessed how disease outbreaks can plunge a country into darkness — and how the power of CHWs can help pull it back into the light. As Liberia's experience shows, CHWs need adequate resources and financial support to be effective. In the early 2010s, Liberia's efforts to offer primary healthcare in remote areas faced significant challenges. There was a shortage of health workers, and where CHWs were deployed, they were under-compensated and did not have the necessary equipment or training to deliver the essential care that was so desperately needed. As a result, different community health initiatives run in parallel by the government and other stakeholders failed to have a significant impact on patients — a



Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

The writer is a former president of Liberia, is Founder of Africa Frontline First



Jean Kaseya

The writer is Director-General of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention

common problem in many African countries. In 2016, the Liberian government launched the National Community Health Assistant Programme to address these issues and apply the lessons learned from the Ebola outbreak that began in 2014. With proper supervision, adequate salaries, and enough supplies to reach every household in their communities, CHWs were empowered to provide standardised, integrated primary healthcare services. The results speak for themselves. Liberia's 4,000 CHWs now deliver nearly 50 per cent of all reported malaria treatments for children under five and consistently provide access to health services, even during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Programmes that take a similar approach have yielded positive results in other African countries. Since Ethiopia implemented its community-based Health Extension Programme, which has deployed 40,000 community health workers, vaccination rates have tripled and child mortality has fallen dramatically. The experience of these and other countries shows that supporting CHWs and integrating them into national health systems can save lives and

create livelihoods. It should serve as a guide for expanding community health services across the continent.

A resilient community health workforce is key to overcoming existing and future health challenges in Africa, which currently range from alarming maternal and infant mortality rates to a high burden of communicable diseases. Equally worrying is the escalating climate crisis, which has underscored the urgency of improving access to care and building health systems that can adapt to a changing environment. Increasing the number of CHWs, and ensuring that they have adequate resources, is one of the most cost-effective and sustainable ways to achieve these goals.

Unfortunately, a daunting

\$4.4 billion annual funding gap — compounded by fragmented financial flows — continues to slow our progress towards a healthier, safer, and more prosperous Africa. The solution is to adopt a "one plan, one budget, one report" framework, like that used by Liberia and Ethiopia. With this approach, governments outline their strategies for national community health programmes, and partners coordinate resources and technical expertise to reduce the bureaucratic burden.

To that end, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and partners launched the first-ever continental coordination mechanism for community health in November 2023. Encouraging coordination among stakeholders

will enable African countries to build effective and efficient CHW programmes to tackle the challenges of high-burden communicable diseases such as HIV, tuberculosis, malaria, and non-communicable diseases, as well as to respond better to emergencies, including epidemics and climate shocks.

The Africa CDC remains firmly committed to strengthening the community health workforce, which dovetails with the New Public Health Order — the organisation's health-security agenda — and the AU's initiative to deploy two million additional CHWs on the continent. As part of this effort, the Africa CDC has collaborated with Africa Frontline First to mobilise the financing needed to professionalise CHWs. Last year's Reaching the Last Mile Forum in Dubai was a success on that front: 12 partners committed to accelerating support for professional CHWs. This announcement also included \$900 million from the Global Fund over the next three years, 74 per cent of which is earmarked for Africa.

The private and public actors in Africa must take coordinated action. @Project Syndicate, 2024



By 2030, Africa will face a shortage of six million health workers.

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Finn Fisher-Black crowning crossing finish line.

FISHER TAKES OVER QURAYAT HILLS UNDER HEAVY RAINS



ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 11

New Zealand's rider Finn Fisher-Black of UAE Team Emirates put up a dominating performance to win the dramatic 170.4 km stage two of 13th edition for Tour of Oman on Sunday in Qurayat. On a day of heavy rains, the Kiwi youngster picked up a spectacular victory after more than four hours of racing that began at Al Sifah in a cloudy weather. This is the second successive triumph for the rider Finn in Muscat following his earlier title of the second edition of Muscat Classic event on Friday after an impressive show.

The star of UAE Team Emirates claimed the overall leader's red jersey (general individual time) after he completed the race within 4 hours, 4 minutes and 4 seconds ahead of the rider LUKE LAMPERTI (USA) of SOUDAL QUICK-STEP team who came in second place within a timing of 4H, 04 minutes and 06 seconds. Italian rider DIEGO ULISSI finished third as he clocked 04 hours, 04 minutes and 06 seconds with minor difference in the seconds. The champion Finn Fisher received red (individual time classification), green (general points classification) and white (young rider) jerseys while rider Oscar Pelegri Ferrnandis from Burgos-BH team of Spain got the golden jersey as he claimed the most aggressive rider for the second straight stage as he claimed the same jersey in the previous opening stage of the tour.

"It is nice to have two victories in three days after my opening triumph in Muscat classic race and then in Tour of Oman in the second stage. It was tough race and competitions in this weather conditions. I did not expect to see this weather as I was in Saudi Arabia and UAE in last two weeks and I thought it will remain the same climate here in Muscat. The heavy rains were in the last part of the race but the weather was in good condition during the earlier part," New Zealand's rider Finn Fisher-Black said

" We managed as a team to

overcome with some climbs and hills during the stage as we implemented a good tactical and strategic plan. One of our team members was crashed during the race but he managed to continue the race later. We are eyeing for more victories in the coming days of the race," the champions signed out

A couple of days after he started strongly his tally for 2024 with Muscat Classic and stage 2 of the Tour of Oman 2024, the young New-Zealander proved again to be the strongest riders when the road rose on the final ascent of the day in Qurayat. Showered by the heavy rain to spice up the race, Fisher-Black got the better of Luke Lamperti (Soudal Quick-Step), already runner-up on Friday, and Diego Ulissi (UAE Team Emirates), already 3rd last year in Qurayat.

The Spanish rider Oscar Pelegri Ferrnandis from Burgos-BH team of Spain remained the champions of the golden jersey for the second straight stage. "It is very good for me to be with this jersey and for my team as well. I am planning to go home with this jersey," he added

" The heavy rains started in the last 50 km of the race approximately. Later, the water were in the roads and we took our precautions from that to continue the race safely," he ended

Oman's national team rider Said al Rahbi finished the second stage race in the 67th position in a timing of four hours, six minutes and 23 seconds.

Ahmed bin Mohammed al Humaidi, Chairman of Muscat Municipality, the chief guest delivered the awards in the final ceremony to the top winners in presence of officials from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth and Oman Cycling Association.

On Monday, the road keeps rising in the Tour of Oman with an even harder finish up Eastern Mountain. The stage three will start from Bidbid at 10:25 am and will end in Easter Mountains for a distance of 169.3 km. The finishes will occur at the top of the hill at the end of a 180 m final.



Finn Fisher-Black crowning red jersey

JOHNSON SNATCHES LATE VICTORY FOR SPURS



Tottenham Hotspur's Brennan Johnson celebrates with Richarlison. — Reuters

ANDY JALIL
LONDON, FEB 11

This was as last-gasp a win as it can get with substitute Brennan Johnson's 96th minute winning goal, after an inch-perfect cross by substitute Heung-Min Son, sending the Tottenham fans into a frenzy with a 2-1 result against Brighton with six minutes having been added for stoppage time.

Spurs manager, Ange Postecoglou, who had brought on the South Korean after 62 minutes for his first match after returning three days earlier from Asia Cup duties was full of praise for him: "That ball that Sonny plays, that's a world-class player in a clutch moment. He finds the right pass.

"When you look at his record in the Premier League, the toughest league in the

world, his goal contributions irrespective of how the team's gone and the time he's been here have always been right up there. Even this year before he left, he was probably the best attacking player in the competition."

He added: "I thought we did well to cover his absence. Richie (Richarlison) stepped up in terms of goal threat and a few other players. But to have a world-class player back for the run-in is brilliant."

Brighton had taken the lead in the 17th minute. It began with Rodrigo Bentancur losing the ball on the edge of the box to Pascal Gross who promptly passed to Danny Welbeck and the former England player then played a one-two with Facundo Buonanotte before being tripped by Micky van de Ven. A penalty was awarded and Gross' shot sent Guglielmo Vicario

the wrong way.

Spurs missed a chance soon after when Richarlison's weak shot from James Maddison's through pass was saved by the legs of Jason Steele in the Brighton goal. Spurs were behind at the break but equalised 16 minutes of the restart after some excellent work by Bentancur and Dejan Kulusevski who made a brilliant pass to Pape Matar Sarr.

The Senegal international's cross was intercepted by Lewis Dunk but the ball came off the post and into the path of Sarr who shot inside the far post from a tight angle.

Tottenham had chances but these were wasted. Maddison was just wide with a curling shot and Richarlison was wide with his shot from a cross by Timo Werner. After substitutions there was a marked difference

in Spurs' play but towards the latter part of the second half they seemed to lose momentum and Brighton kept fighting hard for second goal.

But just as the certainty of a draw began to appear Johnson grabbed the winner in a counter attack following fine moves by Maddison and Richarlison before that wonderful cross by Son to shock the travelling Brighton fans.

Their assistant manager, Andrea Maldera spoke in the absence of manager, Roberto De Zerbi who is in Italy recovering after dental surgery: "To concede in the 96th minute, in transition, away, is very tough but this is our mentality. We always want the second goal. Until that moment we played a big match with big courage. We have to accept that this is our identity."

Maxwell blasts unbeaten 120 as Australia beat West Indies in 2nd T20

ADELAIDE: Big-hitting Glenn Maxwell slammed a 50-ball century as Australia beat the West Indies by 34 runs in the second Twenty20 international to seal the series in Adelaide on Sunday.

The 35-year-old was in ominous touch, blasting eight sixes and 12 fours in a blistering 120 not out from 55 deliveries.

It propelled Australia to 241-4 and the visitors could only muster 207-9 in reply, led by skipper Rovman Powell's battling 63.

"It was good fun, that's for sure. Always good batting here, we saw in the Big Bash how good the wickets were during the tournament," Maxwell said.

