



SQU Academic Council gets powers to set up branches in governorates

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The details of Royal Decree 19/2024 about the Sultan Qaboos University System were published on Sunday, specifying the role of the University Academic Council. As per the decree, the Council will be formed under the chairmanship of the Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation. Its members will also include private sector representatives, whose work will be related to university education and public affairs.

After approval by the Council of Ministers and the competent authorities, the Council will be responsible for drawing up the



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general policy of the university to ensure the achievement of its objectives with powers to approve the university's organisational structure, strategic plans, development plans, academic programmes, and quality

standards, the establishment of branches in the governorates, abolition, merger, and modification of colleges, centres, institutes, and academies and the number of students accepted annually to the university.

The Academic Council will also determine the university's annual budget and implement its provisions by the provisions of the financial regulations. It will also have powers to approve the start of studies and suspend or postpone them completely or partially, and issue the annual report on the progress of work at the university.

The Academic Council at the university is concerned with expressing an opinion on public policy proposals for education, research, and innovation entrepreneurship in the university referred to by various departments. The university may employ visiting professors for teaching, training, or research.



EMPLOYMENT OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES, HOUSEMAIDS REVIEWED

MUSCAT: Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour met with Dr Rashid bin Hamad al Balushi, Chairman of Oman Human Rights Commission (OHRM) and a number of the OHRM members, on Sunday. They reviewed a number of topics including housemaids, employment of persons with disabilities and office violence and sexual harassment.

180 artistic works on display at SQU art education exhibition

MUSCAT: The Silver Jubilee of the Art Education Exhibition at Sultan Qaboos University was celebrated on Sunday with the opening of the 25th annual exhibition in the Exhibition Hall.

This exhibition is considered one of the most prominent artistic events at the university, and represents a platform for displaying the creativity of the students of the Art Education Department.

During this year, students of the Art Education Department worked on presenting 180 artistic works. These works include a variety of artistic fields, such as sculpture, drawing, design, photography, ceramics, weaving, printing, artwork, graphic design, and others. These exhibits reflect uniqueness and development in the field of art.



The Silver Jubilee of the Art Education Exhibition at SQU was held today.

Dr Badr bin Mohammed al Maamari, Head of the Art Education Department, said that these works of art represent selections from a larger artistic production that came into existence through educational courses from different fields of creative arts.

Al Maamari added, "As the Art Education Department celebrates the Silver Jubilee of this exhibition, we must remember the contributions of all the distinguished professors who passed through the Art Education Department from the inception of the department in the early nineties until the present day. They had a great impact on developing the students' artistic abilities and exceptional creativity during the past three decades.

— ONA

Sultan Qaboos Award to focus on three fields



FROM P1

Al Balushi emphasised, "When we talk about geology in Oman, we are talking about a country with astonishing environmental diversity, which is rarely found in other countries. It possesses rocks that were once at the bottom of the ocean 90 years ago and are now exposed in Oman's land, which can be visited and seen. Today, we speak of environmental voids, vast deserts, towering mountains, seas and communities that have adapted to certain environments in Oman."

In the arts category, radio programmes were chosen as the field of competition, with participation restricted to institutions rather than individuals, considering that radio production is typically a collective effort involving a large number of creative participants.

Regarding this programme, Al Balushi said, "Nomination will be limited to audio works only, not audiovisual works, unless

fundamentally auditory. There are many audio programmes today that have excerpts recorded for promotional purposes and to convey their messages to the public, which is acceptable. However, works that broadcast their entire episodes on social media platforms will be rejected."

As for the literature category, classical Arabic poetry was designated as the field of competition.

Al Balushi added, "Participation in this programme is limited to individuals only, who can submit one poetry collection. This collection must have been previously published and should not have been published for more than four years.

The research will be for poetry collections characterised by poetic precision, creativity, lofty expression, linguistic integrity, quality and other poetic criteria that contribute to the excellence of the submitted poetry collection."

Two new schools come up in Al Batinah South

ALRUSTAQ: Two new schools have been handed over to the Directorate of Education in Al Batinah South Governorate. Al Somoud School for grade 1 to 4 in the Wilayat of Barka consists of 40 classrooms, 7 offices, educational resources centre, multi-purpose room, two playgrounds, accommodation for guards and drivers and a permanent shade structure.



Al Bayrouni School in the Wilayat of Al Musannah consists of 36 classrooms, 7 offices, education resources centre, 2 laboratories, a multi-purpose room, 2 computer labs, 2 playgrounds, accommodation for drivers and guards and a permanent shade structure. The combined cost of the two schools is RO 3,670,000.

— ONA

SUGARCANE HARVEST STARTS IN MANAH

MANAH: Omani farmers in the Wilayat of Manah in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate began harvesting the sugarcane for 2024 season, on Sunday.

Sugarcane is one of the most important agricultural crops owing to its contribution to food security. The Wilayat of Manah is well-known for cultivation of sugarcane alongside other wilayats of the Sultanate of Oman.

Mohammed bin Harib al Bahlani, Director of the Department of Agriculture and Water Resources in the Wilayat of Manah, said that farmers in the Wilayat of Manah are keen on continuing the cultivation of sugarcane crop which gives them good economic revenues. Sugarcane is in high demand by all society

segments especially the owners of the traditional Omani halwa factories.

He noted that the area planted with sugar cane in the Wilayat of Manah this year reached 15 acres with an expected output of 9 tonnes of red sugar from 61 farms, compared to last year's figure of 7 tonnes. Sugarcane cultivation season begins in February or March each year. Technicians from the department visit the farms and meet with farmers from the beginning of the season until its end to provide instructions and directions on preparing the land, fertilising method, irrigating the soil and spraying pesticides. Follow-up continues for a whole year until the time of harvest, the official said.

— ONA



The Wilayat of Manah is well-known for cultivation of sugarcane. — ONA







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BIOMETRIC FINGERPRINT LAW TO ENHANCE JUSTICE, SECURITY IN OMAN

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 31

The Biometric Fingerprint Law represents a reference and resource for information and data related to those with criminal records, detecting the perpetrators of crimes, speeding up their arrest, and bringing them to justice.

It also reflects positively on the speed of evidence-gathering and investigation work. The biometric fingerprint helps in the early detection of mental disabilities, including, for example, Down syndrome, and contributes to solving them.

Thus enhancing the rights of persons with disabilities, the biometric fingerprint law will provide new means and procedures for judicial officers,

investigation officers, and judicial bodies to achieve true justice in criminal matters.

The biometric fingerprint is defined as distinctive, measurable characteristics that determine a person's identity from the rest of the population. The genetic fingerprint is also known as the biological features or genotype of the highly variable non-coding sites in the chromosomal DNA resulting from DNA analysis. It is fixed and unique to each person and is not repeated except in cases of identical twins.

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) has emphasised that the importance of the biometric fingerprint law lies in facilitating the identification of the perpetrators of crimes and achieving speedy arrest, as well as identifying the victims.



It represents authoritative proof of evidence before the judicial authorities, in addition to creating an important reference and resource regarding information and data related to those with criminal records and exposing the perpetrators. Crimes and the speed with which they are seized and brought to justice. It also reflects positively on the speed of evidence-gathering and

investigation work.

The law is consistent with the objectives and powers of the ROP stipulated in Article 11 of the Police Law to maintain order and public security, protect lives, property, and honour, prevent the occurrence of crimes, and control those that do occur.

It keeps pace with scientific development in the field of various fingerprints (face, eye

print, decimal fingerprint, genetic fingerprint), and the body that collects the biometric fingerprint and other fingerprints is the ROP, and all its data and systems are confidential and protected by law. This draft law implies penal protection when the confidentiality of biometric fingerprint database data is violated.

The executive regulations of this law will regulate the mechanisms for collecting biometric fingerprints, controls for preserving data, and collecting, preserving, and destroying samples.

Regarding the impact of the law on existing legislation, the ROP explained that the Biometric Fingerprints Law integrates with Article (11) of the Police Law issued by Royal Decree No

(90/35), under which Oman Police is authorised to maintain order, public security, and morals, protect lives, honour and property, and prevent.

Committing crimes and arresting any of them that occur, and taking the necessary investigative and evidentiary measures. It is also consistent with the provisions of the Criminal Procedures Law issued by Royal Decree No (99/97) about gathering evidence, flagrante delicto, and preliminary investigation, which entrusted judicial officers with searching for crimes and their perpetrators and collecting and making inferences, controlling what is related to the crime, preserving its evidence, and seeking the assistance of doctors and other experienced people.

Al Dakhiliyah Municipality launches ‘Shi Aloum’ WhatsApp citizen initiative

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, MARCH 31

Al Dakhiliyah Municipality introduced a groundbreaking concept that integrates the municipality with community service. The municipality marked a significant milestone as it unveiled the ‘Shi Aloum’ WhatsApp platform last week which connects citizens with municipalities to facilitate dialogue and improve services.

‘Shi Aloum’ fulfils the long-awaited desires of citizens, enabling seamless communication with municipalities without delays or travel. With just a few tap on their smartphones via the WhatsApp application to the relevant municipality department, they can send their inquiries, complaints, and suggestions.

The platform assists in addressing inquiries regarding municipal services across various sectors,



The inauguration included a dialogue session to discuss attendees’ comments including public hygiene, health, technical affairs, inspection, lighting, landscaping, and more. They will receive quick and effective responses to achieve their goals and meet their needs.

The launch was held in the presence of the municipality’s general manager, officials, government and private institutions, civil society teams, charitable organisations, and clubs.

Attendees were briefed on various completed projects, including road paving, beautification, and service

Through these platforms, we aim to increase the satisfaction rates of the beneficiaries of municipal services, in addition to extending the cooperation between the municipality and its affiliated departments in the governorate to ensure that transactions are completed accurately and quickly and procedures are facilitated for all citizens. This goal is essential for enhancing performance and ensuring the satisfaction of service beneficiaries, making it a crucial objective for all stakeholders to accomplish.

The contact numbers with Al Dakhiliyah Municipality are 72619911, while those with the municipal departments are: Nizwa: 72557702, Bidbid 72557712, Samayil 72557710, Al Jabal Al Akhdhar 72557708, Izki 72557709, Manah 72557703, Adam 725577 04, Bahla 72557705, Al Hamra 72557706

Economy minister receives UNFPA Representative to GCC countries

MUSCAT: Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, on Sunday received Karl Kulesa, Country Representative of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The meeting discussed the programme and work

undertaken by the fund during the current period in Oman and the GCC countries.

It also touched on the reports that are being prepared by the fund. Moreover, the meeting reviewed challenges and opportunities arising from population growth (both Omanis and expats).

— ONA



The meeting discussed the programme and work undertaken by the fund during the current period in Oman. – ONA

MoCIIP cautions against distorting traditional clothes ahead of Eid

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, MARCH 31

As Eid al Fitr approaches, the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) has issued a stern warning against any actions that may undermine the integrity of traditional Omani clothing and fashion.

In a recent announcement, MoCIIP cautioned shop owners and tailors against engaging in tampering, misconduct, or any activities that could compromise the authenticity of traditional Omani garments such as the dishdasha, musar, men’s thobe, and women’s abaya.

This includes alterations such as sewing, drawing, or printing logos or trademarks onto these garments, as well as combining designs in a manner that detracts



MoCIIP has cautioned shop owners and tailors against engaging in tampering or any activities that could compromise the authenticity of traditional Omani garments



from their traditional appearance.

Highlighting the heightened purchasing activity in the lead-up to Eid al Fitr, the ministry stressed the importance of maintaining the cultural significance and integrity of Omani fashion during this period.

As part of its ongoing efforts

to safeguard Omani fashion from distortion and uphold its identity, the MoCIIP has conducted inspections at various markets and commercial establishments across different regions of the Sultanate of Oman to ensure compliance with established standards for the dishdasha.

According to the Directorate General of Standards and Metrology, the dishdasha is defined as a loose garment typically made from cotton fabric, with embroidery commonly found around the neckline, chest, and sleeve edges.

The dishdasha is categorised

into several types, including the commonly worn official Omani attire, plain dishdasha, Abu Shaq dishdasha, Bedouin dishdasha, and embroidered dishdasha.

In addition to regulations concerning the dishdasha, the MoCIIP also addressed the Omani Kumma, the traditional

head covering for Omani men. It emphasised that the fabric used in making the Omani Kumma must adhere to Omani Standard No. OS1646/2021, with white fabric being the only permissible option.

Embroidering symbols or phrases that contravene public decency or Islamic law, as well as unauthorised use of official emblems or logos, is strictly prohibited.

The MoCIIP’s directives underscore the government’s commitment to preserving Omani heritage and cultural identity, particularly in the realm of traditional clothing and fashion.

By enforcing regulations and conducting inspections, the ministry aims to ensure that Omani fashion continues to be celebrated and respected both domestically and internationally.



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THE WRITER COMPARES THE SHOPPING STRATEGIES BEFORE RAMADHAN AND THE DIFFERENT PATHS OF PREPARATION FOR EID FESTIVAL WITH INSIGHTS FROM DIFFERENT FAMILIES

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES ON EID PREPARATIONS

AHMED AL KAABI

BEFORE RAMADHAN, families rush to the markets to secure their supplies for the fasting month as the market sees huge turnout in preparation for the Eid celebrations and to complete the requirements of the blessed month.

Despite the keenness of many to meet their needs before the start of fasting so they can devote themselves to worship, there is another category that sees this as an opportunity to meet the needs of Eid and prepare for it completely, which reflects the diversity of preparations and preferences.

Mohammed al Kaabi, a parent, stresses the importance of fulfilling his needs before Ramadhan and follows a pre-planned shopping plan to ensure that all the needs of his family are met before fasting. However, he finds himself visiting the markets regularly to complete the other requirements that come to mind before Eid, including buying clothes that he designs in advance for his family members.

As for Abdulrahman al Risi, he points out that his family refuses to go shopping early, especially women, because they believe in the anxiety of limited shopping options and the unavailability of new products and the fear of better collections arriving after the purchase. He also considers it an additional preoccupation in the blessed days in which it is preferable to focus on worship, prayer and reciting the Quran.

Al Risi added that preparing for Eid cannot be done easily, as the process requires many steps and visits to different markets to buy clothes, shoes and necessary supplies as well as kitchenware and household appliances and even changing home furniture and buying meat.

He stressed that a clear planning is an essential

basis for organising these operations, so that the head of the household can accomplish as much as possible to finish and get his chance to worship in the last days of Ramadhan.

Thabit al Bahri explained that shopping and providing Eid supplies is one of the most important things he plans before the countdown to Eid begins.

He focuses on coordinating with his family members to make appropriate decisions about the shopping destination and the required supplies. He prefers to complete part of the shopping before the end of the 25th of Ramadhan in order to expand the range of options and ensure everyone's satisfaction.

He notes that it is possible to get discounted prices because there is enough time to bargain with sellers, while he notes that prices increase as Ramadhan approaches the end.

Muna Mohamed believes that shopping for Eid is a fun experience for women, as the markets open their doors until late at night, which gives women the opportunity to buy what they need during this long period.

In addition, she enjoys the ability to move between different markets during the same day, while shopping hours on normal days are limited and usually shuts by 10 pm, which makes shopping intermittent and less convenient.

Reinad al Balushi confirms this opinion and says that people usually shop for Eid during Ramadhan because they feel the joy and celebration of the approaching Eid and because they want to prepare for it from all aspects.

Some of them also wait for the last days of the month in the belief that everything new in the markets is available during that critical period.