"The wicket was nice and true. I have always relied on my hand speed and it worked for me today. I give myself the best chance always and nice to play a positive knock."

The hosts won the first clash in Hobart by 11 runs, with one match to play in Perth on Tuesday.

West Indies opener Johnson Charles hit a giant six off the first ball he faced in the run chase, knowing his team must come out swinging.

A wicket maiden by Josh Hazlewood stymied the threat, with Brandon King caught on the ropes for five.

Nicholas Pooran then took apart the next over from Jason Behrendorff, smacking three sixes in a row, but he didn't last, spooning to midwicket on 18 as left-arm quick Spencer Johnson

picked up a wicket in his first home international.

Marcus Stoinis removed Shai Hope (0) and Charles (24) in his first over to leave them on 62-4.

Johnson collected his second of the night to remove Sherfane Rutherford (0) and Stoinis got his third in Andre Russell (37 off 16), before Powell's 36-ball knock proved in vain.

"The boys showed courage, they started aggressive but we keep losing wickets and in the middle we failed to get big partnerships," Powell said.

"But credit to the Australian guys, they bowled well."

Earlier, Australian opener Josh Inglis lasted just six balls before being caught in the deep trying to hit Jason Holder out of the ground.

Skipper Mitchell Marsh whacked an enterprising 29 to propel the hosts to 58-2 off their power-play, but he tried one slog too many and was well caught at mid-on by Holder off Alzarri Joseph, with David Warner following soon after for 22.

That brought Maxwell to the crease and he was looking for the boundary with every delivery, finding it frequently with a range of magnificent shots to reach a half-century off 25 balls.

He shared an 82-run partnership with Stoinis (16) before being joined by fellow big-hitter Tim David (31 off 14) in a 95-run stand that saw him bring up his fifth T20 century.

— AFP



Glenn Maxwell

DONCIC SHINES AS NBA MAVS SILENCE THUNDER

LOS ANGELES: The Dallas Mavericks, fuelled by 32 points from Luka Doncic and 25 from Kyrie Irving, routed the high-flying Oklahoma City Thunder 146-111 on Saturday, notching a fourth straight victory to match their longest winning streak of the NBA season.

Daniel Gafford added 19 points and nine rebounds as he made his Mavs debut along with P J Washington — both acquired at the trade deadline.

Doncic found both newcomers for alley-oop dunks

in the first quarter, when Dallas took a 47-30 lead.

Doncic out-shone Canadian Shai Gilgeous-Alexander in a battle between the league's top two scorers. Doncic, the NBA scoring leader, added eight rebounds and nine assists and had the luxury of resting the fourth quarter.

Gilgeous-Alexander scored 25 points with six rebounds and five assists, but the Thunder — who came into the contest just a half-game behind Minnesota for the Western Conference



Luka Doncic (77) drives to the basket as Jalen Williams (8) defends. — USA TODAY Sports

lead — trailed by as many as 41 and dropped a second straight contest.

Irving added eight assists, delivering the 4,000th of his career in the second quarter.

As the Thunder faltered, the Los Angeles Clippers moved into second place in the West with a tougher-than-expected 112-106 victory over the league-worst Detroit Pistons.

Paul George scored 15 of his 33 points in the fourth quarter as the Clippers battled back from a 13-point deficit early in

the third quarter.

Kawhi Leonard added 24 points for the Clippers, who had seized a quick 12-2 lead in front of home fans only for the Pistons to hit back.

Detroit led by five going into the final period, but the Pistons couldn't contain the Clippers down the stretch despite the departure of Los Angeles reserve point guard Norman Powell after he took an elbow to the face from Pistons centre Jalen Duren as they battled for a rebound. — AFP

SOUTH AFRICA TAKE THIRD PLACE AT NATIONS CUP

ABIDJAN: South Africa took third place at the Africa Cup of Nations finals in the Ivory Coast when they edged the Democratic Republic of Congo 6-5 on penalties after a goalless draw at the Felix Houphouet-Boigny Stadium on Saturday.

South Africa midfielder Teboho Mokoena hit the outside of the post with the first kick after which the next eight efforts were all successful, leaving DR Congo captain Chancel Mbemba needing to score to win the contest.

But South Africa goalkeeper Ronwen Williams saved Mbemba's effort was saved, taking the shootout into sudden death.

Williams then saved again from Meschak Elia to win the tie.

No extra time was played in the bronze medal match, which the Congolese dominated despite proving poor in front of goal.

Silas Katompa had two glaring chances to put them ahead, first in the eighth minute when free on the left with just Williams to beat, but his hesitation allowed the keeper to grab the ball at his feet.

When Williams dropped a high ball in his box midway through the second half, without any pressure on him, Katompa had an even easier chance but shot into the side netting.

Fifteen minutes from the end, DR Congo striker Simon Banza also had clear sight on goal but botched his effort from point blank range.

Substitute Fiston Mayele did well to bring a long ball down on his chest and get goalside of his marker but he, too, missed as his effort in the 89th minute went across the face of goal.

South Africa, who lost on penalties after extra time in Wednesday's semi-final to Nigeria, looked tired as they made only three changes to their line-up, while DR Congo gave an opportunity to all their reserves with nine changes from their midweek loss to the Ivory Coast.

On Sunday, hosts Ivory Coast take on Nigeria in Abidjan to decide the continental title.

— Reuters



South Africa's Ronwen Williams and Khuliso Mudau celebrate after winning the penalty shootout.—Reuters



South Africa's head coach Hugo Broos is lifted in the air.—AFP

PSG fight back to secure 3-1 win over Lille

PARIS: Luis Enrique's Paris St Germain moved 11 points clear at the top of the Ligue 1 standings with a 3-1, come-from-behind home win over Lille on Saturday.

PSG, who were without striker Kylian Mbappe before they host Real Sociedad in the Champions League last 16 on Wednesday, are on 50 points from 21 games and have extended their unbeaten run to 16 games.

It was only the third time Mbappe, who was forced off injured against Brest in the Coupe de France midweek, has stayed on the bench during an entire Ligue 1 game for PSG -- and the first since April 2018.

"Mbappe is physically very good. It is clear that we did not want to take risks, there was no need, we are not playing in a final, it made no sense. He will be available for Wednesday match," said Luis Enrique in a news conference.

"This is a collective effort, obviously there are players like Kylian with the individual ability to change the course of a game on his own, but I have highlighted the level of the squad - that's what makes me proud as a coach."

"Playing in the Champions League is not like playing for our lives. We will face the competition with calm, without pressure... We are ready and we have proved it," he added.



Remy Cabella (R) stretches top control the ball ahead of Marco Asensio (L). – AFP

Midfielder Yusuf Yazici when he gave Lille the lead after silenced the Parc des Princes six minutes, collecting a loose

ball inside the six-yard box to send it past returning PSG goalkeeper Keylor Navas.

Navas, 37, who was sent on loan to Premier League side Nottingham Forest for the second half of the 2022-23 season, missed the beginning of the current campaign with back problems.

A Lille defensive error four minutes later gifted PSG an equaliser however, with Ousmane Dembele squaring the ball to Goncalo Ramos who scored with a low, first-time shot from 10 metres.

The home side then went ahead when Lille defender Alessandro put the ball in his own net in the 17th minute as he attempted to clear a low strike by Fabian Ruiz from outside the box.

Midfielder Marco Asensio and defender Nordi Mukiele had chances for the Parisians in the second half before Randal Kolo Muani sealed the points with an 80th-minute tap-in.

Lille, who ended their unbeaten start to 2024 on Wednesday when they were knocked out of the French Cup last 16 by Olympique Lyonnais, remained fourth on 35 points.

They host Le Havre on Feb. 17, while PSG travel to 14th-placed Nantes later that day.

Second-placed Nice host AS Monaco, in fifth, on Sunday.

—Reuters



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Oman anticipates steady growth in electricity consumption and renewables expansion

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, FEB 11

Oman's electricity consumption is expected to witness a consistent increase in the coming years, as outlined in the recently released report "Electricity 2024: Analysis and forecast to 2026" by the International Energy Agency.

The report, which offers insights into Oman's energy landscape, highlights the country's aims to diversify its energy mix and reduce reliance on traditional fossil fuels.

One of the key findings of the report is that Oman's electricity consumption grew by an estimated 2.5% in 2023. This growth trend is projected to continue with an anticipated annual growth rate of around 3% for the next three years. As a result, Oman is taking strategic steps towards enhancing its power generation infrastructure and embracing renewable energy sources.

Currently, Oman's electricity generation is primarily reliant on natural gas, which accounts for 93% of the country's energy mix.

However, with increasing



To facilitate the development of new production capacities, Oman has initiated the Rabt project.

concerns about energy security and sustainability, Oman has set ambitious targets to expand its renewable energy capacity.

The report highlights the upcoming implementation of two solar photovoltaic power plants, Manah I and II, with a combined capacity of 1,000 MW. These plants, scheduled to commence operations in 2025, will significantly bolster

Oman's renewable energy output, nearly tripling the existing capacity from renewables.

Furthermore, to facilitate the development of new production capacities and improve transmission infrastructure, Oman has initiated the Rabt project. This project, which costs RO 183 million and was launched on December 14, 2023, aims to

connect the north and south standalone grids of the country.

A key milestone in this endeavour was accomplished in August 2023, with the commissioning of the Suwayhat grid station, a critical \$49 million infrastructure project undertaken by the Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) which owns and operates the

country's transmission system.

Meanwhile, Al Duqm and Mahout grid stations were completed and energised in October 2023 with total investments of more than \$99 million.

Additionally, a competitive tender has been launched for a 132/33 kV grid station on Masirah Island, which will be linked to the mainland through a subsea cable, thereby reducing the island's dependence on diesel-fired power generation.

While transitioning towards a more sustainable energy future, Oman acknowledges the importance of uplifting the existing subsidy framework. In response to the energy crisis, the Omani government has already increased electricity subsidies by 15% in 2022 and 2023.

However, comprehensive reforms are underway, aiming to gradually raise utility tariffs, ultimately leading to the elimination of subsidies by 2025. These reforms are expected to ensure a more efficient allocation of resources and encourage responsible energy consumption.

EU agrees on looser fiscal rules to cut debt, boost investments

BRUSSELS: European Union member states and MEPs struck a preliminary deal on Saturday to ease the bloc's stringent fiscal rules, giving governments more time to reduce debt as well as incentives to boost public investments in climate, industrial policy and security.

The latest revamp of two-decades-old rules known as the Stability and Growth Pact came after some European Union countries racked up record high debt as they increased spending to help their economies recover from the pandemic, and as the bloc announced ambitious green, industrial and defence goals.

The new rules set minimum deficit and debt reduction targets but these are less ambitious than previous figures.

"At a time of significant economic and geopolitical challenge, the new rules will allow us to address today's new realities and give EU member states clarity and predictability on their fiscal policies for the years ahead," European Commission Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis said in a statement.

"These rules will improve the sustainability of public finances and promote sustainable growth by incentivising investment and reforms," he said. — Reuters

Mideast growth to slow in 2024 on oil cuts: IMF

DUBAI: The International Monetary Fund said on Sunday Middle East economies were lagging below growth projections due to oil production cuts and the Israel-Gaza conflict, even as the global economic outlook remained resilient.

Despite uncertainties, "the global economy has been surprisingly resilient," IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva (pictured) told the Arab Fiscal Forum in Dubai, while warning of a potential wider impact on regional economies of continued conflict in Gaza.

The IMF revised its GDP growth forecast for the Middle East and North Africa down to 2.9% this year, lagging below October projections, due in part to short term oil production cuts and the conflict in Gaza.

The IMF last month edged its forecast for global economic growth higher, upgrading the outlook for both the United States and China and citing faster-than-expected easing of inflation.

Georgieva said economies neighbouring Israel and the Palestinian territories saw the conflict weighing on tourism revenues, while Red Sea attacks



weighed on freight costs globally.

Those factors compounded "the challenges of economies that are still recovering from previous shocks," she told the forum on the sidelines of the World Governments Summit in Dubai.

The Ansar Allah in Yemen have been targeting commercial vessels with drones and missiles in the Red Sea since mid-November, and say their attacks are in solidarity with Palestinians as Israel strikes Hamas militants in Gaza. But the US and its allies characterise them as indiscriminate and a menace to global trade.

Several global shippers have been diverting traffic to the Cape of Good Hope, a longer route than through Egypt's Suez Canal.

Egypt's Finance Minister Mohamed Maait said that part of the impact of the diversion on Suez Canal revenues could be absorbed due to good growth in "the period before the events."

— Reuters

US firm gets grant to study Oman's geologic hydrogen potential

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, FEB 11

US geotechnical firm Eden GeoPower has secured funding assistance from the US Department of Energy (DOE) to help advance a landmark initiative to unlock the potential for geologic hydrogen production in the Sultanate of Oman targeting peridotite rock in the Semail Ophiolite.

Last September, the American firm signed an agreement with Oman's Ministry of Energy and Minerals designed to enable it to pilot its proprietary technology in enhancing the production of geologic hydrogen at peridotite-rich rock sites in the country.

The goal is to accelerate the production of geologic hydrogen and harness this zero-carbon fuel resource in support of the global energy transition. Geologic hydrogen is produced when water interacts with iron-rich rocks such as peridotite.

By drilling and injecting water directly into such iron-rich rocks, the naturally occurring process of hydrogen production is stimulated.



Eden GeoPower scientists in Oman during an earlier visit to pilot their proprietary technology in accelerating geologic hydrogen production from peridotite rock.

According to Eden, around 2 – 4 kg of hydrogen can be produced per cubic metre of peridotite rock through this process.

However, to produce commercial quantities of geologic hydrogen through this process, Eden has been seeking to deploy its patented Electrical Reservoir Stimulation (ERS) technology to crack rocks and increase their permeability. The technology, it says, has a far lower carbon footprint than conventional hydraulic fracturing.

Announcing its grant to the

US tech firm, the Department of Energy said: "Eden GeoPower is developing a way to apply its electrical reservoir stimulation techniques to increase geologic hydrogen production through testing their stimulation methods on peridotite core samples from multiple sites to be selected in the Semail Ophiolite in Oman.

The company's electrical stimulation method could produce significant surface area enhancement while also increasing the local temperature to promote reaction conditions

suitable for hydrogen production.

Experimentally testing how peridotite rock types respond to electrical stimulation could support identifying the optimal conditions and geologic formations for stimulation."

Significantly, Eden GeoPower was among 16 projects that received the DOE's funding support for initiatives aimed at accelerating the natural subsurface generation of hydrogen. It marks the first time that the US government has competitively selected teams to research this kind of technology.

Oman hosts one of the largest occurrences of peridotite, which forms part of the Semail Ophiolite – a massive ridge extending some 100,000 sq kilometres across north Oman and into neighbouring UAE. Once part of the oceanic crust, it was obducted on to the Arabian Peninsula due to tectonic forces around 95 million years ago.

According to experts, geologic hydrogen has the potential to make an important contribution to the growth of clean energy resources necessary to meet the global Net-Zero target by 2050.

Sohar Aluminium signs MoU with Takaful Suhar Social Charity Team to fund investment building

SUHAR: Sohar Aluminium Company (SA) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Takaful Suhar Social Charity Team to finance the development of an investment building project for the team in the Wilayat of Suhar, Al Batinah North Governorate.

The signing ceremony was attended by Shaikh Mohammed bin Abdullah al Busaidy, Wali of Suhar, Abdullah bin Ali al Balushi, Majlis Ash'ishura Member of Suhar, Shaikh Ahmed bin Mohammed al Balushi, Deputy Wali of Suhar, and other dignitaries.

The agreement was signed by Ahmed bin Mohammed al Kharusi, General Manager of HR and Corporate Affairs at Sohar Aluminium, and Abdulmunim bin Mohammed al Murshidi, CEO of Takaful Suhar Social Charity Team.

The agreement stipulates financing the construction of a 4-storey residential and commercial building with a total built-up area of approximately 406 sqm based on the approved design, provided that the building is constructed within a period of one year from signing the agreement.

This project will play a significant role in boosting and ensuring the sustainability of the activities conducted by Takaful Suhar Social Charity Team to serve the community in the Wilayat of Suhar.

The revenues of this investment building will support the Team to fund its various social and charitable activities that have



The agreement was signed by Ahmed bin Mohammed al Kharusi, General Manager of HR and Corporate Affairs at Sohar Aluminium and Abdulmunim bin Mohammed al Murshidi, CEO of Takaful Suhar Social Charity Team.

been managed by the Team and to achieve its objectives.

The General Manager of HR and Corporate Affairs at Sohar Aluminium confirmed that funding the construction

of this project for Takaful Suhar Social Charity Team reflects the Company's social responsibility and its continuous support to give back to the communities, especially those located within its

concession area.

He further commented that this project is in line with Sohar Aluminium's direction towards developing the community and supporting sustainable projects

that thrive charitable activities, initiatives, and projects.

On the other hand, the CEO of Takaful Suhar Social Charity Team stated that this investment building will stand as an asset, which will contribute to supporting the Team's different activities and initiatives.

He also commended the role of Sohar Aluminium, which has been a partner to fund this remarkable project, marking a testament of the Company's ongoing support to the community.

Takaful Suhar Social Charity Team was established in 2012 and works under the umbrella of the Social Development Committee in the Wilayat of Suhar. The Team is concerned with providing a range of charitable and social services to the community of Suhar.

Liva Insurance launches rewards programme offering customers over RO 800 in value

MUSCAT: Liva Insurance, the leader in innovative insurance solutions, is proud to announce the launch of the Liva Rewards Programme, an ambitious initiative designed to redefine the insurance customer experience.

Hosted at the Novotel Muscat, the launch event marked a significant milestone in Liva's dedication to offering unique and high-value rewards to its customers, with the programme's value exceeding RO 800.

Liva Insurance's groundbreaking Rewards Programme is setting new standards in the insurance industry by significantly enhancing the role and value that insurance plays in the lives of its customers.

Through strategic and exclusive partnerships with over 25 different retailers, service providers, and healthcare facilities, Liva Insurance is offering its customers an unparalleled opportunity to enjoy valuable discounts and special offers that extend well beyond the traditional scope of insurance benefits.

Upon purchasing any of Liva Insurance's wide-ranging products and services (including group medical, travel, motor, home...etc) customers will receive a digital loyalty card, which they can easily display on their smartphones or other digital devices.

This digital card is their passport to accessing exclusive discounts across the network of participating partners.



Liva Insurance is offering its customers an unparalleled opportunity to enjoy valuable discounts and special offers.

"We are thrilled to introduce the Liva Rewards Programme, a testament to our commitment to being a partner in our customers lives, giving value beyond insurance. Through our exclusive partnerships across a wide spectrum of services and retailers, we're proud to offer a programme that enhances the quality of life for our customers, offering significant discounts and unique offers directly tied to their lifestyles.

At Liva Insurance, we believe that insurance should do more than protect — it should propel our customers towards a richer, more rewarding life," Said Hanaa al Hinai, CEO of Liva Insurance said.

Bader al Lawati, Head of Brand and Communications also commented: "The essence of the Liva Rewards Programme is to forge a deeper connection with our customers, transforming

every insurance policy into a key that unlocks a spectrum of extraordinary benefits.

As we continue to grow this programme, the value and the list of partners will continue to grow, giving our customers an invaluable tool to enrich their everyday lives."

The Liva Rewards Programme is set to transform customer engagement by offering unmatched benefits, special deals, and personalised experiences. This initiative propels Liva towards its objectives of enriching the customer experience and establishing itself as a frontrunner in insurance innovation.