I believe that shopping for Eid is a fun experience for women, as the markets open their doors until late at night, which gives women the opportunity to buy what they need during this long period

MUNA MOHAMED



World record calligraphist visits Oman with longest handwritten Quran

KABEER YOUSUF
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The longest handwritten holy Quran is now in Oman as the calligraphist, who won the world record for the same is on a short visit to the Sultanate of Oman aiming to meet with higher officials of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MoARA).
Jaseem, the author who hails from Cherumukku, near Tirurangadi in Kerala, broke the record hitherto held by Egyptian scholar Mohammed Gabriel by



Calligraphist Jaseem displaying his World Record certificate at a social iftar in Muscat

scripting 1,106m long Quran in calligraphic style. It took nearly two years for him to break the record of 700m.

Jaseem, who completed his graduation from Jamia Nooria Arabic college in Pattikkad, Perinthalmanna, Kerala, made

the most of the pandemic and the lock down in order to complete his manuscript copy of the Quran, thanks to the skill that he acquired during his 12 years with Tirur Chembra Dars Art of Calligraphy.
According to All Guinness Records Holders (AGRH) officials, Jaseem became the 75th Guinness record winner from Kerala. “It’s a proud moment for us all,” said Munawarali Shihab Thangal, who was the witness to the feat.
The 1,106m long Quran he prepared weighs 118.3 kg

and has 325,384 Arabic letters, 77,437 Arabic words, 114 chapters, and 6,348 verses. Each Juz (section) is done in about 65-75 pages, and each page contains 9-10 lines. Each page is 75 cm in height and 34 cm in width. This work was done using 300 GSM ivory card about 2,000 pages. Thangal and Adoor handed over the Guinness certificate to Jaseem.
Jaseem says it was Covid-19 lockdown that helped him to set his eyes on this feat. He had displayed his calligraphic prowess at a Quran exhibition

organised by the Noorul Ulama Students earlier and he attributes his gratitude to two people who helped him achieve the title.
“They are Ayoob, my elder brother who paints and the reason behind my taste for calligraphy from childhood. It is my teacher Swalahuddin Faizy Venniyoor who initiated me into Arabic calligraphy and inspired me to take my first steps in this traditional Islamic art form. I have set my goals even higher and only time can prove them to be true,” Jaseem said before leaving for Iftar.

Shinas UTAS innovative glasses project heads to WSIS 2024

SIHAM AL SAIDI
MUSCAT, MARCH 31

The World Summit on the Information Society 2024 (WSIS 2024), in an upcoming high profile event, hosted by the International Telecommunication Union annually, is set to be a platform for reviewing progress, achievements, challenges, and opportunities in sustainable development.
The forum, known as WSIS+20, is organised in collaboration with Unesco, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and UNCTAD, with participation from the International Telecommunication Union and the Swiss Confederation. Scheduled from May 27 to 31, in Geneva, this event aims to showcase advancements since the Geneva and Tunis Summit.
From Oman, four projects have been nominated, two of them owned by Rustaq and Shinas UTAS.
The innovative project is owned by Shinas University



UTAS team members Alaa al Jabri, Maisa al Buraiki, Maha al Zahli, and Noura al Shuhi

of Technology. This project involves the creation of advanced glasses to assist the visually impaired, reducing their reliance on external aid. Equipped with modern technologies, these glasses can recognise individuals, display time, aid in reading, and offer various other functionalities.
The innovative glasses project was chosen as one of three technology projects from Oman to compete in the WSIS. Team members Alaa al Jabri, Maisa al Buraiki, Maha al Zahli, and

Noura al Shuhi, expressed their excitement about the project’s potential impact on enhancing the lives of the visually impaired and seniors which will add competitive value to the project.
Alaa bint Said al Jabriyah, a team member says, “Our project idea aims at facilitating the lives of the visually impaired and elderly, allowing them to live a normal life independently with no need for assistance. This is achieved through the use of glasses embedded with various technologies.”

The innovative project involves creation of advanced glasses to assist the visually impaired, reducing their reliance on external aid

She emphasised that the project aims to enable these individuals to recognise people in front of them, recognise the time and date, assist in reading books by converting text into audible speech, warn them of obstacles in their way, and provide a chat feature for requesting assistance.
These functionalities enhance both their academic progress and daily life experiences and atmosphere generally.
Noura bint Ali al Shuhayah, showcased the developmental opportunities for the project. She commented there are plans to include several technologies, such as GPS, to guide visually impaired individuals or elderly to specific locations, utilising a system similar to Google Maps.

Indian Embassy launches Ramadhan blood donation drive

MUSCAT: The Indian Embassy in Oman launched the week-long annual Ramadhan blood donation drive, which was opened by Dr Thamra al Ghafri, from the Directorate-General of Health Services in Muscat in the presence of Amit Narang, Indian Ambassador to Oman.
The inaugural day saw 225 units of blood collected as the ambassador emphasised the significance of blood donation during the holy month of Ramadhan.
The Blood Donation Camp will continue at the Embassy Auditorium from 8 am to 2 pm and at the Bausher Blood Bank from 7 pm to 11 pm from March 30-31 and from April 4-6.
The blood banks in the Sultanate of Oman are facing

severe shortages during the holy month of Ramadhan. The Central Blood Bank in a statement said that it needs ten platelet donors daily as the need continues to save the lives of many patients and those injured in accidents, burns, major surgeries such as open heart, organ transplantation such as marrow or liver transplantation, cases of severe bleeding, women during childbirth, newborn children (premature), and patients who suffer from a deficiency of platelets.
Platelets are used in the treatment of cancer patients, especially those undergoing chemotherapy, as they need frequent platelet transfusions throughout the treatment period.



The Indian Embassy in Oman launched the week-long annual Ramadhan blood donation drive.

Knowledge Oman’s heartwarming mission at SQUH’s cancer ward

MUSCAT: Knowledge Oman (KO) recently embarked on a heartwarming mission to spread joy and hope to patients battling cancer at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital.
The initiative under the theme ‘spreading joy and hope’ was organised as an event in a collaborative effort with Techno Plastic Industry (Techno), along with volunteers who dedicated their time to bring comfort and smiles to those facing challenging times. KO Founder, Tariq bin Hilal al Barwani, along with volunteers were present at the centre.
“We believe in the power of compassion and human connection to make a difference in the lives of people. Collaborating this year with the like-minded organisation as Techno has allowed us to even further amplify our contribution and impact by reaching to those in need, particularly in the



KO Founder, Tariq bin Hilal al Barwani, along with volunteers on a mission to spread joy to cancer patients at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital.

healthcare industry. Together, we were able to bring moments of joy and comfort to patients undergoing cancer treatment, reminding them that they are not alone in their journey,” said Knowledge Oman President, Balkees al Hassani.
The initiative aimed to uplift spirits and provide a moment of respite for patients undergoing treatment. Knowledge Oman team toured the cancer ward, learning

about the care and treatment provided, and expressed their gratitude and admiration for the hospital staff’s dedication and commitment to the children’s well-being. KO team engaged in various activities that includes interactive games, organising a magic show, and sharing heartfelt conversations that created an atmosphere of positivity and encouragement within the cancer ward. Over hundreds of gifts were

distributed to children, care givers and medical healthcare staff.
“Partnership with Knowledge Oman exemplifies a shared commitment to community service and making a meaningful difference in the lives of individuals facing adversity. By joining forces, we were able to leverage our resources and expertise to create a memorable experience for patients and their families,” said Omar al Bahri, Techno Commercial General Manager
KO also organises Iftar Siam project for distributing food to the needy families during Ramadhan. To support the vision of His Majesty for transforming the country into a knowledge society, Knowledge Oman continues to provide workshops, seminars and training in partnership with private and government organisations.

TENDER NOTICE

The Ministry of Economy
Announces the following tender:

Tender No.	Tender Title	Document Fees In Omani Riyals	Last Date For Tender Submission
2024/2	Preparing a study to evaluate the impact of local content on the Omani economy	LO: 25 SME: 10 RE: 25	09/05/ 2024

First

- All specialized and interested companies that are registered with the Tender tender from the following website: www.etendering.tenderboard.gov.om
- The bidders must submit their offers electronically via the website.

Second

- Tenders that does not meet the above conditions shall not be considered. The ministry shall have the right to reject any tender, and shall not be obliged to award the tender for the lowest bid without giving reasons.

For inquiries regarding tenders, please contact through the website of the electronic tendering system; <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>

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GAZA CEASEFIRE TALKS TO RESUME IN CAIRO

CAIRO: Talks aimed at brokering a truce between Israel and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip will resume in Cairo on Sunday, Egyptian outlet Al Qahera reported, days after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave the green light for fresh negotiations.

“An Egyptian security source confirmed to Al Qahera News the resumption of negotiations on a truce between Israel and Palestinian groups in the Egyptian capital Cairo tomorrow,” an anchor for the channel, which is close to country’s intelligence services, said in a broadcast on Saturday.

Egypt, Qatar and key Israeli ally the United States have mediated previous rounds of negotiations, but a workable agreement has remained elusive.

The mediators had hoped to secure a ceasefire before the start of Ramadhan, but progress stalled and the Muslim holy month is more than half over.

On Friday, Netanyahu approved a new round of ceasefire negotiations to take place in Doha and Cairo.

His office said the Israeli premier had spoken to Mossad chief David Barnea about the talks, but did not elaborate on whether Barnea would be travelling to either city.

Reports of the new talks in Cairo came as protesters in Israel’s biggest city blocked a major road on Saturday following demonstrations calling for the release of captives held in Gaza and criticising the government’s handling of the war.



Members of a Palestinian family leave Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip with personal belongings. — AFP

The mediators had hoped to secure a ceasefire before the start of Ramadhan, but progress stalled and the Muslim holy month is more than half over

Palestinian groups seized about 250 captives during the October 7 attacks on Israel that sparked the war. Of those, Israel believes 130 remain in Gaza, including 33 who are presumed dead.

A key element of the ceasefire negotiations has been an agreement on releasing the captives in exchange for Palestinian prisoners held in

Israel.

France’s top diplomat was also in Cairo on Saturday for meetings with his Egyptian and Jordanian counterparts, with all three calling for an “immediate and permanent ceasefire” in Gaza and the release of all the captives.

French foreign minister Stephane Sejourne also said his government would put forward

a draft resolution at the UN Security Council setting out a “political” settlement of the war that would include “all the criteria for a two-state solution” to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

On Monday, the Security Council adopted a resolution demanding an “immediate ceasefire” in Gaza, and a UN court ordered Israel on Thursday

to “ensure urgent humanitarian assistance” reaches civilians there, though neither development appears to have changed the situation on the ground.

Israel’s retaliatory campaign in the Gaza Strip has killed at least 32,705 people, most of them women and children, according to the Palestinian territory’s health ministry. — AFP

Strikes deepen humanitarian crisis

GAZA: Deadly airstrikes pounded the Gaza Strip as talks towards a truce between Israel and Palestinians were set to resume in Cairo on Sunday.

Heavy fighting raged on in the besieged Palestinian territory, including in or around several hospitals, in the nearly six-month-old war sparked by October 7 attack.

As an Israel siege has deepened the humanitarian crisis, an aid delivery inside Gaza descended into deadly chaos with shots fired and a stampede before dawn on Saturday. At least five people were killed and dozens wounded, according to a Red Crescent paramedic, while the Israeli army said it had “no record of the incident described”.

Witnesses said that gunshots were fired, both by Gazans overseeing the delivery and Israeli troops nearby, and that lorries hit people. At least 75 people were killed overnight in new



Palestinian women and children walk near a building destroyed in Israeli bombardment in Rafah. — AFP

Israeli bombardment and ground combat, most of them women and children, according to the health ministry in the territory.

The fighting has raged on unabated despite a UN Security Council resolution last Monday that demanded an “immediate ceasefire” and the release of all hostages held by militants.

Tensions have risen over

the spiralling civilian death toll between Israel and its chief backer the United States, especially over Israeli threats to send ground forces into Gaza’s crowded far-southern city of Rafah.

Washington has nonetheless approved billions of dollars worth of bombs and fighter jets for Israel in recent days.

Israel’s retaliatory campaign

has killed at least 32,782 people, mostly women and children, according to the Gaza health ministry.

In Gaza, vast areas of which have been reduced to a rubble-strewn wasteland, heavy fighting has rocked areas around several Gaza hospitals.

Israel accuses Palestinian militants of hiding inside and in tunnels beneath the medical facilities, and of using patients and medical staff as cover, charges which the groups deny.

The Gaza health ministry said 107 patients remained inside Al Shifa, including 30 with disabilities, and that the army had stopped attempts to evacuate them.

Israeli military operations were also ongoing at two hospitals in the southern city of Khan Younis — at Nasser hospital, according to the government press office, and at Al Amal hospital, according to the Red Crescent. — AFP

EASTER AMID ONGOING WAR



Palestinian Christians celebrate Easter Sunday Mass at the Catholic Holy Family Church in Gaza. — AFP

Pope Francis calls for ceasefire in Easter Sunday address

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and the release of all Israeli captives in an Easter Sunday address that marked the most important day on the Christian calendar by deploring the suffering caused by wars.

The pontiff presided over Mass in a packed and flower-bedecked St Peter’s Square, and then delivered his “Urbi et Orbi” blessing and message from the central balcony of St. Peter’s

Basilica.

Francis, 87, has been in poor health in recent weeks, forcing him on repeated occasions to limit his public speaking and cancel engagements as he did on Good Friday, skipping at short notice a procession at Rome’s Colosseum. However, he took part in other Holy Week events leading up to Easter, and appeared in relatively good spirits on Sunday. Easter celebrates the day in which the faithful believe Jesus rose from



Pope Francis stands at the central loggia of St. Peter’s basilica for the Easter ‘Urbi et Orbi’ message and blessing to the City and the World, in the Vatican. — AFP

the dead. After the service, Francis took to his open-topped popemobile to greet crowds in the square and the avenue connecting St Peter’s to the River Tiber. The Vatican said about 60,000 people had turned up. Francis has repeatedly deplored the death and destruction in the Gaza war and he renewed his call for a ceasefire on Sunday.

“I appeal once again that access to humanitarian aid be ensured to Gaza, and call once

more for the prompt release of the captives seized on last October 7 and for an immediate ceasefire in the Strip,” he said in his Urbi et Orbi address.

“How much suffering we see in the eyes of children, the children have forgotten to smile in those war zones. With their eyes, children ask us: Why? Why all this death? Why all this destruction? War is always an absurdity and a defeat,” he added. — Reuters



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In brief

■ TOKYO



AUTHORITIES INSPECT KOBAYASHI PHARMA FACTORY AFTER DEATHS

Health authorities searched a second Kobayashi Pharmaceutical factory in western Japan on Sunday after the company reported five deaths possibly tied to dietary supplements.

The inspection in Wakayama prefecture follows one on Saturday in Osaka, expanding the investigation into the drugmaker's use of "Beni-Koji" red yeast materials.

Osaka-based Kobayashi said it found what appeared to be potentially toxic puberulic acid that could have been produced by blue mould penicillium in Beni-Koji materials produced between last April and October at the Osaka factory. — **Reuters**

■ JOHANNESBURG



FIRES KILL TWO, LEAVE HUNDREDS HOMELESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Two people died and almost 2,000 were left homeless when fires engulfed hundreds of shacks in three separate incidents in South Africa's Cape Town during the weekend, emergency services said.

"An adult male and female sustained fatal burn wounds and were declared deceased by medics" at one of the informal settlements, the Cape Town's fire and rescue spokesman Jermaine Carelse said.