As the region's premier multi-line insurer, Liva continues to offer a comprehensive suite of digitally enabled, customisable solutions across all insurance lines, backed by exceptional customer service.

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MUSCAT: Ford vehicles are renowned for their attractive designs, inspiring safety features, advanced technology and dependability which makes them a popular choice for a wide base of customers.

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Ford genuine parts are specially manufactured to keep your Ford running in the finest form, far longer than non-genuine parts. Moreover Ford genuine parts are strongly recommended by Ford Motor Company.

Ford genuine parts are designed to perfectly fit your Ford vehicle encouraging them to perform better at all times. Besides this the wear and tear compared to non-genuine parts is much lesser, thereby giving owners multiple opportunities to save.

In comparison, non-genuine parts offer temporary opportunity to save, but in the long run it turn out



to be a bad choice. When it comes to your family's safety on every journey, Ford genuine parts tick all the boxes as they are manufactured according to strict specifications and have undergone extensive laboratory and on-road testing.

Ford genuine parts offer immense confidence on every journey eliminating unnecessary hassles and worries. Ford genuine parts are available throughout Oman brought to you by Arabian Car Marketing Co LLC.

Bank Muscat Oryx Fund delivers remarkable performance in 2023

Bank Muscat Oryx Fund's performance track record			
Period	Bank Muscat Oryx Fund	S&P GCC Composite Index	Outperformance
2023	29.2%	6.2%	23.0%
Past 3 Years	22.6% p.a.	9.0% p.a.	13.6% p.a.
Past 10 Years	11.1% p.a.	2.2% p.a.	8.9% p.a.
Note: Return over 1-year period is annualized Performance as on December 31, 2023 Data source: Bloomberg and Bank Muscat			

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat Oryx Fund registered industry leading gains of 29.2 per cent during 2023 as against its benchmark S&P GCC Composite index, which posted a return of 6.2 per cent.

Accordingly, the Fund maintained its track record of posting attractive returns during 2023 with outperformance of 23 per cent over the index.

The Fund achieved this stellar performance despite challenging market conditions prevailing throughout 2023 for a number of factors, including a sharp increase in interest rates and geopolitical issues.

The strong performance of the Fund made it the Top Performing GCC Equity fund among the GCC equity funds in Oman for the year 2023.

The Fund has been delivering consistent performance across all periods.

In addition to delivering robust capital appreciation, the Fund also rewarded investors with consistent cash dividends.

During 2023, the Fund paid dividend of 68 baisas per unit which is higher than the dividend of 66 baisas per unit paid in 2022.

Bank Muscat Oryx Fund primarily invests in stock markets in the GCC region and has a consistent and proven track record of generating attractive returns for 29 years.

The Fund is one of the largest funds in the GCC region within



its category and it is regulated by the Capital Market Authority as per the applicable laws and regulations in Oman.

The Fund clearly stands out as an attractive investment choice for prospective investors with a medium to long term view.

Bank Muscat Oryx Fund offers daily liquidity with no minimum holding period. Investors may choose to sell their investment anytime and receive cash funds in their bank accounts within 3 days.

The Fund's Net Asset Value ("NAV") is published on a daily basis on Bank Muscat's website and on Muscat Stock Exchange's website, so that investors can track the value of their investments on a daily basis.

Investors can invest and redeem their investments in Bank Muscat Oryx Fund through Bank Muscat's Mobile Banking and Internet Banking platforms.

The investors can subscribe for the Fund with a minimum subscription amount of RO 50.

Investors may also choose to invest every month by subscribing to the Systematic Investment Plan (SIP) option through filling in the application form and submitting it to Bank Muscat asset management.

Interested investors may contact the relevant team of the Fund through email at assetmanagement@bankmuscat.com.

Please refer to the prospectus of Bank Muscat Oryx Fund available on www.bankmuscat.com to understand the Fund's details including key terms and conditions.

Investors are also requested to refer to the key risk factors highlighted in the prospectus.

It should be noted that the mutual fund returns are subject to market performance and past performance doesn't guarantee future performance.



In brief

■ WASHINGTON

**TESLA SLASHES PRICES FOR SOME MODEL Y CARS IN THE US**

Tesla Inc has temporarily cut prices of some of its Model Y cars in the US until February 29, less than a month after the carmaker cut Model Y prices in Germany. Tesla reduced prices for its Model Y rear-wheel drive and Model Y Long Range by \$1,000 to \$42,990 and \$47,990 respectively, representing a discount of 2.3% and 2% from previous prices. Prices of the Model Y Performance variant and other models remained unchanged, according to the website. New Model Y rear-wheel drive and Long Range model prices will be reduced for deliveries now through February 29, Tesla said in a notice on its website.

■ SEATTLE

**BOEING STRIKES CONCILIATORY TONE WITH SUPPLIERS**

Boeing executives extended an olive branch to the company's strained supply chain this week to help them deal with the fallout of the latest 737 MAX crisis, but those firms are taking a wait-and-see attitude after years of dealing with the planemaker's hard-line approach.

The aerospace giant's shift in tone was underlined by a speech on Wednesday by Ihssane Mounir, Boeing's vice president of supply chain and fabrication, at an aerospace conference outside Seattle.

"We build the airplane together. There's no you and us. It's just us," he said. — **Reuters**

■ NEW YORK

**JEFF BEZOS SELLS ROUGHLY \$2 BILLION OF AMAZON SHARES**

Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos sold around 12 million shares of the online retail and cloud services firm for roughly \$2 billion, according to a company filing on Friday, soon after laying out a plan to sell his shares over the next year.

The sale took place on Wednesday and Thursday, the filings showed.

Last week, Amazon said that Bezos would sell up to 50 million shares in the firm. The sale plan, which is subject to certain conditions, was adopted on November 8, 2023, and would be completed by January 31, 2025, according to the company's latest annual report.

Bezos founded Amazon as a bookseller in 1994. — **Reuters**

Empowering rural Omani women: A hopeful step in Taqah

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, FEB 11

Nestled amidst the verdant mountains and fertile plains of Dhofar Governorate lies Taqah, a town where the whispers of change are beginning to ripple through the lives of its rural women.

The recently launched Rural Women's Empowerment Programme, a collaborative effort between the Governor's office in Taqah and various regional institutions, aims to be a turning point, unlocking economic opportunities and fostering financial independence for this often-marginalised segment of the population.

For decades, rural Omani women have grappled with limited employment opportunities, restricted access to resources, and societal constraints. This programme, targeting 130 participants across three training centres, seeks to address these challenges head-on.

Equipping women with practical skills in cheesemaking, jam & pickle production, and other agricultural ventures, empowers them to launch income-generating businesses, paving the path towards financial self-sufficiency.



"This programme is a beacon of hope," says Maryam bint Ahmed bin Salim, a participant with dreams of starting her own cheesemaking business. "The training has given me the confidence and knowledge I need to turn my passion into a livelihood, not just for myself, but for my family as well."

Beyond individual empowerment, the programme also aims to revitalise the local economy by promoting and listing locally produced goods in established markets.

This not only creates a sustainable market for participants' products but also contributes to the preservation of traditional food-making practices and the cultural heritage of the region. However, the road to sustainable success is not without its

challenges.

Access to financing, navigating market competition, and overcoming cultural barriers remain hurdles that need to be addressed. Experts like Ahmed Suhail al Maashani, an agricultural economist, emphasise the need for comprehensive support systems, including mentorship, microloans, and marketing assistance, to ensure the programme's long-term impact.

Noor bint Mohammed al Awaid, working for the governor office in Taqah, expressed confidence in the programme's potential, stating: "This meticulously designed initiative equips women with the essential skills and knowledge they need to thrive. We are confident that this programme will make a

significant contribution to the economic development of Taqah and empower rural women, paving the way for a brighter future for all."

The programme's focus on youth engagement is another commendable aspect. Encouraging young people to participate in agriculture and related fields, fosters intergenerational collaboration and ensures the programme's sustainability beyond the current cycle. This creates a ripple effect, empowering not just the participants but also their families and communities, ultimately contributing to broader rural development goals.

The Rural Women's Empowerment Programme in Taqah stands as a testament to the immense potential that lies within rural communities when women are empowered and equipped with the necessary skills and resources.

While challenges remain, the programme's holistic approach, collaborative spirit, and focus on sustainability offer a hopeful glimpse into a future where rural Omani women not only contribute to their well-being but also play a vital role in the economic and social development of their communities.

Oman to host 34th General Arab Insurance Federation Conference on Feb 19

MUSCAT: HH Dr Kamil bin Fahd bin Mahmoud al Said (**pictured**), the Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers, will patronise the opening ceremony of the 34th General Arab Insurance Federation Conference (GAIF34) on Monday, February 19, 2024.

The conference, themed 'Sustainability and inclusivity in the Arab Insurance Industry; How Arab Insurers Leverage the Artificial Intelligence Revolution' will convene with the participation of international, regional, and local stakeholders from the insurance industry.



This biennial event is a key regional gathering for insurance industry policymakers, companies, brokers and reinsurers from the Arab world and beyond.

Oman Insurance Association, in collaboration with the Capital Market Authority, currently are

finalising preparations for the launching of this significant conference.

The event has garnered widespread interest from a large number of entities and companies in the insurance industry, with over fifty local, Arab and international companies providing diverse sponsorships.

The conference is scheduled to take place at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre from February 18 to 21, 2024 and will address various topics in line with theme of the event over a span of three days by eminent panels of industry leaders and subject matter

experts along with meticulously moderated plenary sessions. Oman's hosting of this regional conference comes after winning the bid in the previous edition held in Oran, Algeria.

The organisation of this conference in Oman is considered an exceptional event, given its large attendance and the high-quality topics presented.

The anticipated positive impact includes contributing to national goals, showcasing the country's capabilities, and continuing to host events of this magnitude in the future, enriching economic activity and tourism.

Green shoots of growth

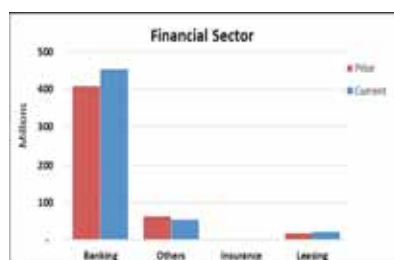


KARL JACKSON

No major spikes nor slumps in general business, as per the preliminary full year results submitted to the MSX.

The major year-on-year changes are explained typically by one off items. Overall, financial services and service-oriented companies continue their positive post-Covid bounce back, consistently outperforming industrial companies, which are still experiencing subpar performance as they struggle often against various global headwinds. In total, 20 companies posted losses, compared to 23 companies in 2022.

Within the financial sector, banks are maintaining their

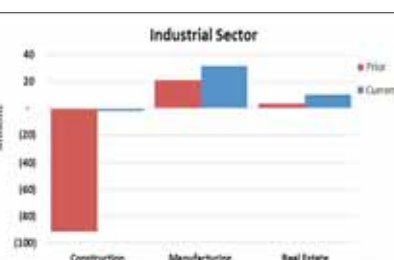


leadership position, marked by reduced loan impairment charges combined with improved net interest income as they have been able the ride the global increases in interest rates to post improved net interest margins.

The leasing companies, who are wholesale funded, so are not able to reap the benefits of increasing interest rates, are however similarly reporting improvements, with a slight increase in profitability attributed primarily to expanding loan portfolios.

Since the insurance companies have been given an extended reporting deadline, to cope with the arduous requirements of IFRS 17, they have not yet reported.

Within the Industrial sector, encompassing construction,

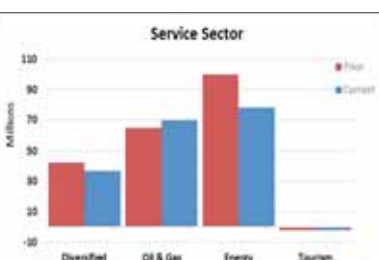


manufacturing, and real estate, even excluding the RO 97 million one-off hit taken by Raysut Cement in the prior year, construction income is still slightly down.

The manufacturing sector is also facing challenging times due to several factors, notably the global challenges posed by high interest rates and the destabilising impacts of various wars.

The reported improvement came entirely from Oman Cables, which posted a RO 8 million improvement in profitability.

It is hoped that ensuring free trade agreements with neighbouring countries will open up new export opportunities for Oman manufacturers. The real estate gain came from the launch of the Pearl REIF, which posted a RO



6 million gain in its inaugural year. Lastly, the service sector offers a contrasting landscape.

With the exception of SMN Power that recorded a loss of RO 16 million after providing for impairment of its plant, the energy companies reported robust profitability.

Whilst the profits of the three petrol station operators were down only slightly, this was offset by impressive growth of the new market participant, OQ Networks with the oil and gas sector.

The story in tourism is less rosy, as 3 of the 5 hotel operators again posted losses.

The author is an Audit and Assurance Partner with Crowe Oman karl.jackson@crowe.om and is based on financial data published by the Muscat Stock Exchange.

NEDC's \$500m sukuk oversubscribed



MUSCAT: Nama Electricity Distribution Company SAOC (NEDC) has successfully issued a \$500 million 5-year 144A/RegS Sukuk at a profit rate of 5.5 per cent.

"The transaction garnered a 4x oversubscribed book and has high levels of participation from high quality international asset managers.

This transaction is an important issuance for NEDC post the sector reorganisation, and helps to deepen investment into Oman, said NEDC in a statement.

NEDC, part of Nama Group, is Oman's sole electricity distribution company outside Dhofar Governorate and is 100 per cent indirectly owned by the Government of Oman. The company is rated Ba1 (stable) by Moody's and BB+ (stable) by Fitch).

Omani law firm expands partnership



MUSCAT: Leading Omani law firm Al Busaidy, Mansoor Jamal & Co (AMJ) has appointed Sayyid Ahmed bin Said bin Hilal al Busaid (**pictured**) as a new partner in its Corporate, Commercial and Regulatory Department.

Sayyid Ahmed has a broad range of experience in corporate commercial, regulatory advisory, Capital Market and Mergers & Acquisitions and advises his clients across a wide-ranging spectrum of sectors.

"We are delighted to welcome Al Sayyid Ahmed into our partnership," said Mansoor Jamal Malik, managing partner.

"His appointment to the partnership is a testament to the success we have had in advisory work on all regulatory matters relating to Banking and Finance, M&A and IPO transactions.

This demonstrates our commitment to support fast-paced economic growth and development in Oman. It boosts our capability to respond to the business community's need for quality legal services at a time of increasing complexity and sophistication of transactions, products and the developing regulatory framework."

Positioning Oman’s tech industry as pillar of national economy



ANATOLY MOTKIN

The author is the President of StrategEast.

LIKE other Gulf countries, Oman is embarking on a remarkable journey of economic transformation. This transformation, encapsulated in Oman Vision 2040, signifies a monumental shift from an oil-dependent economy to a diversified and sustainable one.

When we say “digital economy,” we mean not only the digital transformation of all spheres of life — from business to public services but also the creation of our own IT sector with its startups, universities, and a developed segment for the provision of digital services.

Such a transformation does not happen overnight and requires not only political will, the presence of which was outlined by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and which is reflected in Oman Vision 2040, but also daily painstaking work aimed at increasing digital expertise within the country, developing investment attractiveness, innovative entrepreneurship, and reinvestment of local capital in intellectual capital and much more.

All processes in our time have become so fleeting that to close the gap, organically growing in the right direction is not sufficient, and out-of-the-box solutions to leapfrog are required.

Such not ordinary solution would be digital integration of the Gulf region and, in particular, Oman with the Central Asian and Caucasus regions in Eurasia.

The Caucasus and Central Asian countries took good care of their intellectual potential.

They arranged ideal conditions to create an IT industry that was initially based on outsourcing, then — on Western orders for more complex engineering solutions, and finally, on their technological products.

At the initiative of governments

or non-governmental organisations, IT parks were created, in which companies working for export received special tax and legal preferences.

Taxes for such companies have been reduced to a single-digit number, companies have been freed from the region-wide registration bureaucracy and the currency regulation hassle, and, in some countries, and such companies have even been able to conclude contracts in accordance with British law.

The IT education system was not only restored and modernised but also expanded; working developers from global engineering companies were involved as mentors.

Graduates of such training became the primary source for the growth of international companies that opened their regional offices and attracted new ones, both engineering and product.

The IT ecosystem was created in the region by the joint efforts of not only local governments and local and global IT companies but also international financial institutions and development agencies such as the World Bank, EBRD, USAID, and others.

Today, the IT ecosystem of the Central Asian and Caucasian countries is a well-tuned, modern, dynamically developing mechanism that needs only one component — foreign orders and investments.

As the digital miracle of Eurasia is blooming, the GCC region, located almost in the same time zone as the bearer of a similar cultural code, is showing outstanding leadership ambitions in the knowledge economy.

Historical experience shows that the most ambitious projects were awarded with success only in the case of mutually beneficial collaboration between the most gifted stakeholders.

The Gulf countries are undoubtedly capable of joining forces and forming a coalition for digital cooperation with the Caucasus and Central Asia in order to become a single digital market and a global digital hub.

Initially, such cooperation should be based on three components.

The first one is providing digital services by engineering companies with offices in the Caucasus and Central Asia to the traditional business and public sector of the Gulf countries.



An illustrative image depicting the digital bridge connecting the Middle East, Caucasus, and Central Asia as a unified digital single market.

The second is the participation of venture capital from the Gulf countries in the development of the startup ecosystem of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The third is the regional knowledge partnership.

For the systematic implementation of this initiative in Oman, local government and businesses should work in 7 main areas:

Attraction of large international engineering companies

Large international engineering companies have R&D offices in several countries, employing thousands or tens of thousands of coders and providing digital services to global corporations. Such companies can quickly transfer assignments between their offices, as well as relocate their employees. That type of companies will enable Oman to increase production, including export-oriented quickly. This can be implemented within the framework of the Oman Vision 2040 programme. The National Program for Investment and Exports Development (Nazdaher).

Development of a local

startup ecosystem

Oman should attract leading mentors and experts from Silicon Valley and the EU to accelerate and promote local startups and to develop entrepreneurial skills, attract the world's best venture funds to cooperate with the park, develop local angel investors pipeline, and create local venture funds in Oman.

These activities will fulfil Innovation Dynamics, Innovation Capacity, Ecosystem knowledge sharing, and other Strategic Priorities in short-term and medium-term timeframes within Economic Leadership and Management as well as Economic Diversification and Fiscal Sustainability Key Performance Indicators.

Promotion of the international reputation of Oman as a technologically advanced country

That will ensure the representation of Oman's IT industry at the prime international venues and also will hold its own international forums and events, establishing a globally-accepted Innovation Forum to support events, conferences, and seminars for innovators, startups, and SMEs throughout the country and

to attract global stakeholders, accomplishing the priority recommendation Ecosystem Knowledge Sharing 1 advised in the Digital innovation profile of Oman.

National Employment Program Tashgheel

For the accelerated growth of Oman's IT industry, it will be necessary to train a significant number of local talent. They will be trained within special training programmes organised by large international engineering companies.

Over time, such programmes will be embedded into the formal curriculum of local universities; joint programmes with the leading international universities, such as Berkeley, Stanford and others, which, except for the main target of local talent development, will also support emphasised Strategic Priorities focused on Innovation Capacity increase aligning Education, Learning, Scientific Research and National Capabilities Key Performance Indicator.

AI-cloud-blockchain technologies

To be in line with the most cutting-edge technologies, the training of Omani specialists

should focus on AI, cloud, and blockchain in collaboration with the global leaders, fulfilling the Artificial Intelligence & Advanced Technologies focus of the priorities set by the country.