The biggest fire which happened around 2:30 am on Sunday engulfed over 150 shacks leaving over 1,000 people displaced in the Mfuleni settlement, some 30 kilometres southeast of Cape Town. — **AFP**

■ MEXICO CITY



MAYOR KILLED IN MEXICO REGION PLAGUED BY ORGANISED CRIME

A mayor was shot dead at a restaurant in Mexico, the regional prosecutor's office said, the latest politically related killing in the country plagued by violence and organised crime.

Guillermo Torres, 39, and his 14-year-old son were attacked at a restaurant in Morelia, the capital of western Michoacan state, the prosecutor's office said in a statement. He was elected mayor of Michoacan's Churumuco municipality as a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party in 2022, but recently quit the party and publically voiced sympathy for the ruling Morena, according to local media. — **AFP**

France to send vehicles, missiles to Ukraine



Relatives and friends of Ukrainian prisoners of war from the Azov Brigade and sub-units hold placards while standing in the sunroof of vehicles during a rally in the centre of Kyiv calling for their exchange with Russian prisoners, amid Russian invasion in Ukraine. — **AFP**

PARIS: France will deliver hundreds of old armoured vehicles and new surface-to-air missiles to Ukraine in its war against Russia, French Defence Minister Sebastien Lecornu said on Sunday.

In an interview with La Tribune Dimanche, Lecornu said that President Emmanuel Macron, following talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, had asked him to prepare a new aid package, which will include old but still functional French equipment.

"The Ukrainian army needs to defend a very long front line, which requires armoured vehicles; this is absolutely crucial

for troop mobility and is part of the Ukrainian requests," he said.

France is also speeding up the development of remotely operated ammunition for delivery to Ukraine as early as this summer

He said France was looking at providing hundreds of VAB (Vehicule de l'Avant Blindé) front-line troop carriers in 2024 and early 2025.

France's army is gradually replacing its thousands of

VABs, which first went into operation in the late 1970s, with a new multi-role troop carrier. Lecornu added that France was also preparing to release a new batch of Aster 30 surface-to-air missiles for the SAMP/T system provided to Kyiv. The Aster 30 can intercept warplanes, drones and cruise missiles within a range of 120 km.

"Ukraine has an urgent need for better ground-air defence ... Russia is intensifying its strikes, in particular on civilians and civil infrastructure," he said.

Lecornu said he had asked government defence procurement agency DGA (Direction Generale de

l'Armement) to make proposals to accelerate production of Aster missiles, manufactured by European group MBDA.

Lecornu said last week a decree was published giving the ministry powers to impose stock levels and prioritise contracts.

France is also speeding up the development of remotely operated ammunition for delivery to Ukraine as early as this summer, Lecornu said.

Macron last month suggested the possibility of European nations sending troops to Ukraine, although he cautioned that there was no consensus as allies agreed to ramp up efforts to deliver more munitions to

Kyiv. Meanwhile, the air force said it had managed to down nine of the drones and nine of the missiles.

For over a week, Russia has significantly stepped up an air strike campaign against Ukrainian energy facilities, causing significant damage and leaving Ukrainians fearing a return to the blackouts seen in the first winter of the full-scale war. Ukraine's largest private energy firm, DTEK, said on Saturday that five of its six plants had been damaged or destroyed with 80 per cent of its generating capacity lost, and that repairs could take up to 18 months. — **Reuters**

Baltimore bridge being cut up after ship collision

BALTIMORE: The crumpled Baltimore bridge was being cut up in preparation for its removal, Maryland's governor said on Sunday, promising "progress" was being made after it was destroyed by an out-of-control ship.

Demolition crews using blow torches sliced through the top part of the Francis Scott Key Bridge, which collapsed when the Dali cargo vessel lost power and struck it on Tuesday, killing six people.

"Progress is beginning to happen despite the fact that it's an incredibly complicated situation," said Maryland Governor Wes Moore, adding that weather conditions and debris in the water meant divers were unable to assist with the recovery operation.

"We now do have cranes, the Chesapeake 1,000, which has a capacity of lifting a thousand pounds," Moore told CNN on Sunday.

"(Workers have) begun to cut up the remnants of the bridge



The remains of the collapsed Francis Scott Key Bridge lie in the Patapsco River after the container ship Dali (L) struck it on March 26. — **AFP file photo**

that we can then prepare for removal."

Video footage showed sparks flying as crews suspended in cages cut through an upper section of the steel structure.

The Unified Command said the wreckage will be lifted away and processed at a Baltimore shipping site before being taken to a disposal site.

Moore said the recovery would be a "long road," adding: "This is a very complex operation, but

movement is happening."

The difficult conditions have hampered efforts to recover the bodies of the six road workers — all Latino immigrants — who died when the bridge collapsed, with just two bodies recovered so far.

Shipping in and out of Baltimore — one of the United States' busiest ports — has been halted, with the waterway impassable due to the sprawling wreckage. — **AFP**

King Charles attends Easter Sunday church service

WINDSOR: Britain's King Charles III attended an Easter church service on Sunday, in his most high-profile public appearance since revealing a cancer diagnosis earlier this year.

Charles and his wife, Queen Camilla, arrived by car for the hour-long late morning service at St George's Chapel within the grounds of Windsor Castle, west of London. The 75-year-old, dressed in a suit and light blue tie, smiled and waved to crowds — who had queued up for hours for a glimpse of the ailing monarch — before he entered the chapel.

Leaving the service, Charles and Camilla greeted some of the well-wishers lined up outside, shaking hands and briefly chatting to some in the crowds. Attending the annual religious ceremony is a long-

standing annual tradition for the royals, with other family members in attendance on Sunday.

But heir-to-the-throne Prince William and his wife Catherine were notable absentees this year, as the 42-year-old Princess of Wales receives treatment following her own cancer diagnosis which was revealed just last week.

The situation represents an unprecedented crisis in modern times for the monarchy, as two of its most senior members simultaneously fight serious illness.

Charles was just 17 months into his long-awaited reign when Buckingham Palace announced in early February that he had cancer and would be pausing all public-facing engagements as he commenced treatment. — **AFP**



King Charles III greets well-wishers, in Windsor castle. — **AFP**

Oman’s economy shows remarkable improvement



Standard & Poor’s (S&P) recently revised the outlook for the Sultanate of Oman to positive from stable and affirmed its credit rating at BB+. The positive outlook indicates that S&P believes there is a chance of an upgrade in Oman’s credit rating in future, signalling improved confidence in the country’s financial stability.

This decision reflects an optimistic view on Oman’s economic prospects and fiscal management. This year, the Ministry of Finance expects Oman’s economy to achieve a growth of at least 3 per cent while continuing to maintain annual inflation at moderate levels.

“The 2024 budget is meticulously crafted to achieve a comprehensive array of economic and social objectives, including economic growth of at least 3 per cent at constant prices during 2024 and maintaining inflation rates at moderate levels, around 3 per cent,” the Ministry of Finance had

earlier stated in the 2024 budget statement.

S&P’s decision to revise Oman’s outlook to positive may be attributed to the government’s commitment to implementing economic reforms aimed at diversifying the economy, reducing dependence on oil revenues, and enhancing fiscal sustainability.

These reforms are crucial for long-term economic stability and growth.

In recent past, Oman’s economic landscape has displayed remarkable resilience, resurgence, and enhanced fiscal performance despite global economic and geopolitical uncertainties.

The synergy of government’s economic diversification initiatives, favourable oil prices, and prudent fiscal policies has propelled the economy over the past three years.

Oman’s efforts to strengthen its fiscal position through measures such as subsidy reforms, revenue enhancement initiatives, and expenditure rationalisation have likely played a significant role in S&P’s decision.

Improving fiscal metrics are essential for maintaining investor confidence and securing favourable credit ratings.

After recording a 4.3 per cent GDP growth in

2022, Oman’s economy grew by 2.1 per cent in the first half of 2023, predominantly driven by non-oil sectors such as transport, storage, agriculture, and fisheries activities.

The growth highlights Oman’s successful efforts under the 10th Five-Year Plan for economic diversification.

The integration of policies and accelerated programmes to achieve Oman Vision 2040 and the 10th Five-Year Plan has been beneficial in propelling economic growth.

Non-oil sectors played a pivotal role, contributing approximately 69.4 per cent to GDP in the first half of 2023.

The government’s proactive measures, including stabilising fuel prices and expanding VAT exemptions, underscore its commitment to mitigating inflation effects.

Oman’s ability to navigate external challenges

effectively and maintain resilience in the face of uncertainties contributes to a positive outlook from rating agencies like S&P.

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has valued the positive outcomes that strongly contributed to consolidating GDP growth, upgrading the country’s financial and economic indicators, and generating a financial surplus for economic and social priorities.

According to the Central Bank of Oman (CBO), windfall oil revenues from higher-than-budgeted oil prices and prudent fiscal management under Oman’s Medium-Term Fiscal Plan have eased debt pressure on the government and provided economic buffers.

Effective debt management practices, including prudent borrowing strategies and debt repayment capabilities, are critical considerations for credit rating agencies.

S&P’s affirmation of Oman’s BB+ rating suggests confidence in the country’s ability to manage its debt obligations responsibly.

In its Financial Stability Report 2023, the CBO said that Oman’s debt-to-GDP ratio has decreased to around 40 per cent, marking a significant improvement from the 66 per cent recorded in 2021.

The reduction in debt levels and higher GDP have enhanced Oman’s debt sustainability.

Booker Prize winner flays politicians after festival axed

The Booker Prize-winning author, Douglas Stuart, has lent his support to the Aye Write book festival, which has been cancelled this year as a funding bid was refused.

The Glasgow-born author of ‘Shuggie Bain’ also offered a sharp critique of arts and culture funding in Scotland, comparing it unfavourably to Ireland’s.

Other writers who have backed the festival include Damian Barr, author of ‘Maggie And Me,’ and Darren McGarvey, author of ‘Poverty Safari.’

Former first minister Nicola Sturgeon, a well-known book lover, also said the cancellation was “really bad news.”

Earlier this week, First Minister Humza Yousaf said he would look at what “potential support” the Scottish government could provide.

Stuart posted on X, formerly known as Twitter, for the first time since July last year to make his feelings known. He said: “The righteous outrage around the cancellation of the@AyeWrite festival is not merely a conversation about the merit of literary festivals, or whether Scotland’s first city deserves one. It is much, much bigger than that ...

“I have watched in horror, as Scotland has haggled over funding for the arts, has closed her libraries, and now has allowed the cancellation of a major literary festival in her largest city. A festival that has a focus on Scottish voices.

“In the past year, I’ve sat through many interviews asking about the surge of great Irish writing. “And while Irish writers are great, it’s also clear to me that Ireland understands that culture, people, & literature are her strength and they fund it like they mean it.”

He said it is “unacceptable” that his home city of Glasgow does not have a literary festival.

The author continued: “When I won the Booker Prize, within hours of the announcement many of the major political parties contacted me asking for my support.

“But the politicians who wanted to use my art to protect their jobs are failing to do their jobs to protect my art.”

He added that “working class people are crucial to Scottish literature.”

Aye Write is organised by Glasgow Life — the arms-length leisure body of Glasgow City Council — but it will not go ahead as a festival this year after a funding application to Creative Scotland was turned down. A spokeswoman for Creative Scotland said earlier this week: “We recognise the significance of Aye Write to audiences and the literature sector and understand that this is disappointing news. — dpa



Sandhya Rao Mehta

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



Families of workers taking part in the restoration of the 8th-century Umayyad Mosque take part in a mass fast-breaking 'iftar' meal organised by the Syria Trust for Development NGO and other charities at the mosque in Aleppo. – AFP

Ramadhan is a time when families and communities gather in faith and reflection. But it is also a time when each member of a family gets involved in the process of putting together a memorable iftar. These are usually based on well-known family recipes which continue to be handed down to subsequent generations. Often, these recipes are about more than just food — they are moments and stories which evoke nostalgia and trips down memory lane.

Typically, the Ramadhan month gathers communities together as dishes are made to be shared while children help with smaller activities like setting the iftar table and making decorations.

Preparing food involves everybody: from bringing the raw material from the market to sieving, pounding, shaping and frying, the entire process is a story in itself.

Our grandmothers may not have the terminology for it, but visual storytelling has always been around. For most families, kitchens are often where families gravitate, where most childhood memories reside. In Ramadhan, this is heightened with lively commotion, chattering and communal activity. This is the stuff of which memories are made.

RAMADHAN IS SUCH A SPECIAL TIME OF SHARING AND TOGETHERNESS AND SHARING THE ACTIVITY OF COOKING BINDS FAMILIES TOGETHER

Long before Instagram reels became fashionable, recipes were learnt by doing. It wasn’t even necessary to measure ingredients — a pinch, a fistful, a cupped hand was all that would be required, and remembered. Nor were ingredients sacred — there would always be a substitute for something that wasn’t available in the kitchen. Lemon for tamarind, curry leaves for coriander, all kinds of permutations were possible before recipes began to be written down to the last detail.

Sharing the activity of cooking binds families together, but more so in Ramadhan which is such a special time of sharing and togetherness. Much after youngsters move away from home to study or set up their own homes, these shared moments form an integral part of their own lives.

“I remember coming to my grandmother’s house in Ramadhan evenings and being welcomed

with an array of delicious aromas floating around the whole house,” reminisces a young student.

“In Egypt, our families would come together to share recipes in the daytime and bring food to each other’s homes every day for iftar,” remembers another. “We would go around collecting small change from the neighbourhood and decorate the lanes outside our homes with buntings and crepe paper,” she continues.

A young student who now lives away from Oman says that the most important thing she misses being away is the cheerful and busy noises surrounding her home in Ramadhan: “Our mothers planned everything — the meals, the ingredients, the drinks, everything was thought of to the last detail. We would just soak all that energy. I miss being part of all that now and look forward to returning to family Ramadhan soon.”

A time for prayer and charity, Ramadhan is also a time for family bonding. Remembering family traditions, following valuable and remembered recipes and even documenting them for the coming generations is a great way to respect the holy month. Recipes are also stories in their own ways and treasuring them is another way of honouring our heritage.

Teachings behind the ritual of fasting

The holy month of Ramadhan marks an opportunity which shouldn't be missed and undervalued. Its religious and social advantages are many and we should all invest in this time of the year that brings people together and cherish their lives with blessings.

Most significantly is the change in people's daily routine during Ramadhan with adaption to its spirit that instills calmness and tranquillity to people's personality. Their attitudes and behaviours change mostly throughout the day. People tend to be more compassionate, patient, sociable, generous, cooperative and more. These are some of Ramadhan's blessings to one's character.

Observing this month and fasting is a very effective way of acquiring self-development skills. As Ramadhan is the month of fasting, mercy, forgiveness and kindness, people become more compassionate to one another. Fasting teaches people to stay soft, compassionate, merciful and respectful to others around them. One can be more supportive to his family, colleagues, friends and society overall. In other words, people tend to be more emotional more than any other time of the year.

There are many objectives and teachings behind the religious ritual of fasting during Ramadhan. Among the key objectives is that the Almighty Allah wants to teach Muslims different personal and social lessons. Fasting helps Muslims to develop and strengthen their powers of self-control, so they can resist wrongful desires and bad habits. Thus, one can control his or her behaviours, thoughts and desires too. The month-long of fasting marks a great motive to urge people give up bad habits and avoid wrong deeds, attitudes and practices.

Another lesson that one can learn during the month of fasting is by being away from all the bad things and refraining from personal desires, so one can be much closer to Allah. Knowing that Allah knows what we all do and think about whether it is good or bad,



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FASTING HELPS MUSLIMS TO DEVELOP AND STRENGTHEN THEIR POWERS OF SELF-CONTROL, SO THEY CAN RESIST WRONGFUL DESIRES AND BAD HABITS

it increases the consciousness and remembrance of Allah in our hearts. This raises the spiritual bar of us, so we become more religious and attached to Allah during Ramadhan. That is why one can see people more obedient and kindhearted in Ramadhan.

Another important lessons that fasting teaches Muslims is to think about the poor and needy people who have shortfall of food and cannot afford getting three meals a day. Throughout such learning, fasting allows others to experience hunger like those needy families. Accordingly, Ramadhan brings the focus on the importance of charity and voluntary works in the society. Hence, you see people strive to do different sorts of charitable deeds with the poor people and needy families. This is due to the spirit of compassion that Ramadhan instills in people.

Luckily, people here are more considerate and they contribute in helping others through various charitable organisations. Their interest to support voluntary activities and charities is not only limited to this month, rather it increases in Ramadhan as the credit and rewards of such deeds are getting double. That is why Ramadhan is called the month of generosity.

In fact, fasting does not only promote refraining from eating and drinking, but from all kinds of selfish desires and wrong doings. Fasting is not merely intended for the body, but for the spirit as well. Thus, the physical fasting symbolises and expresses the real and inner fasting. Fasting is a spiritual practice that is targeting the spirit and body at the same time.

It calls upon us to discover ourselves, master ourselves, and discipline ourselves via various tasks. Thus, we should all realise the real message, reason and values behind fasting. It is a sacred annual religious ritual and a one of the main pillars of Islam, which all Muslims should comply with and practice obediently. May the Almighty Allah bestow us the great rewards and blessings from this month. Wish you all a rewarding fasting and a blessed Ramadhan!

A LATE BLOOM!



■ A woman poses for photographs under cherry blossoms in Tokyo on Sunday, as the declaration of the blooming came 15 days later than last year in Japan's capital. – AFP

What can stop the shortening of American lives?

Even as Covid-19 recedes into the background of everyday life, the broader decline in US life expectancy is still with us, because too many elected officials refuse to take its causes seriously.

Covid-19 has killed nearly 1.2 million Americans, making it the main reason that US life expectancy fell by 2.4 years between 2019 and 2021.

But while life expectancy has started to tick back up, it is still 1.3 years lower than it was in 2019, according to the latest data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Every racial and ethnic group now has a lower life expectancy than before the pandemic, with American Indian and Alaska Native, Black, and Hispanic people suffering the largest setbacks.

Meanwhile, other countries – including Sweden, Belgium, and Denmark – have returned or nearly returned to pre-pandemic life expectancy.

The main reasons that the United States lags many other rich countries can be summed up in three words: guns and drugs. The US far outpaces other high-income countries in overdose and gun deaths, and both problems have worsened since 2019.

In fact, they have reached record levels. At the same time, chronic illnesses such as heart disease, stroke, and diabetes are among the leading causes of death in the US.

Obesity is a major risk factor for all these conditions, and America's obesity



Michael R Bloomberg

The writer is founder of Bloomberg LP and Bloomberg Philanthropies and a former mayor of New York City, is the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Climate Ambition and Solutions and the WHO's Global Ambassador for Noncommunicable Diseases and Injuries

rate is the highest among large, developed countries.

Despite having the world's largest economy and the world's most advanced health-care facilities, the US ranked 40th in global life expectancy, according to the most recent available data.

And that data was released in 2019, before Covid pushed the US even further behind. Given the cascading challenges of the past five years, it probably still ranks at the bottom of the Western world.

This is a national disgrace, but it isn't inevitable. Americans don't have to live and die like this.

We can use public health — the science of protecting as many people as possible from diseases and injuries — to preempt threats every day.

Change starts with listening to public-health experts and developing practical, data-driven responses.

Unfortunately, the pandemic's path of destruction did not spare the field of public health. Scientists and doctors were subjected to relentless attacks from partisans trying to score political points, and public trust in their views declined as a result.

Of course, scientists and doctors are fallible like the rest of us. But ignoring their warnings and guidance is deadly.

We saw that during the pandemic and during the vaccine

rollout, and we are still seeing it today.

Even before the pandemic, public health was undervalued, because its power is so often hidden. Patients leaving a hospital after receiving emergency surgery are almost always grateful, and they know exactly whom to thank for saving their lives.

By contrast, public-health interventions save lives every day, but those who are saved rarely even know it.

Such interventions – whether it's a seatbelt or an airbag, a smoke-free workplace or a trigger lock – do not produce grateful patients (or grateful policymakers, who could

better fund them), because they keep people out of hospitals (and the morgue).

Strengthening trust in those who work in public health begins with raising awareness of what they do and how they do it.

That is why the new four-part documentary series The Invisible Shield (produced by Radical Media, supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies, and airing in the US on PBS) aims to shine a spotlight on public health and the historic gains it has made possible.

From 1900 to 2000, US life expectancy increased by more than 30 years, and child mortality plummeted as measles and

diphtheria were nearly eliminated.

By 1980, the world had eradicated smallpox. Polio could be next. These extraordinary successes, once unimaginable, show what is possible when societies commit to keeping children safe and extending all our lives.

But the political courage to take the steps necessary to save and extend lives — from enacting stronger gun laws to taxing tobacco — seems to be in shorter supply than ever before.

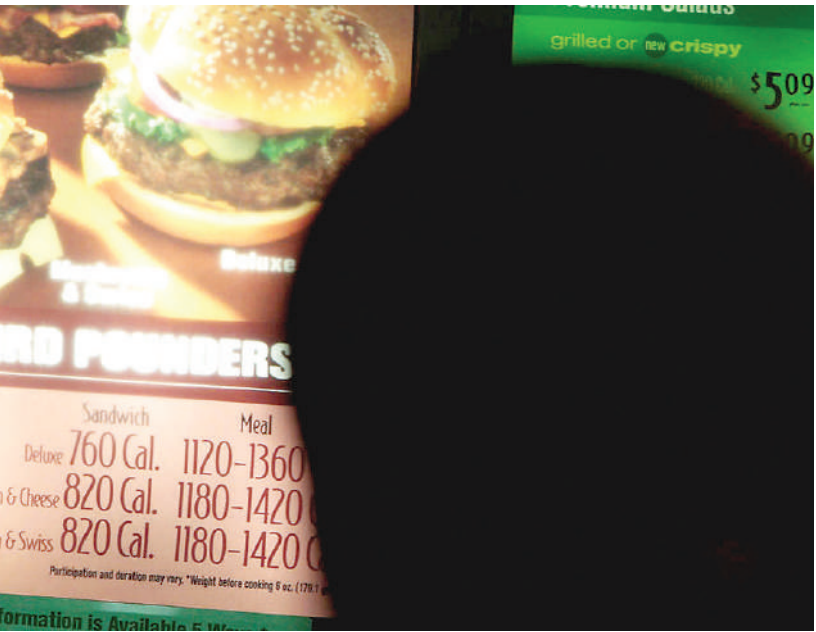
During my 12 years as mayor of New York, average life expectancy in the city increased by three years, because we refused to bow to lobbyists and naysayers who opposed our groundbreaking public-health protections.

Some of those protections, such as posting calorie counts and banning artificial trans fats, proved so popular and effective that the federal government later adopted them. But over the last decade — and especially after the pandemic — data-driven public-health interventions have stalled in Washington.

To push life expectancy back to its pre-pandemic highs — and then higher — we need elected officials to be braver and bolder in deploying the “invisible shield.”

And for that, we need voters who recognise the stakes and hold their representatives' feet to the fire.

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America's obesity rate is the highest among large, developed countries.

sport

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Arsenal beat Chelsea to win Women's League Cup after Maanum health scare

WOLVERHAMPTON: Arsenal striker Stina Blackstenius scored the winner in extra time as they beat Chelsea 1-0 in the Women's League Cup final at the Molineux Stadium on Sunday in a game overshadowed by the collapse of Gunners midfielder Frida Maanum in stoppage time.

Maanum fell to the turf in second-half stoppage time before being carried off on a stretcher, with Arsenal subsequently announcing on X (formerly Twitter) that "Frida is conscious,

talking and in stable condition. She will continue to be monitored closely by our medical team."

No further details about what caused the incident were given.

In an even first half short on chances, Mayra Ramirez thought she had given Chelsea the lead in the 21st minute with a superb shot from outside the box, but the goal was chalked off as Erin Cuthbert had handled the ball in the build-up. Cuthbert inadvertently provided Arsenal with a great chance

midway through the second half, coughing up possession in midfield and allowing the Gunners to go on the counter, but Cloe Lacasse's shot was straight at Hannah Hampton.

England international Lauren James almost grabbed a late winner in the 85th minute, cutting in from the left and aiming for the far corner but Manuela Zinsberger steered the ball to safety with her foot.

Minutes later came Maanum's collapse, prompting anxious

players and fans alike to urge medics onto the field to treat her, and after a long delay the Norwegian was replaced by Alessia Russo as the game resumed, finishing scoreless minutes later.

Both teams wasted some decent chances in extra time until Swede Blackstenius was set up by Caitlin Foord, and Blackstenius took a touch before blasting home the runner from close range to ensure Arsenal retained the title. — Reuters

Man City and Arsenal draw 0-0, to Liverpool's benefit

MANCHESTER: Arsenal showed their title credentials by holding reigning champions Manchester City to a 0-0 draw on Sunday at the Etihad Stadium, allowing Liverpool to take top spot on a pivotal day in the Premier League's three-way title race.

Mikel Arteta's Arsenal, in the hunt for their first league title in 20 years, are second in the table on 65 points with nine games remaining, while City are third with 64.

Liverpool claimed the lead with their 2-1 comeback victory over Brighton & Hove Albion earlier on Sunday.

City dominated possession,

coming at Arsenal in waves. But the visitors frustrated Pep Guardiola's men — including league-leading scorer Erling Haaland — with a textbook defensive display to extend their unbeaten league run to nine games.

Gabriel Jesus had Arsenal's best chances, firing two shots just wide in the first half and then narrowly failing to meet an inviting cross from Bukayo Saka.

City's best opportunity was Kevin De Bruyne's early corner kick that glanced off the shoulder of Nathan Ake but fell to keeper David Raya.

— Reuters



Arsenal's Takehiro Tomiyasu in action with Manchester City's Erling Braut Haaland. — Reuters

R U S T A Q D E F E A T B A H L A

Al Wahda snatch first victory in Omantel League

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 31

Rustaq club defeated Bahla 3-2 in a thrilling match on Saturday evening at the Rustaq Sports Complex in the 14th round of Omantel League.

In a first half full of excitement, both teams shared the periods of the 45 minutes. Bahla started quickly and managed to score a goal in the first minute, but it was ruled out. The game changed and Rustaq took possession of the ball, while Bahla relied on a defensive style due to the high pressure from Rustaq players.

Rustaq players were able to create several dangerous chances on Bahla's goal, and the first goal came from a corner kick that was met by Soumahoro header to score the lead goal in the 14th minute.

After the lead, Rustaq players continued with the same attacking style and looked for the second goal, while Bahla players tried to create some chances that did not pose any danger to Rustaq's goal. In the 27th minute, Rustaq was



Rustaq club players celebrating after winning

awarded a penalty kick after their player Mohammed al Ghafri was fouled after facing Bahla goalkeeper Salah al Hanbali. Al Ghafri kicked the penalty to scored the second goal.

After scoring two goals, the pace of the game slowed down for Rustaq players, which allowed Bahla players to put pressure on Rustaq's goal in the last minutes of the first half. In the 37th minute, Bahla was awarded a penalty kick

after a foul inside the box, Loki scored the first goal for Bahla through the penalty, which made the match more exciting due to the close performance of the two teams. Bahla came back and scored the equaliser through a header by Mahboob Juma in the last minute of added time and the referee announced the end of the first half with the two teams tied 2-2.

The second half was more exciting, as the two teams were tied



Al Wahda and Sur match

2-2. The match saw more chances from both teams in an attempt to get the three points. Rustaq player Mohammed al Ghafri fired a powerful shot from outside the area that went past the left post of Bahla goalkeeper in the 55th minute. Bahla player Majid al Shikili responded with a powerful shot from inside the area that Rustaq goalkeeper managed to save with difficulty outside the area.

The two teams exchanged

attacks without any advantage for either side, with parity on both sides. Rustaq managed to score the third goal through a header by Musab al Sharqi after receiving a cross from the left side and it hit the net of Bahla goalkeeper in the 81st minute. Rustaq striker Mohammed bin Humaid al Ghafri missed a chance to score a goal when he fired the ball past the right post of Bahla goalkeeper. Bahla coach made a number of changes in an attempt

to return to the match and he had a number of chances but they were not exploited properly. The match ended with Rustaq winning 3-2 against Bahla.

With this result, Rustaq raised their points tally to 17 points, in seventh place in the league standings, one goal behind Ibrai. Bahla's points tally remained at 6 points, in 12th (last) place.

Al Wahda Snatch First Victory Against Sur

In the second match, Al Wahda achieved their first victory in the Omantel League this season on Saturday, defeating Sur 1-0 at the Sur Sports Complex in the 14th round.

The only goal of the match was scored by Younis al Sunaidi in the 89th minute, to raise his team's points tally to 10 points, in 11th place in the standings (second from last).

As for Sur, their points tally remained at 13 points, in ninth place, leaving the gap between them and Al Wahda at just 3 points, entering the relegation battle.

After tough start, Celtics shut down Pelicans

WASHINGTON: Jayson Tatum scored 23 points to lead a balanced Boston attack in a 104-92 victory at New Orleans on Saturday, snapping a two-game losing skid for the NBA-best Celtics.

Latvian forward Kristaps Porzingis contributed 19 points, 10 rebounds, four blocked shots, three assists and two steals while Jaylen Brown added 17 points for the Celtics.

Jrue Holiday had 13 points, eight rebounds and seven assists for Boston, which avoided a first three-game losing streak this season after back-to-back losses in Atlanta.

"We want to be a hungry team no matter what," Porzingis said. "We haven't done anything and back-to-back losses to Atlanta is not in our DNA. It just didn't sit right with us, so we came out here tonight and got us a W."

The Celtics, who have clinched the Eastern Conference crown, improved to 58-16, moving closer to securing a home-court edge throughout the NBA playoffs.

New Orleans, fifth in the Western Conference, fell to 45-29, a half-game ahead of Dallas and two atop Phoenix in a fight for the last two guaranteed West playoff spots.

"We just knew we couldn't be in cruise control," Porzingis said. "These teams are hungry. They need these wins. Maybe we at this point of the season don't need them as much, but still we want to come out here and compete at a high level every night."

Porzingis was unhappy at shooting only 6-of-14 from the floor, and just 1-of-6 from 3-point range but pleased with his all-around effort.

"There are so many ways we can impact a game if things are not going perfect for us," Porzingis said. "That's what I did tonight. I turned up another notch and that's

what we're going to need the rest of this regular season and then even more in the post-season."

Boston began the third quarter on a 15-7 run to open a 74-64 advantage on the way to an 83-68 lead entering the fourth quarter and the Celtics kept the Pelicans at bay over the final minutes.

"Once we hit another gear, the game just flipped," Porzingis said.