Relationships with the world's largest technology corporations

Such global giants as Google, Microsoft, and Amazon are at the first stage of providing the backbone services — cloud and other technologies, in order to further attract them to work in Oman. This will allow reaching goals for Ecosystem knowledge sharing, Ecosystem partnership, and governance Strategic Priorities, simultaneously promoting data centres and cloud services supporting the Focus Area for up to 2025.

Issues of regional and transnational collaboration

Cooperation with similar parks in the Gulf countries, countries of Central Asia, and the Caucasus will facilitate the implementation of the joint startup acceleration programmes, organise transnational venture funds, and eventually support the development of a regional digital hub in Oman.

EU’s AI ambitions may fail on two fronts

THE European Union’s artificial intelligence ambitions may fall short. Brussels wants to enact vanguard regulation that makes the new technology safer and more competitive.

But overly detailed legislation makes it more likely the EU, and emerging local champions, get left behind.

EU member states signed off on the so-called AI Act last week and sent it to the European Parliament for approval.

The ambitious regulations aim to rein in emerging technology so advanced it could pose a systemic risk, while protecting

privacy and explicitly prohibiting some types of profiling. US President Joe Biden has taken a different tack, issuing an executive order that includes job-boosting measures as well as plans for consumer protections and foreign technology safeguards.

In trying to rein in AI, the EU is following its pattern of ambitious regulations like the Digital Markets Act, which seeks to force big US tech giants like Apple and Alphabet to open up their walled gardens, and the General Data Protection Regulation, which many consumers know from the pop-ups seeking permission to

deposit cookies in their browsers.

However, big companies have ready incentive to challenge EU rules in court or find external workarounds, particularly since technologies are evolving fast.

It doesn't help that the EU is internally divided on how to approach the issues. Germany, for example, has long-standing concerns about privacy, yet joined France in lobbying for more leeway for mid-sized AI startups such as Paris-based Mistral AI and Heidelberg-based Aleph Alpha.

This tension plays out in how the new rules handle systemic risk. General-purpose AI models, which can apply abstract

thinking and adapt to new situations, will face the toughest scrutiny if they exceed a certain threshold of computing power in training their models.

This currently only applies to US-based Open AI's GPT-4 chatbot, not its EU rivals.

It's far from clear that such a technological cutoff is an effective way of managing AI risks, let alone whether the EU can keep applying tighter rules to only the most advanced players.

Another sticking point is when and how open-source coding should be treated differently from private models when used by profit-driven

companies.

The draft law currently exempts open-source technology from some, but not all, of the requirements.

The EU is hoping that its new rules will trigger a global rush towards stronger regulation. But it may just reinforce the US lead in technology.

Giants like Microsoft and Google owner Alphabet have deep pockets to finance investment in AI, access to vast amounts of data, and huge potential customer bases for new applications.

Furthermore, the Brussels benchmark creates opportunities for others to adopt a lighter

touch. Last year Microsoft announced big AI investments in the UK, which could design rules to be more friendly to big tech firms.

In 2023, venture capital firms invested an estimated \$68 billion in AI in the United States, compared with compared to \$15 billion for China and just \$8 billion for the EU, according to the OECD's AI Policy Observatory.

If the EU clamps down too hard, too early on the emerging sector, innovation will follow the money elsewhere.

Then Brussels will be less of a rule maker than a technology taker. — Reuters

Global equities notch third weekly gain, US yields up

NEW YORK/LONDON: Global equities rose on Friday, with the S&P 500 crossing the 5,000-point milestone for the first time ever, as US inflation data raised expectations of an interest rate cut this year, while closely watched US Treasury yields rose.

The greenback reversed earlier gains, falling 0.06%.

Oil notched a gain for the week on worries over a broadening conflict in the Middle East after Israel rejected a ceasefire offer from Hamas.

The MSCI All Country stock index climbed 0.4% to a third straight weekly gain.

The mood in stock markets was buoyed by Wall Street, where the S&P 500 index rose above 5,000 points, helped by big gains in megacap stocks such as Nvidia.

The chipmaker climbed to a record high after Reuters reported it was building a new business unit.

"The new closing high over 5,000 bodes well over the intermediate to longer term, with a key technical level being

cleared today," Larry Tentarelli, Chief Technical Strategist with Blue Chip Daily Trend Report, in North Andover, Massachusetts.

"We believe that the combination of very strong corporate earnings, strong jobs data, strong GDP data and declining inflation are an excellent backdrop for equities going forward."

US monthly consumer prices rose less than initially estimated in December, but underlying inflation remained a bit warm, data showed on Friday. The data revision did little to alter expectations for central bank rate changes.

US inflation data for January is coming next week.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 54.64 points, or 0.14%, to 38,671.69, the S&P 500 gained 28.70 points, or 0.57%, to 5,026.61 and the Nasdaq Composite gained 196.95 points, or 1.25%, to 15,990.66.

The yield on benchmark US 10-year notes rose 0.7 basis points to 4.177%, from 4.17% late on



Traders work on the floor of the NYSE in New York. — Reuters

Thursday.

The 2-year note yield, which typically moves in step with interest rate expectations, rose 3.2 basis points to 4.4883%, from 4.456% late on Thursday.

Gold prices came under pressure from the stronger yields, with spot gold down 0.44% at \$2,024.16 an ounce. US gold futures settled 0.4% lower at \$2038.7.

Brent crude futures settled up 0.7% at \$82.19 a barrel, and US crude futures finished up 0.8% at \$76.84.

European shares ended slightly lower under pressure from rising

yields and sliding L'Oreal shares.

The pan-European STOXX 600 index closed 0.1% lower, but still eked out a weekly advance of 0.2%.

L'Oreal dropped 7.6% after the French cosmetics company reported underwhelming fourth-quarter sales growth.

Inflation in Germany, Europe's biggest economy, eased in January to 3.1%, adding fuel to bets on when the European Central Bank will begin easing rates.

However, euro zone bond yields hit multi-week highs after several ECB rate setters warned against easing monetary policy too early.

"Indeed, it seems pretty clear now that the ECB will be waiting for European wage data statistics at the end of April before likely cutting rates in June," ING bank said in a note.

Japanese shares hit 34-year highs. The yen recovered after falling to a 10-week low, with traders reassessing their bets on how quickly the Bank of Japan might raise rates. — Reuters

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TRAVEL TALES

A woman walks on Red Square, with the State Historical Museum seen in distance, during a heavy snowfall in Moscow. — AFP



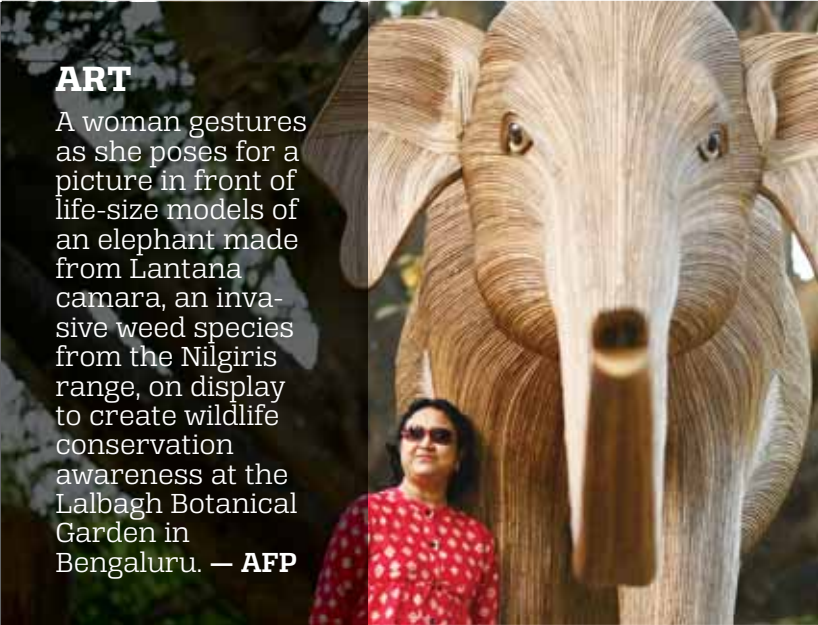
LIFESTYLE

Leila, a homeless woman, receives her Friday night dinner offered by the "Restaurant of Love", a charitable initiative launched three years ago to help feed the growing number of Tunis' homeless, in Tunis. — AFP



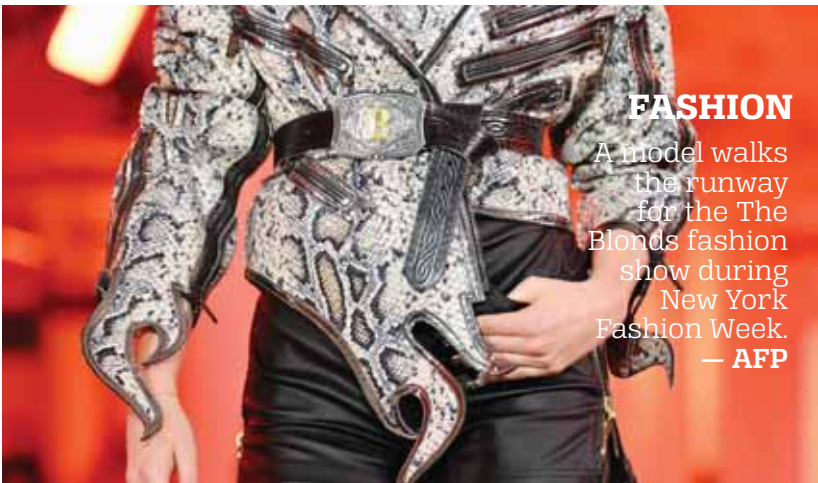
ENTERTAINMENT

Bollywood actors Vidyut Jammwal (L) and Nora Fatehi pose for pictures during the trailer launch of their Indian Hindi-language sports action film 'Crakk-Jeetega Toh Jiyegee' in Mumbai. — AFP



ART

A woman gestures as she poses for a picture in front of life-size models of an elephant made from Lantana camara, an invasive weed species from the Nilgiris range, on display to create wildlife conservation awareness at the Lalbagh Botanical Garden in Bengaluru. — AFP



FASHION

A model walks the runway for the The Blonds fashion show during New York Fashion Week. — AFP

art & life

MONDAY | FEBRUARY 12, 2024 | SHAABAN 2, 1445 AH | OMAN OBSERVER | www.omanobserver.om | features@omanobserver.om



When in Barr Al Hikman, all roads lead to Whales Head Camp

Visiting Barr Al Hikman? Then you'd likely come across Whales Head Camp. With its friendly atmosphere and environmental consciousness, it's become a landmark in this remote, yet increasingly popular, destination... **P20**

TRAVEL TALES

Parades, parties, pageantry: What to know about Rio's Carnival

AFTER WEEKS OF SWEATY, pulsating street parties, the Rio Carnival reaches its crescendo this Sunday with its main event, in which samba schools compete in dazzling parades.