Derrick White, who scored 15 points, sank a 3-pointer at the second quarter buzzer to cap an 8-1 Celtics run for a 59-57 half-time Boston lead.

Tatum had 13 first-half points for Boston while Brown and Porzingis each scored 11.

Zion Williamson led New Orleans with a game-high 25 points, 12 in the first quarter, and nine rebounds while CJ McCollum added 24 points for the Pelicans.

BIG NIGHT FOR GIANNIS

Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 36 points, grabbed 16 rebounds and added seven assists, three steals and a blocked shot to spark the Bucks to a 122-113 victory in Atlanta.

The Bucks snapped the Hawks' four-game win streak — which included two wins over the Celtics — and improved to 47-27, stretching their lead over Cleveland for second in the East to two games.

Atlanta, led by Bogdan Bogdanovic's game-high 38 points, fell to 34-40, clinging to 10th in the East and the last play-in spot, a game behind Chicago.

Orlando's Wendell Carter had 15 points and 13 rebounds on a night when seven Magic players scored in double figures, none more than 15 points, in a 118-88 home victory over Memphis.

Orlando improved to 43-31, 1.5 games behind fourth-place New York in the East.

— AFP



Jayson Tatum (0) is defended by Najji Marshall (8), Jones (5), and CJ McCollum (3). — USA TODAY Sports

COLLINS BEATS RYBAKINA TO WIN MIAMI OPEN



Danielle Collins (USA) reacts after winning. — USA TODAY Sports

Miami: American Danielle Collins upset the odds to win the Miami Open title on Saturday, beating Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan 7-5, 6-3 to claim her first WTA 1000 title in her final season on the tour.

The 30-year-old Collins, number 53 in the world, is the lowest-ranked woman ever to win the tournament, clinching her biggest career title in a two-hour triumph.

Collins announced in January that she will be retiring from the sport at the end of this year and her unexpected run to the final and victory over the world number four delighted the home crowd.

"I couldn't think of a better way to win my first 1000 title. It means the world to me," Collins said.

"The encouragement and support that I got, it was hard to hide the emotion because I think these are the moments that we live for and we don't always get to have them. It was really special," she said.

While she insists that her recent run of form won't lead her to reconsider her departure from the sport, Collins will rise to 22 in Monday's WTA



Danielle Collins (USA) celebrating the trophy

rankings.

It was a disappointing second straight loss in a Miami final for Rybakina, who missed out to Petra Kvitova last year.

Both players looked strong on their serve in the early exchanges but Floridan Collins had to work hardest to hold her serve.

She saved four break points as she hung on for 4-3 and showed resistance again to deny a break point at 5-5 with a brilliant backhand winner after a long rally.

Collins broke at the end of the first set, capitalising on a third break point to win the set when Rybakina went long.

Then the momentum shifted heavily in Collins's direction when she broke Rybakina's first service game of the second set.

The 24-year-old Rybakina, the 2022 Wimbledon champion, responded, breaking back at the first opportunity.

Neither player was able to truly dominate, but Collins struck the decisive blow when she broke to go 5-3 up as Rybakina at full stretch on the baseline went long.

The American had not defeated a top five player since a win over then world number two Paula Badosa at San Diego in October of 2022.

Perhaps it was inevitable then that Collins showed nerves at the end as she struggled to serve out, denying two break points and finally clinching on her fourth championship point.

- Hanging in there -

"It's hard," Collins said. "You've got the crowd supporting you and pushing you to close it out and they wanted me to win so bad. It was like playing in front of my best friends and I didn't want to let the crowd down and it was tough."

"Elena does not give up and she just kept slinging those shots right and left, I just had to hang in there."

Rybakina had missed out on Indian Wells due to a

gastrointestinal illness and said that with four of her five matches in Miami en route to the final having gone to three sets, she was not in peak condition.

"I was feeling the body, of course. Also, it was not easy tournament, because the first matches I was playing quite late, finishing, and then I was going to sleep around 2:00, 3:00. Then some matches were during the day. So the schedule was also up and down, and recovery, it doesn't help, for sure," she said.

"I had a lot of tough matches. Some of them went my way with a bit of luck here and there. This one didn't, and of course I was not expecting to be fresh in this final, and she played really well," she added.

Collins becomes the first American woman to take home the Miami Open title since Sloane Stephens in 2018 and the sixth overall, also joining Martina Navratilova, Chris Evert, three-time champion Venus Williams and eight-time champion Serena Williams.

The previous lowest-ranked women's champion was Kim Clijsters, who was ranked 38th when she won the title in 2005.

— AFP

Miller steers Gujarat to IPL win over Hyderabad

Ahmedabad: Mohit Sharma's bowling figures of 3-25 and an unbeaten 44 by David Miller powered Gujarat Titans to their second IPL win with a thrashing of Sunrisers Hyderabad on Sunday.

Gujarat restricted Hyderabad to 162-8, a total they overhauled with seven wickets and five balls to spare at their home Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad.

Hyderabad skipper Pat Cummins came to the venue with happy memories after he led Australia to an ODI World Cup triumph at the 132,000-capacity stadium last year, but this time, the home team ruled.

"Winning two matches at home is great, two more to go and then we go on the road," Gujarat skipper Shubman Gill said.

Gill added, "Credit to the bowlers to restrict them. Everyone knows their roles in terms of batting or bowling... Miller's gotten in form too."

Gill made 36 to add to his team's attacking start after fellow opener Wriddhiman Saha smashed a 13-ball 25 and set up the chase.

Sai Sudarshan then came in as impact substitute in place of Mohit and put on a key 64-run third-wicket stand with fellow left-hander Miller, who struggled in the middle with his running and Gill said it was "just a cramp, I think".

Sudarshan fell for 45 off Cummins but Miller stood firm to steer the team home with Vijay Shankar at the other end in an unbeaten stand of 30.

Gujarat needed 49 from the last 30 balls before Miller and Sudarshan

smashed Mayank Markande in a 24-run 16th over to ease into the chase.

Mohit, 35, set up victory with his medium-pace bowling as he struck three times including the key wicket of Abhishek Sharma, who made 29 off 20 balls.

Afghanistan spin wizard Rashid Khan made his presence felt when he bowled Heinrich Klaasen, who trudged back to the pavilion after his 13-ball 24.

"Good match but we got 10-15 less," said Cummins. "They bowled well. Losing a couple of wickets meant we couldn't get a batter not making fifty plus."

Hyderabad, who won their only title in 2016 under David Warner, suffered their second loss in three matches.

— AFP





Mohamed Salah celebrates scoring their second goal. – Reuters

LIVERPOOL GO TOP AFTER 2-1 COMEBACK WIN OVER BRIGHTON

LIVERPOOL: Striker Mohamed Salah scored the winner as Liverpool came back from a goal down to beat Brighton & Hove Albion 2-1 and go top of the Premier League ahead of Manchester City's showdown with Arsenal later on Sunday.

Salah's sublime second-half strike leaves Liverpool on 67 points, three ahead of second-placed Arsenal and four ahead of City on a pivotal day in the title race.

HIGHEST TOTAL
The Egyptian striker tormented Brighton, taking 12 shots to notch up his highest total in a Premier League game and, even though only one of them found the back of the net, it was to prove vital.

Danny Welbeck gave Brighton the lead after 84 seconds when his side broke up a Liverpool attack and burst forward to find him just inside the box and he drilled an unstoppable shot past Caoimhin Kelleher to break the deadlock.

The early goal jolted Liverpool into life and Luis Diaz put them level in the 27th minute after Joel Veltman's attempted clearance went awry, allowing the Colombian winger to steal in behind the defence and hook the ball home.

Liverpool's suffocating pressure and incisive attacking paid dividends again when Alexis Mac Allister teed up Salah to fire them into the lead.

Diaz thought he had put the Reds 3-1 up six minutes later but his goal was ruled out for a razor-thin offside that was confirmed by the VAR and Salah went close on the break in the 74th minute, but fired his effort straight at the keeper.

Brighton substitute and former Liverpool player Adam Lallana dragged a shot wide in the 86th minute, and Salah forced a brilliant diving one-handed save from Bart Verbruggen in the final minute of normal time as Liverpool held on to win, much to the delight of Mac Allister, another former Seagull.

"We didn't start as we wanted but it was an amazing game. We played against an unbelievable team. I know them very well, I know what they can do and it was a tough match, but in the end we won it and we are very happy," he told Sky Sports.

"I would rather not concede so early but the mentality of the boys is amazing and that is what you need when you are 1-0 down, and today we showed it again. But next time we have to start the game winning, not losing," he added.

— Reuters

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Post-transformation
plan, Oman Air plans
single-family aircraft

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, MARCH 31

The Transformation Plan of the National Airline, Oman Air, will continue until 2027, which is primarily aimed at cutting losses to ‘Zero EBITDA’ and repositioning the airline.

Eng Said al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology and Chairman of the Board of Directors of Oman Air, told the Observer, “By 2027, Oman Air will be a healthy company and will be ready for growth. So questions about growth should be asked by 2027.

But for now, we should focus on filling the seats and improving the yield for this period to make sure that there is good financial sustainability for the aircraft and the airlines.”

On the aircraft types, he said, “Going forward, as a policy, as an airline, what is good is widebodies. We should focus more on widebody aircraft, efficient ones but for the time being. We are rightsizing and repositioning the company.”

Currently, the airline operates a fleet of Boeing 737s, Dreamliners and A330s. The Transformation Plan is evaluating scenarios to reduce its wide-body fleet (currently made up of Airbus and Boeing) to single-family aircraft to determine the most financially suitable option while continuing to meet demand.

Following the external externally audited results. Oman Air announced that net losses in 2023 dropped by 36% in 2023 compared to 2022.

The company has also achieved a lot of improvements in terms of the quantity and quality of revenue. The number



By 2027, Oman Air
will be a healthy
company and will be
ready for growth.

ENG SAID AL
MAAWALI

Minister of Transport,
Communications and
Information Technology

of passengers in 2023 increased from 5 million passengers in 2022 to six million in 2023.

The minister said, “The team tried to implement some crucial strategies on cost control as a result of the transformation plan, which included renegotiating some contracts, getting rid of some contracts that are not necessary and in general reducing cost.”

He added, “Now there is a trust in the company and so we can approach the banking community for some loans for the company, minor loans.

The banks are ready to lend us some money without any governmental or sovereign support. This is in terms of the transformation.

It is going in the right direction. We expect to be at zero EBITDA by 2027, which is earnings before taxes and interest and that is a good target.”

From 2027, the airline plans to grow aggressively as a company.

New FSA to vitalise financial sector

HIBBA AL HIBBA
MUSCAT, MARCH 31

The newly established Financial Services Authority (FSA) is expected to vitalise the financial sector in Oman, according to FSA officials.

Last week, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik issued Royal Decree No. 20/2024, establishing the Financial Services Authority and enacting its law. Part of the decree stipulated the transfer of rights, obligations and assets from the Capital Market Authority to the Financial Services Authority.

Speaking at a press conference at FSA headquarters in Muscat yesterday, spokesperson, Majid al Abri, said the establishment of the Financial Services Authority (FSA) and the issuance of its law, will “re-arrange” the financial sector to include a wider set of sectors.

These will include the insurance sector, capital markets, credit rating agencies, commodities and energy markets and the accounting and auditing sector, which were previously regulated by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion.

Furthermore, he shared that the



Officials of the Financial Services Authority briefing the media on its substantive mandate.

Authority will aim to include the financial sector into the national decision-making process, as it will directly report to the Cabinet of Ministers per Royal Decree No. 20/2024.

Additionally, the Authority’s establishment aims to promote a conducive investment environment in the Sultanate of Oman, boost and facilitate innovation and the introduction of non-traditional financial instruments and enhance national capacities within the sector.

According to officials, the

Authority aims to establish legislative and regulatory frameworks that enhance the integrity, independence, transparency and competitiveness of financial sectors.

Al Abri stated that the newly issued law will pave the way for more sectoral frameworks, notably within the securities, insurance, auditing and accounting firms, commodities and energy markets sectors.

Additionally, the Authority will monitor and enforce compliance of supervised entities with regulatory frameworks.

Moreover, the Authority aims to protect the rights of investors and stakeholders dealing with entities under its supervision, as well as ensure the confidentiality and privacy of data.

Furthermore, the Authority aims to raise awareness among different segments of society and stakeholders.

According to officials, the Authority will also “establish or contribute to the establishment of a specialised educational or professional training institution” to support the sectors and activities within its scope.

Consultancy contract awarded for Phase 1 of Al Dhahirah Zone design

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 31

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) has awarded a consultancy services tender to an Oman-Saudi JV for the design and supervision of the infrastructure development of Phase 1 of the Integrated Economic Zone in Al Dhahirah Governorate (EZAD).

Phase 1, covering 20 km2 site, will include a land port set on a 6.5 km2 area operated and managed by Asyad Group. The remaining land will be developed for future expansions to keep up with the land requirements of all economic sectors.

“The tender works also include the detailed design of the infrastructure facilities, the preparation of the documents for the tender of the construction works and the supervision of the



EZAD will capitalise on its proximity to the Saudi border.

implementation of the works, the completion of the project, operation and delivery.

The tender also includes supervision of a number of key components such as the land

port, road, electricity and telecommunications networks, water, irrigation and sewage networks, gas network, solid waste management, administrative buildings and horticulture works,” said Eng Yahya bin Khamis al Zadjali, Planning Advisor.

He added that the establishment of EZAD was motivated by several goals, including optimising the advantages of its strategic border location with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, boosting intra-regional trade between the two nations, bolstering development initiatives and economic diversification, opening up new markets for the Omani economy as well as the Gulf economy and reaping the benefits of the competitive elements.

The Integrated Economic Zone in Al Dhahirah Governorate is located about 20 kilometres from Oman’s border crossing with Saudi Arabia, and about 100 kilometres away from the Ibri Industrial City project.

Improving fiscal resilience to underpin Sultanate of
Oman’s sustainable economic development

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, MARCH 31

In recent years, Oman has been making significant strides towards economic stability and diversification, as highlighted in a detailed presentation by Hamid Hamirani, Co-Founder - EHA Advisory and former advisor at Oman’s Ministry of Finance during last week’s event of The British Omani Society titles ‘Navigating Oman’s Fiscal and Diversification Reforms.

Hamirami’s presentation outlines various key aspects of Oman’s economic landscape, shedding light on its fiscal reforms, infrastructure quality, debt resilience, social protection measures, tax revenue challenges, and labour market reforms.

One of the standout achievements for Oman is its positive fiscal balance, shifting to a surplus of 10.1% of GDP in 2022.



Oman’s economic trajectory is defined by resilience, reform and a forward-looking vision for sustainable growth.

This transformation was fuelled by favourable oil prices, increased tax revenues and prudent

expenditure management, leading to a substantial improvement in the country’s fiscal position.

Additionally, efforts to reduce fuel subsidies and enhance non-hydrocarbon revenue streams

OMAN’S INFRASTRUCTURE QUALITY STANDS OUT COMPARED TO OTHER EMERGING MARKETS AND EVEN SURPASSES THE AVERAGES OF GCC AND ADVANCED ECONOMIES. WITH A PUBLIC CAPITAL STOCK-TO-GDP RATIO OF 150%, OMAN HAS MADE SIGNIFICANT INVESTMENTS IN INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT, DRIVING ECONOMIC GROWTH AND ATTRACTING DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN INVESTMENTS.

have played a significant role in strengthening Oman’s fiscal resilience, he said.