Here are three things to know about the Rio Carnival:

THE SAMBODROME

Rio de Janeiro vibrates with Carnival fever throughout February, but the main event is the parade of samba schools through the massive "Sambodrome" venue.

For two nights, the schools — community organisations deeply rooted in Brazil's vibrant samba culture — try to out-strut, out-shimmy, and out-shine their competitors in massive parades.

These feature elaborate, massive floats, fantastical costumes and intricate choreography by performers dancing to the beats of a specially composed samba.

Each parade can include up to 3,000 participants who move up the 700-metre (2,300-foot)-long avenue flanked by up to 70,000 spectators.

This year 12 schools will compete for the coveted title of Carnival champion.

Much like football teams, each school has its fervent fans.

There are also different divisions in which schools rise and fall — and getting to the main competition in the Sambodrome is no easy feat. Rio de Janeiro alone has 120 schools.

Those who make it are called the "Special Group."

They put on a million-dollar production, with up to 75 minutes to seduce the jury with



their story told in music and dance.

Themes often revolve around social and political issues or key historical events.

Tickets to the event cost between \$14 and \$400.

STREET CARNIVAL

For most revellers, the real Carnival happens far from the iconic Sambodrome, in hedonistic street "blocos."

These parties, whose name refers to the neighbourhood blocks they are held on, are thronged by thousands, some of whom dance in place, while others move through the

streets following bands performing live music.

Drums, costumes and flowing alcohol — even when the party starts early in the morning — are the name of the game.

Blocos mostly have themes and there are some for all tastes. Loucura Surburana (Suburban Madness) and Zona Mental are for patients and workers from mental health hospitals.

The "Sergeant Pepper" bloco plays Beatle songs, Besame Mucho (Spanish for kiss me a lot) plays samba versions of famous tangos and even the infectious tune "Despacito."

This year there will be some 600 blocos in the city.

SERIOUS BUSINESS

Behind the pleasure-fuelled festivities lies some serious money.

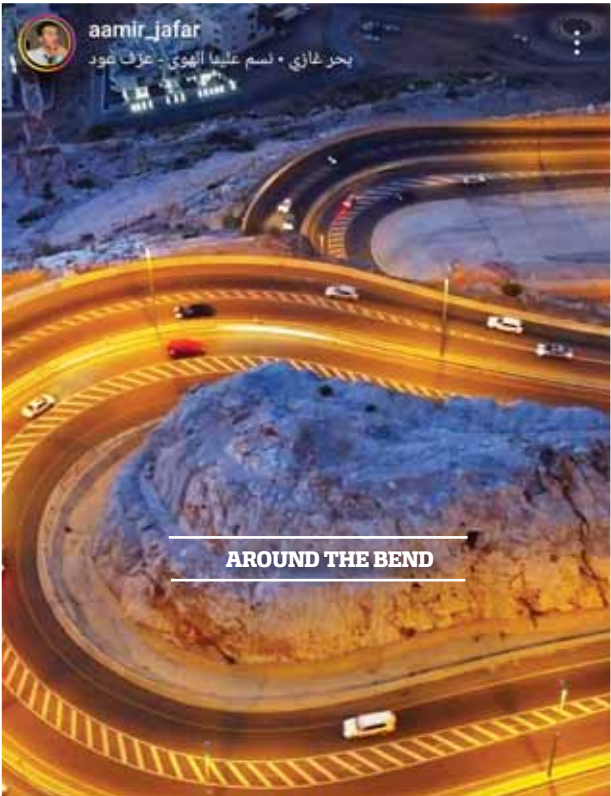
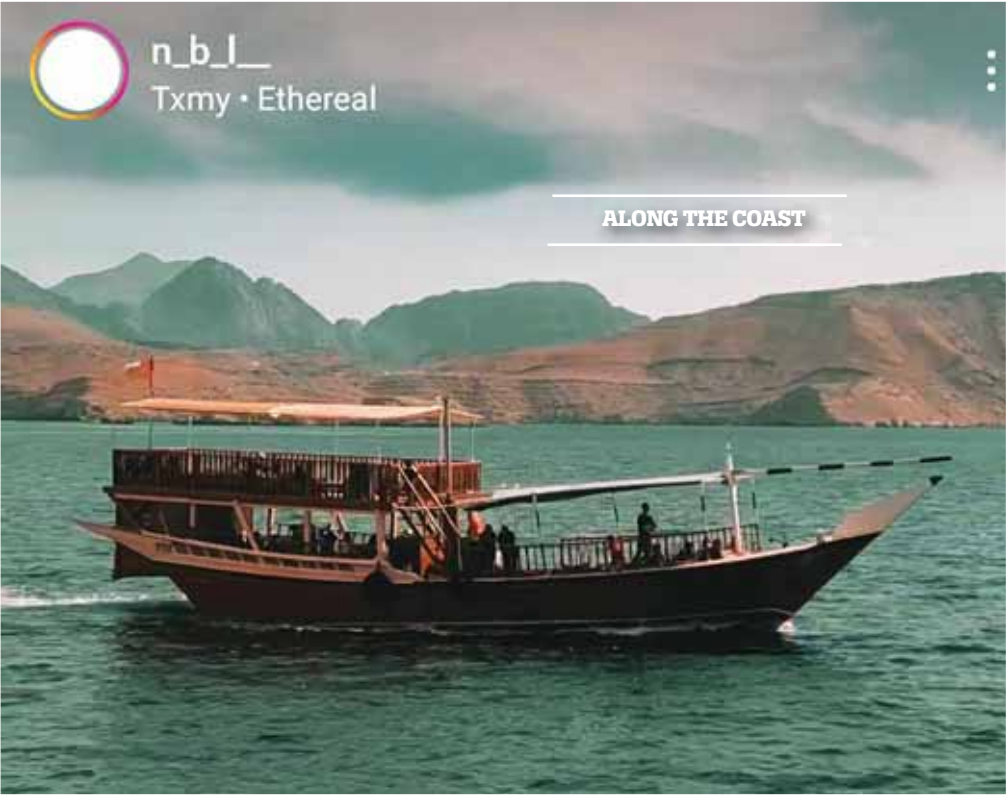
This year the Rio Carnival received its largest-ever cash injection from the state government, 62.5 million reais (\$12.5 million), 40 million of which went to the samba schools.

The Rio prefecture allocated them another 40 million reais.

Carnival will bring in about \$1 billion to the local economy, according to official statistics. This is 18 per cent more than in 2023.

The whole of Brazil will see its economy boosted by \$1.8 billion.—AFP

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The beauty of apricot season starting in Wakan soon

BY BALQEES AL ORAIMI

In the tranquil village of Wakan, nestled within the Wilayat of Nakhal in the Al Batinah South Governorate, a mesmerising spectacle unfolds each year: the arrival of apricot blossom season. As the days grow longer and the warmth of spring begins to unfurl, the landscape transforms into a canvas painted with delicate hues of white, courtesy of the blooming apricot

flowers.

This annual phenomenon, stretching from the onset of February until the early days of March, casts a spellbinding charm upon visitors who venture into this picturesque corner of Oman. The apricot trees, proudly donning their white garb, stand as silent sentinels of the fleeting beauty of nature's cycles. These apricot trees, resilient denizens of the region, find their haven in the high mountain highlands, par-

ticularly in the villages of Wadi Mastal within the Wilayat of Nakhal. Here, in places like Wakan, Hadash, and Al Qawra, the conditions are ideal for their cultivation. The cold embrace of winter and the gentle warmth of summer create a perfect equilibrium, nurturing the apricot trees to yield their bountiful fruits. Ahmed bin Salem al Arafati, a respected resident of Wakan, shares insights into the annual rhythm of the apricot trees. He recounts how, with the onset of December, the trees enter a phase of dormancy, shedding their leaves in preparation for the spectacle that lies ahead. As February unfolds, the landscape bursts into life once more, as the apricot trees adorn themselves with blossoms, heralding the promise of a fruitful season ahead. Come mid-April, the first blush of apricots begins to ripen, marking the commencement of the harvest season. For the farmers of Wadi Mastal, the care of their apricot trees is a labour of love. In the midst of June, following the harvest, they tenderly nourish the trees with fertilisers, replenishing the nutrients lost during the demanding process of fruit-bearing. This cycle continues through the year, with additional fer-

tilisations in November and February, ensuring the vitality of the orchards. Crucially, these farmers eschew the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, preferring instead to embrace traditional methods that uphold the natural balance of the ecosystem. This commitment to sustainability not only preserves the integrity of the land but also fosters the innate resilience of the apricot trees against common agricultural pests. The apricot tree, a stalwart symbol of abundance and resilience, stands as a testament to the enduring beauty of nature's cycles. From its modest beginnings, as a sapling barely one and a half metres tall, to its towering stature, reaching heights of up to 20 metres, the apricot tree embodies the spirit of growth and renewal. As the season unfolds, tourists flock to Wakan, drawn by the allure of its breathtaking vistas. Amidst the fragrant blossoms and verdant orchards, they find solace and inspiration, bearing witness to the timeless dance of nature's bounty. Apricot blossom season, with its ephemeral splendor, serves as a poignant reminder of the harmony that exists between humanity and the natural world.



A RIOT OF SCARLET LANTERNS hung over the red-clothed crowds offering candles as they murmured prayers at a traditional temple in Bangkok to celebrate Lunar New Year. Millions of Thai-Chinese marked the occasion with parties, family meals and visits to many of the shrines dotted around Chinatown. The old streets in the capital's downtown came alive on Saturday afternoon, with thousands of curious tourists and happy devotees such as Watcharin Parichatwuttikoon, 70, enjoying the occasion.



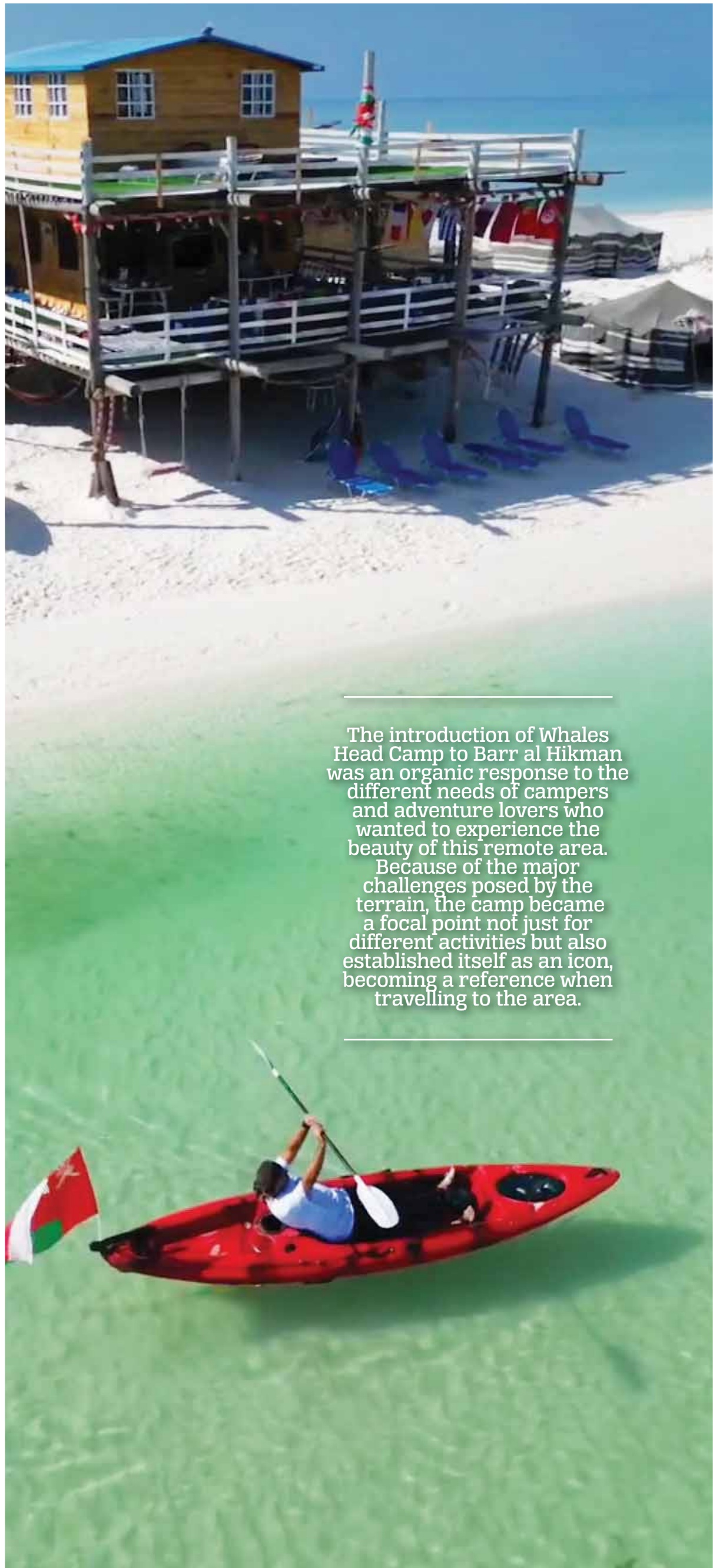
"It's very sacred. I have attended since I was young," he told AFP outside Wat Mongkorn, among the city's largest. "I like to make merits, wash away bad deeds. Today, it's refreshing because it's raining." There is a long history of Chinese migration to Thailand, with Thai-Chinese people accounting for roughly 10 per cent of the population – including some of the kingdom's most prominent business families. Temple-goers found a moment for quiet reflection as they lit candles and made traditional offerings in Wat Mongkorn – sometimes referred to as the "Dragon Temple" – before returning to the bustle outside. Chawanakorn Arunthanachotikul, 31, had travelled with his family and friends to be there. "Today is a good day for Thai-Chinese people," he told AFP.

"I pray for luck and ask for this year to end smoothly." While many in downtown Bangkok were from the kingdom, the celebrations are a busy and highly lucrative time for tourism in



Thailand as well. Between January 1 and February 8 Thailand welcomed more than 730,000 Chinese visitors, a Thai government spokesperson told local media on Saturday. It follows last month's visa waiver agreement between Bangkok and Beijing, which Thai officials hope will boost the kingdom's vital tourism sector, which is struggling to bounce back from the Covid-19 pandemic. In Chinatown tourists were perusing the many stalls that had set out vibrant merchandise, with vendors often dressed in red cheongsams. Among those visiting was American-Chinese tourist Cassandra Branson, 22, who had travelled from Beijing. "I wanted to come to Chinatown during Chinese New Year because it feels like home," she told AFP, saying she usually celebrated in New York. "I spend it with family at home and it's like more quiet, less buzzing. It's very festive here," she said. "It's a lot more lively." — AFP

When in Barr Al Hikman, all roads lead to Whales Head Camp



The introduction of Whales Head Camp to Barr al Hikman was an organic response to the different needs of campers and adventure lovers who wanted to experience the beauty of this remote area. Because of the major challenges posed by the terrain, the camp became a focal point not just for different activities but also established itself as an icon, becoming a reference when travelling to the area.



BY YERU EBUEN
Instagram: @yru_here

With areas belonging to the Al Wusta Nature Reserve, it is easy to get lost in the spectacular and deceptive terrain of Barr Al Hikman. You can drive for hours here in circles, not finding anything but long stretches of white, powdery shores. With no cell reception and most of the roads being nothing more than depressions on the ground made by the coming and going of vehicles, unaccompanied first-timers usually end up getting stuck in muddy traps.

As a protected area, there are no major infrastructures in this shorebird paradise except for the wooden shelters built by fishermen, the majority of whom congregate along the safe zones of the coast where the shores do not go underwater when the tide is high.

In the last five years, Barr Al Hikman has grown in popularity as a camper's paradise, earning for itself the nickname "the Maldives of Oman" because of its beautiful sand bars. Extreme adventurers also discovered that the area offers the perfect haven for different adventures, from kayaking to more challenging sports like wind and kitesurfing.

The introduction of Whales Head Camp to Barr Al Hikman was an organic response to the different needs of campers and adventure lovers who wanted to experience the beauty of this remote area. Because of the major challenges posed by the terrain, the camp became a focal point not just for different activities but also established itself as an icon, becoming a reference when travelling to the area.

Over the weekend, we finally had the chance to explore Barr Al Hikman again after nearly five years and were quite happy and relieved that there's a place you can pass by to get information or help in cases of emergency. The creation of the camp didn't happen overnight, nor was it meant to be structured. The camp is comprised of the main structure, which is about three stories high, with the lower level being nothing more than the still foundation supporting the second and third wooden floors. Surrounding it are different Arabian tents.

At the front of this wooden structure are a couple of whale skeletons, which probably inspired the name of the camp. The walls on the second level are adorned with different shells salvaged from the wide shores of Barr Al Hikman. There is a main sleeping quarter at the centre, while two sheds, which were converted into comfy rooms, sit at the opposite end. There's a porch that wraps around the second floor and a series of stairs that lead from the ground floor, with one leading to the top floor.

The top floor is made up of a shed transformed into a sleeping quarter, surrounded by a sun deck covered with fake grass. It is from the top floor that you can have a sweeping view of the surrounding area. The area where the camp found a home is a perfect location, as during high tide, the water runs around the sandbar but offers plenty of ground for activities like volleyball and other land-based sports.



Seeing the beautiful waters during high tide provides a perfect explanation of why it's also an ideal place for kayaking, which the camp also offers.

It is important to understand that the camp is not luxurious but a great alternative for families wanting to explore and enjoy Barr al Hikman with access to bathrooms and safe sleeping quarters. The camp also offers meals, which is a great advantage for those who want the convenience of having a place to stay and eat.

What I personally love about the camp is the friendliness of the owner and the safe haven they offer in the middle of nowhere. In some form, they are also helping expand the message of environmental conservation by making sure to put up signs and remind guests to mind their trash, as well as raising awareness about the area's biodiversity.

Since 2007, Barr Al Hikman has been a focal point for international research efforts, attracting marine ecologists from esteemed institutions like the Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research (NIOZ). These collaborations, forged in the spirit of scientific inquiry, exemplify the importance of studying and preserving this invaluable coastal treasure.

This coastal haven not only harbours unparalleled biodiversity but also offers a unique vantage point for unravelling the intricate web of natural processes that shape coastal ecosystems. Its significance transcends borders, drawing attention to it as a globally pivotal wetland area crucial for sustaining biodiversity and ecosystem health.

If you're going to Barr al Hikman, chances are you will most likely end up passing by Whales Head Camp since it has become an attraction in itself. From watching the sunset to enjoying the night sky or engaging in different water and land-based activities, it's a great alternative to where to stay.