Oman has seen a remarkable decline in its government debt, from 67.9% of GDP in 2020 to 36.7% in 2023, with projections indicating a further decrease to less than 30% by 2031.

This reduction in debt levels, coupled with the presence of sizable financial buffers, has helped mitigate sovereign debt stress risks.

However, the trajectory of government debt remains subject to external factors such as oil market developments, highlighting the importance of continued vigilance and prudent financial management, Hamirami noted.

Oman’s infrastructure quality stands out compared to other emerging markets and even surpasses the averages of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and advanced economies. With a public capital stock-to-

GDP ratio of 150%, Oman has made significant investments in infrastructure development, driving economic growth and attracting domestic and foreign investments.

Abraj announces Sharia-compliant status

MUSCAT: Abraj Energy Services (Abraj), Oman's leading oilfield services provider, recently celebrated its success in achieving Sharia compliance as per the rules prescribed by the Accounting and Auditing Organisation for Islamic Financial Institutions (AAOIFI).

The announcement came coinciding with the company's general assembly meeting held on March 28, 2024 arising from a number of initiatives and conscious steps taken to reduce conventional debt to less than 30% of the company's market capitalisation.

The announcement was made in the presence of delegates from MSX, the



Financial Services Authority, Abraj's board and management, strategic stakeholders and media

representatives.

This event highlighted Abraj's commitment to upholding the

highest standards to align with Sharia principles.

Eng Saif al Hamhami, CEO of Abraj Energy Services, stated that, "This achievement is a pivotal moment for Abraj, reflecting our steadfast commitment to lead from the front in the energy sector.

As we look into the future, we are excited about the opportunities this Sharia-compliant status will bring in, widening our investor base globally and contributing to our structured strategic growth."

Ali bin Ahmed al Lawati, Assistant General Manager, Meethaq Corporate Banking from Bank Muscat, stated, "Meethaq has consistently remained at the

forefront, making significant contributions to projects such as the ones carried out by Abraj Energy Services, which play a crucial role in Oman's growing economy. This aligns with our vision to introduce Islamic Banking across all sectors and promote economic diversification within the country".

In 2023, Abraj demonstrated positive financial performance, with total revenue reaching RO 144.3 million, a 5.3% increase from the previous year, and net profit standing at RO 16.6 million.

This financial growth is a testament to Abraj's robust business model and operational excellence.



National Finance posts exceptional performance in 2023

MUSCAT: National Finance, the Sultanate of Oman's leading finance company, continues to set new benchmarks in the industry through its resolute commitment to excellence and innovation.

Demonstrating exceptional resilience, the company achieved remarkable success in 2023, driven by rigorous transformation initiatives, fortified operational frameworks, and judicious risk management protocols.

Unveiled in an Annual General Meeting of the company's distinguished Board of Directors and esteemed key stakeholders, National Finance's outstanding performance in 2023 reflects its focused approach towards high-quality businesses and enhanced margins.

With a net investment in lease surging to RO 486.86 million, marking a notable 14.43% increase from the previous year, and a profit after tax of RO 11.11 million, showcasing a significant growth of 9.59%, the company has exceeded expectations and solidified its market leadership.

These remarkable achievements not only validate the company's strategic goals outlined at the beginning of the year, but also instil greater trust and reliability among customers.

Moreover, the redemption of perpetual bonds amounting to RO 18.20 million in March 2023 reflects positively on the company's financial robustness, inspiring confidence among investors.

Commenting on the results, Tariq bin Sulaiman al Farsi (pictured), Chief Executive Officer at National Finance, remarked, "Our ability to thrive amidst a global recession and increased interest rates stems from our proactive engagement with stakeholders and strategic foresight.

Our pledge towards delivering exceptional service, adhering to regulatory norms, and diversifying our product portfolio effectively, has not only enhanced our operational efficiency but also heightened customer experiences across all channels."

He added, "As we celebrate our achievements, we eagerly anticipate embracing future challenges with the same determination and vigour. Guided by our dedication to innovation and excellence, we will continue to redefine success in the financial landscape, forging new paths and setting higher standards as a Partner for Growth to all."

As of December 31, 2023, the company has achieved an impressive Omanisation rate of 91.01%, surpassing the targeted rate of 90%, with 324 Omani employees out of a total workforce of 356.



NBO boosts financial skills with Children's Account

MUSCAT: Reinforcing its commitment to promote financial literacy, the National Bank of Oman's (NBO) Children's Account offers a valuable savings solution for parents and children alike. It empowers them to instill essential financial skills and responsibility in their children from a young age.

The Children's Account from NBO stands out as a comprehensive approach to financial education, reflecting the bank's ongoing efforts to foster financial literacy in the community.

NBO has also streamlined the process for receiving the Social Protection Fund Initiative for child benefit through the Children's Account, which highlights NBO's dedication to community welfare.

Maha al Raisi, Assistant General Manager and Head of Retail Products at NBO, said: "Beyond being a mere savings tool, our Children's Account represents an investment in the financial future of our children.

We are committed to providing parents with the necessary resources to foster responsible money management in their children from an early age.

By instilling the importance of saving and prudent financial management, we are securing their individual futures and nurturing a financially empowered generation.

Through the Children's Account, our goal is to develop young minds into

financially astute individuals capable of understanding the intricacies of the financial world and ensure that a diverse spectrum of parents can invest in their children's financial future from the earliest age."

All parents and guardians both Omanis and expatriates aged 18 and above can apply for a Children's Account via NBO app or by visiting any branch.

This inclusive offering is designed for those with children under 18 years of age, providing a diverse range of families the opportunity to secure financial benefits for their young ones.

The account options comprise a standard savings account with no minimum deposit requirement and no interest, along with a recurring monthly deposit account featuring a competitive 3.5% interest rate and parents can choose a fixed monthly deposit starting from RO 10.

The interest is compounded and paid at maturity, facilitating gradual growth of savings over time.

Parents will have access to a range of key features with the Children's Account.

As account holders, parents or guardians will benefit from complimentary life insurance, offering coverage up to RO 100,000 for a maximum of four children (i.e., RO 25,000 per account).

This feature provides an extra layer of security for their family.

Majid Al Futtaim's Mall of Oman and City Centre Muscat raise funds for charity

MUSCAT: Majid Al Futtaim, the leading shopping malls, communities, retail, and leisure pioneer across the Middle East, has transformed the spirit of giving this Ramadhan by introducing innovative donation-powered arcade games, exclusively available at Mall of Oman and City Centre Muscat.

These classic arcade games seamlessly integrated with POS terminals, offer a nostalgic gaming experience while providing a platform to direct donations to established NGO partners, namely Dar Al Atta'a Association at Mall of Oman and Al Rahma Association at City Centre Muscat.

Patrons and visitors alike can



continue to contribute to these charitable causes by simply playing and tapping their banking cards at the POS terminals.

Husam al Mandhari, Director of Shopping Malls in Oman at Majid Al Futtaim Properties, expressed: "The Ramadhan activities at Mall of Oman and

City Centre malls reflect our commitment to bridging cultures and communities together.

We take pride in providing vibrant hubs where the essence of Ramadhan thrives, enhancing the community experience as families and friends come together to share moments and forge lasting memories."

As the month of giving comes to an end, Majid Al Futtaim extends an invitation to everyone to visit Mall of Oman and City Centre Muscat to participate in the arcade games and contribute to these charitable organisations.

Each donation, regardless of its size, plays a crucial role in changing the lives of those in need.

This Ramadhan, experience unmatched performance with Jaguar F-Pace

MUSCAT: This Ramadhan, immerse yourself in unparalleled luxury and performance with the Jaguar F-Pace. Designed to exceed expectations, the performance SUV combines distinctive aesthetics with cutting-edge technology, offering an experience tailored to both driver and passenger alike.

Mohsin Haider Darwish LLC announces its exclusive Ramadhan offer, allowing you to make the Jaguar F-Pace yours, along with a host of benefits designed to elevate your ownership experience.

These include service for 5 years or 105,000 kilometre, 5 years warranty and roadside assistance, together with complimentary first-year insurance & registration, and premium window tinting.

Mohsin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD ACERE added, "This Ramadhan, we are thrilled to offer an exclusive promotion tailored to make the F-Pace even more enticing.

The award-winning SUV embodies a harmonious blend of performance, elegance, and innovation, and has garnered worldwide acclaim for its exceptional design and performance, earning previous accolades at the World Car



Awards, including the titles of World Car of the Year and World Car Design of the Year."

The F-Pace: The SUV with intuitive technology, intelligent all-wheel drive and the performance of a Jaguar.

Featuring a new bonnet design, super-slim all-LED quad headlights, and a redesigned grille, the Jaguar F-Pace commands attention on the road with its assertive presence.

The centrally-mounted 11.4-inch curved-glass HD touchscreen controls the new Pivi Pro infotainment system, while authentic finishes such as open-pore wood veneers and aluminium elevate the interior ambiance.

Equipped with mild-hybrid (MHEV) powertrains, the Jaguar F-Pace offers enhanced efficiency and refinement.

The advanced MHEV technology intelligently harnesses energy to assist the engine during acceleration, resulting in a more refined driving experience.

With Jaguar's latest Pivi Pro dual-sim infotainment system, accessed through an all-new 11.4-inch HD curved glass touchscreen, the Jaguar F-Pace ensures seamless connectivity and access to essential features.

For further details on how to avail of this exceptional offer, visit the Jaguar showroom in Al Athaiba or call the toll-free number 800 62643.



Improving fiscal resilience to underpin Oman's sustainable economic development

FROM PAGE 13

Moreover, the optimisation of fiscal flexibility, especially in leveraging declining interest costs, is poised to propel long-term sustainable growth in the country. Oman's commitment to social protection is evident through its comprehensive support systems for vulnerable groups, including universal benefits for children, disability, and senior citizens.

The country has also taken steps to enhance labour market dynamics through reforms aimed at increasing productivity, reducing public-private sector wage differentials, and fostering a more competitive and inclusive employment environment.

These initiatives are designed to promote sustainable economic development and ensure social welfare for all citizens, he said.

Despite incremental progress in tax revenue growth, Oman still faces challenges in optimising its tax collection efficiency, particularly in comparison to its GCC counterparts.

Addressing the tax gap and enhancing tax administration capabilities are crucial for bolstering government revenues and sustaining fiscal stability. The implementation of targeted tax reforms, including the introduction of a Personal Income Tax law and modernised IT systems, is expected to enhance revenue generation and improve overall tax compliance, the financial analyst pointed out.

Oman's vision for logistics excellence, coupled with emphasis on technological innovation and research collaboration, underscores the country's commitment to driving economic growth and enhancing competitiveness. By leveraging digital technologies and fostering R&D initiatives, Oman aims to unlock new avenues for productivity growth and diversification.

Additionally, the tourism sector holds potential for expansion, with the newly issued tourism law set to attract investments and promote regional development in the country, Hamirami said.

Efforts to optimise health expenditure efficiency and prioritise critical spending in the healthcare sector are essential for improving health outcomes and managing long-term fiscal costs. Similarly, investments in education, including measures to tackle skill mismatches and promote vocational training, are crucial for equipping Oman's workforce with the necessary skills to support economic diversification and competitiveness. Embracing public-private partnerships and enhancing educational quality can further enhance Oman's human capital development.

Oman's new labour law, aimed at advancing gender equity through inclusive work arrangements and increased representation of women in senior positions, reflects the country's commitment to promoting diversity and inclusivity in the workforce, said the expert. Moreover, Oman's net-zero strategy, focusing on green hydrogen production and sustainable investments, underscores its dedication to environmental stewardship and long-term sustainability.

These initiatives align with global trends towards green energy transition and sustainable development goals. Oman's economic trajectory is defined by resilience, reform, and a forward-looking vision for sustainable growth.

By prioritising fiscal discipline, infrastructure development, social welfare, and innovation, Oman is positioning itself as a dynamic hub for economic opportunity and inclusive development.

As the country continues its journey towards economic diversification and sustainability, collaboration among stakeholders, robust governance frameworks, and proactive policy interventions will be key to unlocking Oman's full economic potential and fostering lasting prosperity for its citizens, he added in conclusion.

MoU signed to support deployment of renewable energy storage in Oman

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 31

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed recently by well-known Omani firm Nafath Renewable Energy with Takhzeen, a 100 per cent subsidiary of publicly traded firm ONEIC, will help introduce renewable energy supply backed by battery energy storage, particularly in rural parts of the Sultanate of Oman.

The MoU seeks to leverage the respective strengths and domain expertise of the two partners to provide renewable and sustainable energy supply to companies and organisations in line with their energy transition and Net-Zero goals.

Muscat-based Nafath, established in 2013, is one of Oman's oldest homegrown players in the small-scale solar PV and sustainable energy sector. Takhzeen, on the other hand, was launched last year to offer cutting-edge sustainable energy solutions to the Omani market.

It has also tied up with Energy Dome, an Italian-based tech start-up behind the revolutionary CO2 Battery — an energy storage system that makes solar and wind power dispatchable 24/7.

“Our recent MoU with Nafath



Representatives of Takhzeen and Nafath Renewable Energy at the MoU signing.

Renewable is all about establishing renewable energy projects along with battery energy storage projects, working on potential projects, projects targeted in remote locations such as rural areas and military camps,” said a Takhzeen representative in remarks to the *Observer*.

“This partnership is geared towards the development of renewable energy storage projects, aligning with Oman Vision 2040 and the broader sustainability

objectives of the Sultanate of Oman.

The MoU signifies a collaborative effort between Nafath Renewable Energy Company and Takhzeen Oman Company to bolster the renewable energy landscape in Oman,” added Nafath in a post.

At the heart of the partnership's differentiated offering is long-term and sustainable battery energy storage based on Energy Dome's proprietary technology. The battery harnesses the unique characteristics of liquid CO2, maintained under

AT THE HEART OF THE PARTNERSHIP'S DIFFERENTIATED OFFERING IS LONG-TERM AND SUSTAINABLE BATTERY ENERGY STORAGE BASED ON ENERGY DOME'S PROPRIETARY TECHNOLOGY

pressure at ambient temperatures, to store energy cost-effectively as part of a closed thermo-dynamic process.

Thus, surplus solar energy, for example, can be stored during the day utilising Energy Dome's CO2 battery system and harnessed when required, thereby eliminating the intermittency issue associated with renewable energy.

Given its potential to mitigate renewable energy intermittency challenges, Energy Dome has secured crucial backing from Oman for its technology.

Last July, the Milan-headquartered company listed IDO Investments, the venture capital arm of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), as among a number of international companies that had participated in a financing round to raise funding for the start-up.

Energy Dome also revealed that it had signed an MOU with Oman Investment Authority to explore potential areas of collaboration in Oman.

Pact signed to revolutionise digital banking, Open API in Oman

MUSCAT: Oman Data Park (ODP), the first IT-managed and cloud services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, and Antom, the leading digital banking innovator based in Oman, have joined forces in a strategic Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to introduce cutting-edge financial solutions to the Omani market through leveraging ODP's robust infrastructure and Antom's expertise in digital finance, via the state-of-the-art Antom Digibanc platform in Oman.

The signing of MoU took place under the auspices of Shaikh Ghosn bin Hilal al Alawi, President of the State Financial and Administrative Audit Institution, in presence of executives from the two companies and other invited guests.

This collaboration promises to deliver unparalleled services in key areas including Digital Banking Platform as a Service (SaaS), Open Banking and APIs Development, Instant Digital Lending, and Instant Credit Card Issuance services.

Commenting of the MoU, Eng Maqbool al Wahaibi, CEO of Oman Data Park, said: “Our collaboration with Antom represents a significant step forward in Oman's digital economy. By combining our expertise in managed IT services with Antom's cutting-edge digital banking solutions, we are poised to reshape



Top officials of Oman Data Bank and Antom signing the MoU in Muscat.

the future of banking in Oman and deliver unparalleled value to our customers.”

Al Wahaibi added: “Oman Data Park took the lead in establishing the company's cyber security centre known as Cyber Security Park to provide pioneering and effective smart security solutions to various sectors, including the banking and financial sector, to reduce electronic attacks.

It is a centre with all capabilities that enable it to repel more than 8,000 electronic attacks faced by various institutions in Oman

daily, while its unremitting efforts contributed to providing specialised sites to host and save data inside Oman instead of saving it abroad.

For his part, Abdullah al Nassri, CEO of Antom, expressed his enthusiasm for the collaboration: “Our partnership with Oman Data Park represents a significant milestone in our journey to transform Oman's Open banking landscape and a game changer for API-driven innovation in the Sultanate of Oman.

Antom Digibanc is designed to empower individuals and businesses, offering secure, efficient, and

personalised financial services.” Based on the Digital Banking Platform as a Service (SaaS), Antom Digibanc will provide a comprehensive SaaS solution, enabling banks and financial institutions to swiftly deploy and manage digital banking services, including account management to secure transactions, while the platform ensures a seamless user experience.

In the Open Banking and APIs Development, Antom's enterprise-grade digital enablement platform is built on an open architecture and collaborative governance framework with 550+ out-of-the-box APIs. Open APIs will empower developers, fintech companies, and businesses to create innovative financial products and services.

In Instant Digital Lending, Antom Digibanc streamlines the lending process, offering instant loan approvals and disbursements. Whether for personal loans, mortgages, or business financing, customers can access funds swiftly and conveniently.

As for the Instant Credit Card Issuance, the platform facilitates real-time credit card issuance, eliminating paperwork and long waiting periods. Customers can apply for credit cards online and receive immediate approval, enhancing their financial flexibility.

Upscale Al Sodah Island resort project back on track

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, MARCH 31

After a period of delay, the landmark Al Sodah Island resort project in Dhofar Governorate is back on track with an estimated investment value of approximately \$100 million, according to a top official of integrated tourism and real estate developer Muriya – a partnership of Egypt's Orascom and Omran Group of the Sultanate of Oman.

Eng Wael al Lawati (**pictured**), CEO of Muriya, expressed

confidence in the company's ability to overcome access challenges associated with the project, planned for development on offshore islands that are part of the Wilayat of Shaleem and Al Halaniyat Islands.

Al Lawati said the resort project – a partnership between Orascom's Samih Sawaris and Muriya – will leverage the latter's formidable experience in such endeavours to ensure its successful implementation.

Speaking to the *Observer* on the sidelines of a gathering of



tourism industry representatives hosted by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) in Salalah on Friday, Muriya's CEO also welcomed Minister Salim al Mahrouqi's call for collaboration

and coordinated action in marketing Dhofar's tourism potential.

Eng Al Lawati highlighted in this regard Muriya's capacity to host international conferences, emphasising Salalah's potential as a conference destination.

He advocated for expanding the scope and diversifying the locations for hosting conferences within Salalah. However, he stressed the crucial role of establishing direct flights from neighbouring countries to attract a wider range of conferences.

Eng Al Lawati emphasised that without improved air connectivity, significant growth in conference and exhibition tourism would be limited. The Minister and Eng Al Lawati also discussed Muriya's existing contributions to Dhofar's tourism sector.

The Minister commended Muriya's recent opening of a new hotel and expressed his interest in their experience with attracting flights from Eastern Europe, a potential strategy for further diversifying Dhofar's tourist base. Eng Al Lawati reaffirmed

Muriya's commitment to fulfilling all its promises regarding Dhofar's development.

In the interview, Eng Al Lawati also shed light on Muriya's active role in implementing the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism's vision for Dhofar.

Their renewed focus on marketing the Khareef Salalah season, progress on the Al Sodah Island project, and commitment to attracting conferences position Muriya as a significant contributor to Dhofar's transformation into a year-round tourist destination.

Wave power as an eco-friendly energy resource

Wave power as an infrastructural investment in a new supersystem for a diversified energy-mix has the great potential to be the most eco-friendly and cost-effective way to Net Zero.

COP 28 represented a milestone of change when it declared that renewable energy dominance can and will prevail over fossil fuel dependence.

With the essential need for diversifying there was acceptance that the transition must allow a seamless transference of dependence across all sectors to avoid destabilising economies and creating voids of supply and employment.

Energy projections see an energy system in 2030 in which clean technologies play a significantly greater role than today. But more will still be needed to keep alive the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 °C, which must not itself be a finite goal.

The laudable target must be



MATT MINSHALL

The author is a Senior Adviser at Havkraft, and Founder and Owner of The Mayamn Sustainability Project.

ENERGY PROJECTIONS SEE AN ENERGY SYSTEM IN 2030 IN WHICH CLEAN TECHNOLOGIES PLAY A SIGNIFICANTLY GREATER ROLE THAN TODAY

achieved but the idea only intends to slow the rate of warming and consideration must be given to halting the rising temperature.

Nature can certainly help directly and indirectly.

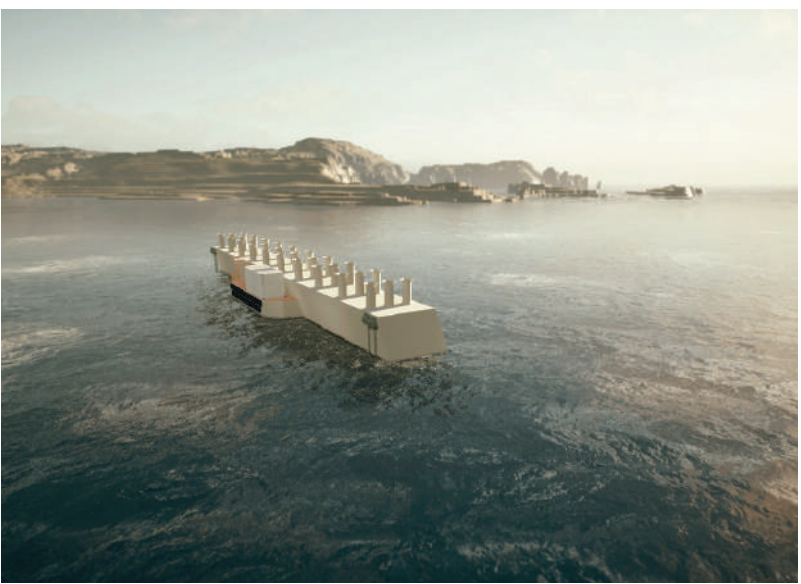
The direct approach is to reverse the human devastation of eco-systems over many millennia and while some is reversible total amends are impossible.

One of the most accessible is the planting of vegetation, such as the Nimr Wetlands in Oman, and the planting of billions of trees, must be considered but be balanced against the needs for agricultural land.

Part of the indirect approach includes better management of current systems and grids and an example is the Rabt interconnection project in Oman.

The key part is harnessing nature through technology such as with light, wind, and increasingly hydrogen, but the least yet considered but arguably one of the most constant is wave energy.

78% of the Earth's surface is covered by oceans, and waves



have the potential for energy with the reliability of a constantly charged battery; and yet the potential is largely untouched. Predictions indicate the potential can be greater than the current global electricity requirement; and the immediate accessibility is substantial.

A supporting “supersystem” concept is possible as a strategic framework to fortify the path towards a sustainable and diversified economy. This

supersystem encapsulates the ability to balance resilience, and environmental sustainability and comprises three bases in a forward-thinking approach.

First base is the emphasis on large-scale production of renewable energy to achieve 30% of electricity needs by 2030. Second base centres on storage solutions, emphasising hydrogen and batteries.

Wave power integration is the third base which would

significantly improve the baseload of the entire system. The synergistic combination of solar, wind, and wave power minimises reliance on expensive storage, ensuring economic viability.

Norwegian company Havkraft is at the global forefront of strategic wave energy conversion technology and their research and demonstration of capability is now well advanced.

The Havkraft concept is to be the technology provider and is now actively looking at strategic partners who would own a national project with around 80% of the total being of in country value.

Incorporating this triple based supersystem aligns seamlessly with providing a comprehensive, resilient, and sustainable approach to energy and by embracing wave power as a fundamental component, countries with suitable wave potential such as Oman can position themselves as leaders in the global shift towards clean energy while realising the vision of a net-zero future by 2050.

Can we engineer our way out of the climate crisis?

On a wind-swept Icelandic plateau, an international team of engineers and executives is powering up an innovative machine designed to alter the very composition of Earth's atmosphere.

If all goes as planned, the enormous vacuum will soon be sucking up vast quantities of air, stripping out carbon dioxide and then locking away those greenhouse gases deep underground in ancient stone — greenhouse gases that would otherwise continue heating up the globe.

Just a few years ago, technologies such as these, which attempt to reengineer the natural environment, were on the scientific fringe. They were too expensive, too impractical, too sci-fi.

But with the dangers from climate change worsening, and the world failing to meet its goals of slashing greenhouse gas emissions, they are moving to the mainstream among scientists and investors, despite questions about their effectiveness and safety.

Researchers are studying ways to block some of the sun's radiation. They are testing whether adding iron to the ocean could carry carbon dioxide to the sea floor.



DAVID GELLES

The author is a reporter on the New York Times climate team.

IF ALL GOES AS PLANNED, THE ENORMOUS VACUUM WILL SOON BE SUCKING UP VAST QUANTITIES OF AIR, STRIPPING OUT CARBON DIOXIDE AND THEN LOCKING AWAY THOSE GREENHOUSE GASES DEEP UNDERGROUND IN ANCIENT STONE – GREENHOUSE GASES THAT WOULD OTHERWISE CONTINUE HEATING UP THE GLOBE



An employee of Icelandic startup Carbfix, enters the dome with injection well at its facility in Olfus, Iceland. – Reuters

progress.

As the risks became clearer, political and corporate leaders pledged to keep global average temperatures to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius higher than before the Industrial Revolution. But for several months last year, the world briefly passed that threshold.

Global temperatures are expected to rise as much as 4 degrees Celsius by century's end. That has given new weight to what some people call geoengineering, although its proponents prefer the term “climate interventions.”

The hope is that taking steps such as these might buy some time at a moment when energy consumption is on the rise, and the world isn't quitting fossil fuels fast enough.

Many of the projects are controversial. A plant similar to the one in Iceland is being built in Texas by Occidental Petroleum. Occidental intends to use some of the carbon dioxide it captures to extract more oil, the burning of which is a main cause of the climate crisis.

Some critics say other types of interventions could create new problems by scrambling weather patterns or amplifying human suffering through unintended consequences.

In effect, they are asking: Should humans be experimenting with the environment in this way?

Do we know enough to understand the risks? “We need more information so we can make these decisions in the future,” said Alan Robock, a professor of atmospheric science at Rutgers University.

“Which is riskier: to do it, or not to do it?” Others argue that fanciful or costly technologies will waste resources and time, or lull people with the false idea it will be possible to slow global warming without phasing out fossil fuels.

There is the risk of rogue actors barreling ahead with their own efforts to change the climate.

Already, Mexico has banned what's known as solar radiation modification after a startup from California released sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere without permission.

Because these technologies are so new, there is relatively little regulation governing them. “There are these much bigger questions around who decides how is this is all coordinated over time,” said Marion Hourdequin, a professor of environmental philosophy at Colorado College.

Edda Aradottir trudged through fresh snow to inspect

the direct air capture plant in Iceland.

Aradottir is CEO of Carbfix, an Icelandic company working with the Swiss startup that built the plant, Climeworks. Known as Mammoth, the project is powered by clean geothermal energy and capable of capturing up to 36,000 metric tonnes of carbon dioxide per year and pumping it down into the bedrock.

That is just one one-millionth of annual global emissions. But unlike trees, Climeworks promises to store that carbon dioxide forever.

When Mammoth is turned on in the coming weeks, it will be the largest such facility in the world, even though the amount of carbon it can absorb is still just a drop in the bucket.

The Occidental plant, being built near Odessa, Texas, will be over 10 times more powerful than Mammoth, powered by solar energy, and have the potential to capture and sequester 500,000 metric tonnes of carbon dioxide per year.

It uses a different process to extract carbon dioxide from the air, although the goal is the same: Most of it will be locked away deep underground.

Even if more companies do decide to start offsetting their

emissions, there are cheaper ways to do so, including by preserving forests and paying for renewable energy.

For example, it costs between \$500 and \$1,000 to capture a metric tonne of carbon dioxide with direct air capture, compared with \$10 to \$30 per tonne for most carbon credits today.

The business world is bullish. Boston Consulting Group expects more companies to begin buying credits to pay for carbon dioxide removal.

In the United States and Europe, governments have started subsidising construction. By 2040, BCG expects the market for carbon dioxide removal technologies could grow from less than \$10 billion today to as much as \$135 billion.

The direct air capture market has vociferous detractors in academia, activist circles and beyond.

Some say it is little more than a ploy by oil and gas companies to prolong the very industries that are responsible for creating global warming.

They point to the extensive evidence that fossil fuel interests for years worked to play down public awareness of climate change, and the fact that some of the captured carbon will be used for additional oil production.

As people begin to deliberately tinker with the climate in new ways, there are questions. If the current extreme weather and temperature rise came about inadvertently, what might happen when we begin actively trying to control the planet's atmosphere?

“It's true that we have been altering the climate through greenhouse gas emissions for centuries now,” said Hourdequin. “But trying to intentionally manage the climate through geoengineering would be a distinctive endeavour, quite different than the kind of haphazard interference that we've engaged in thus far.”

— The New York Times

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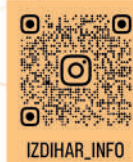
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Abu Huraira, may Allah be pleased with him, reported that the Prophet, may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him, said:

"There is no servant who conceals the faults of another servant in this worldly life, except that Allah will conceal his faults on the Day of Resurrection".



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Is it obligatory to wake up for Suhoor?

It is from Sunnah and it is a blessing. If a person missed it, it will not affect his fasting.

QURAN

VERSE OF THE DAY

So leave them to blunder and play, until they meet their Day which they are promised. The Day when they will emerge from the tombs in a rush, as though they were hurrying towards a target.

(Al Ma'arij)



Ramadhan

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SUHOOR IS A SUNNAH

BY LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

There is a change in life style during the holy month of Ramadhan. From working hours to meal times this shift is very noticeable. There are two meals which are of importance in Ramadhan and they are Suhoor and Iftar.

Why is Suhoor important? Suhoor, the pre-dawn meal consumed by Muslims before commencing their daily fast during the holy month of Ramadhan, holds significant importance as a Sunnah, or tradition, established by Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him). Muslims faithfully adhere to this practice for several compelling reasons.

Firstly, it aligns with the exemplary conduct of the Prophet, emphasising its spiritual significance and blessings. Secondly, Suhoor provides essential nourishment and hydration, enabling individuals to sustain their energy levels throughout the day of fasting. Beyond its physical benefits, Suhoor fosters a sense of spiritual connection, offering a moment for reflection, prayer, and seeking forgiveness before embarking on the fast. Additionally, the communal aspect of Suhoor promotes family and community bonding, as loved ones gather before dawn to share in the meal together. Furthermore, consuming Suhoor aids in preventing overeating during Iftar, the meal to break the fast at sunset, thereby contributing to overall well-being during Ramadhan. In essence, the practice of Suhoor encapsulates a holistic approach to fasting, encompassing physical, spiritual, and communal dimensions, and remains a cherished tradition observed with reverence by Muslims worldwide. Sumaira Fatima, Dietitian at a private

hospital, said that Suhoor is of prime importance, "Especially among adolescents and the elderly people who are fasting should give attention to Suhoor." So what should Suhoor consist of? "Suhoor comprises of whole grain cereals and dairy products especially cheese, milk and laban as well as eggs," the dietitian explained. She said it also depends on people's convenience, but what is extremely important is water. "At least the individuals should consume two to three cups of water," she noted. There are times when someone over sleeps and may not have the time to go through elaborate preparation. "Suppose a person cannot have a proper meal, at least they need to have dates with milk," she advised. The global trends on Suhoor Around the world, Muslims prepare for Suhoor with various culinary traditions reflecting their cultural diversity. In Egypt, for instance, Ful Medames, a dish made from fava beans, is a staple, often accompanied by bread, cheese and

dates. In Türkiye, Suhoor might include dishes like Menemen, a savoury egg and tomato scramble, served with olives, cheese, and bread. Pakistanis commonly prepare a hearty meal with parathas (flaky flatbread) served alongside spicy curries or yogurt. In Indonesia, a popular choice is bubur ayam, a savoury rice porridge topped with chicken, herbs, and fried shallots. Additionally, Malaysian Muslims may opt for nasi lemak, coconut rice served with anchovies, peanuts, and spicy sambal. In the Middle East, Suhoor might feature traditional dishes like fowl (fava bean stew) in Lebanon or khameer (Arabic bread) with labneh (strained yogurt) in the Gulf countries. These preparations vary, but they all aim to provide sustenance for the day ahead while fostering a sense of community and spirituality during the holy month of Ramadhan. It is a Sunnah to have Suhoor. So as it is a blessing we should make sure to have it before 30 minutes to one hour before the Fajr prayers.

ENTERTAINMENT

Back to Life: model Kloss bringing back beloved US magazine

THE LEGENDARY AMERICAN magazine *Life*, a 20th-century mainstay famous for its photography, will be revived by fashion model and entrepreneur Karlie Kloss, the company of which she is CEO announced on Thursday. Bedford Media announced in a state-



ment that the return of *Life* magazine in print and digital distribution, as part of an agreement with (publisher) Dotdash Meredith, will lead to the relaunch of *Life* as a regular publication. The financial details of the deal were not immediately disclosed, nor was a

date for the relaunch. In a world of dizzying social and legacy media possibilities, Kloss, one of the top models in the early 2000s, said *Life* could help bring people together, according to the statement. "Josh and I are honoured to continue



@LIFE's legacy?," she said on Instagram. She was referring to her husband, investor Joshua Kushner, the new owner of the magazine. Kushner is brother of former president Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner. Created in 1883, and then bought and overhauled in 1936, *Life* has long been a flagship of photojournalism, publishing images captured by huge talents like Robert Capa, Alfred Eisenstaedt and Margaret Bourke-White. From movie stars to wars, *Life* chronicled the times for decades. But after years of decline, it became a monthly, before dying out then reborn and finally surviving online with its archives in the 2000s. Kloss recently went shopping for i-D magazine, a British fashion bimonthly. For an old-school feel, the publisher will also continue to publish special editions stamped with the red and white *Life* logo. —AFP

HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF MUSLIM FAITH

632 - 634

Abu Bakr becomes the first caliph (successor to Prophet Muhammad) of the Rashidun Caliphate

Following Prophet Muhammad's death in 632, his companion Abu Bakr became the first caliph, initiating the Rashidun Caliphate. Abu Bakr's rule focused on consolidating Muslim authority in Arabia and expanding Islam. His leadership fostered unity among early Muslims and preserved Islamic teachings.

DOS & DONTs: ETIQUETTE GUIDE DURING THE HOLY MONTH

ENGAGE WITH COMMUNITY.

Community engagement in Ramadhan offers vital spiritual support, unity, and shared responsibility. It nurtures belonging, fosters learning, and strengthens relationships. Through cultural exchange and collective charity, blessings multiply, promoting peace.

RAMADHAN AROUND THE WORLD MOROCCO



ISLAM IN MOROCCO traces its roots back to the 7th century when Arab conquerors brought the religion to the region. Over the centuries, Islam became deeply ingrained in Moroccan culture, influencing art, architecture, and daily life. The Idrisid dynasty (788-974) played a significant role in spreading Islam, followed by the Almoravid and Almohad dynasties.

As of recent estimates, Morocco's population is approximately 37 million, with the majority being Muslim.

During Ramadhan, Moroccans observe various traditions, including fasting from dawn until sunset, increased prayer and reflection, and acts of charity. The fast is typically broken with a meal called iftar, which often includes dates, milk, harira (a traditional soup), chebakia (a sweet pastry), and other savory dishes like bastilla (a meat pie) or msemen (pan-fried flatbread).

These culinary traditions not only satisfy hunger but also serve as a time for families and communities to come together and celebrate the spiritual significance of Ramadhan.

RAMADHAN TRIVIA HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW THE HOLY MONTH

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COLOUR GREEN DURING RAMADHAN?



MAXIMISE THE BENEFITS OF FASTING TO YOUR BODY

BY RUQAYA AL KINDI

You may wonder why, when you get a cold or flu, you automatically lose your appetite and desire to eat. This reaction helps to starve the body's cells and thus stimulate the body to get rid of the genetic material of viruses, which is often present inside living cells in the human body, in a process called "autophagy" of the cell.

When severely deprived of food (that is when the cell is hungry), as Dr Zaaïma al Jabri, Assistant Professor of Microbiology and Immunology at SQU, says, the cell secretes enzymes that break down the cell's components and recycle them to be used again for other and more important processes.

This is exactly what happens during fasting in Ramadhan (autophagy), "As cells in the body are renewed, this renewal helps our bodies self-heal from many chronic diseases and infections if we fast and break our fast in the correct way that achieves 'metabolic balance,'" she confirmed.

The best and quickest way to stimulate "autophagy", therefore, is fasting in the correct way that achieves "metabolic balance". She explained, "The human's body is programmed throughout the year with a specific pattern of fasting and breaking the fast (abstaining from food and eating it between night and day), and therefore excessive or incorrect fasting may constitute a shock to our bodies."

Therefore, as she added, "We must fast and break our fast in moderation to compensate for the lack of nutrients in the body and at the same time stimulate metabolic pathways that also stimulate burning the fat as a source of energy to build body tissues



Sinstead of relying on burning sugar only. In this way, the balance between the processes of construction and cleansing (catabolism) in the body's cells is achieved, and this is known as "metabolic balance."

Achieving "metabolic balance" makes our bodies stronger, healthier, and more flexible because the body can balance the use of fat as an energy source in addition to burning sugar.

"Our bodies nowadays are accustomed to burning sugar as the main source of energy, and the longer we depend on sugar as an energy source, the fluctuation rate in sugar levels increases and insulin in the blood increases," she clarified.

As a result of the constant presence of sugar in food, as she added, "autophagy" will stop occurring naturally, so the Keto diet (based on reducing sugars and carbohydrates) has emerged as a diet that helps restore metabolic flexibility in the body and is used to treat some diseases such as epilepsy in children. This diet has also been proven to be very useful for dealing with some medical conditions, such as type 2 diabetes mellitus to maintain balanced levels of blood sugar."

She confirmed that the Keto diet helps stimulate the burning of fat as a source of energy, in addition to benefiting from the energy resulting from burning sugar available in a balanced manner in the blood. The high-sugar diets that most people follow does not exist and the body depends on burning sugar as a source of energy.

You can maximise the benefits of the fasting in Ramadhan by accelerating the autophagy. "Break your fast with a very light meal preferably low in carbohydrates, with protein and some amount of healthy fat. Try to avoid easily absorbed carbohydrates such as pastries and sweets," she advised.

As she noted, "Consuming one cup of green tea between meals (Iftar and Suhoor) is good because it contains generous amounts of antioxidants in addition to some substances which have been shown to increase the rate of fat burning."

High-intensity interval training (HIIT) or bodyweight exercises are the best type of exercise to burn fat and regulate the metabolic rate. "During HIITs workout, the deep muscle fibers are activated which makes it much faster in burning fat compared to aerobic workouts. You can start with light-weight lifting and gradually increase the weights. If weights are not available, you can still do similar workouts depending on your body weight," she shared.

High-quality apple cider vinegar has been shown to increase the body's ability to burn fat. "You can start using that by adding it to the salad seasoning. Also, you can add one tablespoon of vinegar to one glass of water and drink it 15 minutes before the meal twice daily. It must be drunk using a straw to prevent tooth erosion," she said.

As she mentioned, intermittent exposure to cold and heat, such as showering with cold water for two minutes followed by warm water stimulates what is known as a process of "hormesis" which has also been shown to stimulate the autophagy in the cells.



‘A UNIQUE PLACE’: FOREIGNERS VISIT POST-WAR AFGHANISTAN

HIS SOLDIER SON toured Afghanistan with insurgents in his crosshairs, but American traveller Oscar Wells has a different objective — sight-seeing promoted by the Taliban's fledgling tourism sector.

"It is a unique place, it touches my heart," the 65-year-old Indiana farmer said, praising "its magnificent mountains" with "people living in the old way".

Marvelling at the 15th century Blue Mosque in northern Mazar-i-Sharif, Wells is among a small but rising number of travellers coming to Afghanistan

57-year-old lawyer, of a country that Western governments warn against visiting.

Security concerns worried Nayuree Chainton, the 45-year-old Thai owner of a travel agency in Bangkok, who made a trip for six days recently with a group to test the waters.

"I feel safe despite the checkpoints in the cities," she said, during a visit to a shrine in the capital Kabul.

SHARING A GOOD IMAGE
The number of foreign tourists visit-

tion, to try to help them a little" said Goudant, on his second trip, which included skiing in central Bamiyan province.

He said part of his visits is making donations to local groups, something he describes as "small-scale humanitarian work" in a country that has seen foreign aid drastically shrink since the Taliban takeover.

For Wells, there is a "sense of guilt for the departure" of US troops.

"I really felt we had a horrible exit, it created such a vacuum and disaster,"

Kandahar via Bamiyan and Herat in the west, it was a "bittersweet experience".

"I have been able to meet people I never thought I would meet, who told me about their life," she said, adding that she didn't face any issues as a woman on her own.

She experienced "disbelief that people have to live like this", she added. "The poverty, there are no jobs, women not being able to go to school, no future for them".

With little by way of official informa-



since the war's end.

Decades of conflict made tourism extremely rare, and while most violence has now abated, visitors are confronted with extreme poverty, dilapidated cultural sites and scant hospital-ity infrastructure.

They holiday under the austere control of Taliban authorities, without consular support after most embassies were evacuated following the fall of the Western-backed government in 2021.

They must register with officials on arrival in each province, comply with a strict dress code and submit to searches at checkpoints by men armed with Kalashnikovs.

Islamic State attacks also still pose a potential threat in the country.

"The first thing your loved ones say is: 'You're crazy to go there!'" said French tourist Didier Goudant, a

ing Afghanistan rose 120 per cent year-on-year in 2023, reaching nearly 5,200, according to official figures.

The Taliban government has yet to be officially recognised by any country — in part because of its heavy restrictions on women — but it has welcomed foreign tourism.

"Afghanistan's enemies don't present the country in a good light," said information and culture minister Khairullah Khairkhwa.

"But if these people come and see what it's really like... they will definitely share a good image of it," he said.

But Wells and Goudant — on a trip with firm Untamed Borders, which also offers tours of Syria and Somalia — describe their visit as a way to connect with Afghanistan's people.

Tourists "like us are curious and want to be in contact with the popula-

he said. "It's good to help these people and keep relations."

BITTERSWEET

Untamed Borders brought around 100 tourists to Afghanistan last year, with a nine-day package starting in neighbouring Pakistan costing \$2,850.

The end of the fighting means tourists "can do more things", said founder James Willcox.

"But on the other hand it is disruptive," he added, noting a woman tour guide with the company fled to Italy after the Taliban return.

While the Taliban government has shut girls and women out of education, and much of public life, foreign women are granted greater freedoms.

For solo traveller Stefanie Meier, a 53-year-old American, who spent a month travelling from Kabul to

tion, tourists band together on social media and messaging apps to trade tips.

While two airlines serve Afghanistan's major cities, backpackers prefer the bus, and don't shy away from the 20-hour journey from Kabul to Herat.

An active WhatsApp group named Afghanistan Travel Experience brings together over 600 people from places as far flung as Mexico, India and Italy who are already in the country or on their way out.

They pepper the group with questions, such as one from user Alberto asking if it is "haram" (not allowed) to travel with a dog, or if it's a problem to have visible tattoos.

Another, Soo, asked: "Is there a co-working space in Mazar"? — **AFP**

Song lyrics are getting simpler, more repetitive: study



YOU'RE NOT JUST getting older. Song lyrics really are becoming simpler and more repetitive, according to a study published on Thursday.

Lyrics have also become angrier and more self-obsessed over the last 40 years, the study found, reinforcing the opinions of cranky ageing music fans everywhere.

A team of European researchers analysed the words in more than 12,000 English-language songs across the genres of rap, country, pop, R&B and rock from 1980 to 2020.

Before detailing how lyrics have become more basic, the study pointed out that US singer-songwriting legend Bob Dylan — who rose to fame in the 1960s — has won a Nobel Prize in literature.

Senior study author Eva Zangerle, an expert on recommendation systems at Austria's University of Innsbruck, declined to single out an individual newer artist for having simple lyrics.

But she emphasised that lyrics can be a "mirror of society" which reflect how a culture's values, emotions and preoccupations change over time.

"What we have also been witnessing in the last 40 years is a drastic change in the music landscape — from how music is sold to how music is produced," Zangerle said.

Over the 40 years studied, there was repeated upheaval in how people listened to music. The vinyl records and cassette tapes of the 1980s gave way to the CDs of the 90s, then the arrival of the internet led to the algorithm-driven streaming platforms of today.



For the study in the journal *Scientific Reports*, the researchers looked at the emotions expressed in lyrics, how many different and complicated words were used, and how often they were repeated.

"Across all genres, lyrics had a tendency to become more simple and more repetitive," Zangerle summarised.

The results also confirmed previous research which had shown a decrease in positive, joyful lyrics over time and a rise in those that express anger, disgust or sadness.

Lyrics have also become much more self-obsessed, with words such as "me" or "mine" becoming much more popular.

EASIER TO MEMORISE

The number of repeated lines rose most in rap over the decades, Zangerle said — adding that it obviously had the most lines to begin with. "Rap music has become more angry than the other genres," she added.

The researchers also investigated which songs the fans of different genres looked up on the lyric website Genius.

Unlike other genres, rock fans most often looked up lyrics from older songs, rather than new ones.

Rock has tumbled down the charts in recent decades, and this could suggest fans are increasingly looking back to the genre's heyday, rather than its present.

Another way that music has changed is that "the first 10-15 seconds are highly decisive for whether we skip the song or not," Zangerle said.

Previous research has also suggested that people tend to listen to music more in the background these days, she added.

Put simply, songs with more choruses that repeat basic lyrics appear to be more popular.

"Lyrics should stick easier nowadays, simply because they are easier to memorise," Zangerle said.

"This is also something that I experience when I listen to the radio." — **AFP**