

MUSCAT

DETAILS OF SULTAN QABOOS AWARD

The Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science will hold a press conference on Sunday to announce the details of the 11th edition of the Sultan Qaboos Award for Culture, Arts and Literature. This time the Sultan Qaboos Award for Culture, Arts and Literature is dedicated to Omanis only. The award is divided into three main categories namely culture, arts and literature each of which is divided into subcategories. **SEE P2**

DUTCH HOSTAGE DRAMA OVER

A hostage drama in the Netherlands that lasted several hours on Saturday ended without bloodshed as all four hostages were freed and police took the suspect into custody. Authorities have said there was no reason to suspect a “terrorist motive” for the ordeal, which took place at a night spot popular with young people in the town of Ede. Police said they received reports of a potential hostage situation at 5:15 am at the Cafe Petticoat, with local media saying a “confused” man burst in as staff were clearing up after a party. Police are also investigating a black backpack he was carrying with him, amid reports that the hostage-taker had threatened to use explosives. **DETAILS ON P7**

S&P revises Oman’s outlook to positive

PUBLIC DEBT RATE TO DECLINE TO 31% OF GDP IN 2027

MUSCAT: International Credit Rating agency Standard & Poor’s (S&P) issued its first credit rating report for the Sultanate of Oman for 2024, in which it modified the future outlook from stable to positive, while fixing the credit rating level at “BB+”. According to the agency, this is due to the continuous improvement in the state’s public financial performance indicators and the achievement of financial surpluses in addition to government efforts to reduce net public debt.

The agency stated in its report that Oman is returning to achieving financial surpluses after seven years of achieving double deficits. This is due to government measures taken to control public spending and control its levels, and taking other measures to increase non-oil revenues, in addition to the positive results from the restructuring of government companies.

The agency said that the average financial surplus in the state’s general budget is expected to reach about 2.6 per cent of the



S&P expects the real GDP to grow from 1.6 per cent in 2023.

gross domestic product for 2023, and about 1.2 per cent during the period extending from 2024 to 2027. This is in addition to achieving a financial surplus in

the external (current) account of about 2 per cent in 2023, and an average of 1.2 per cent during the years 2024-2027.

The agency has set its

expectations that the average price of Brent crude will reach about \$85 per barrel in 2024 and \$80 per barrel during the period 2025-2027.

The agency also expects the public debt rate to decline from 36 per cent in 2023 to reach about 31 per cent of GDP in 2027. S&P expects the real GDP to grow from 1.6 per cent in 2023 to 2 per cent on an annual basis during the period 2024-2027, noting that the non-oil sector will witness growth of about 2 per cent.

S&P also said the inflation rate in 2023 is about 0.9 per cent, and will remain moderate at an average of 1.5 per cent on an annual basis during the period 2024-2027, and this is due to the government measures taken to control inflation and protect society from its effects.

The agency said that the government’s continued implementation of its measures aimed at strengthening the financial position and improving its indicators, in addition to the economic measures followed that contribute to enhancing economic growth, and the continued reduction of the state’s public debt, will lead to an improvement in the credit rating. — **ONA**

AID SHIP BOUND FOR GAZA LEAVES CYPRUS PORT

LARNACA, CYPRUS: A second vessel carrying aid to war-torn Gaza set sail from Cyprus on Saturday, an AFP correspondent reported, more than two weeks after the last shipment arrived by sea.

Almost 400 tonnes of aid is being carried to Gaza on a flotilla organised by two charities -- the US-based World Central Kitchen and the Spanish Open Arms.

The barge and two salvage vessels left the port of Larnaca following diplomacy by Cyprus to try to open a maritime corridor to the territory, under siege by Israeli forces since last October.

“There is not enough aid getting through to Gaza and we need to open as many ways as possible,” Juan Camilo of World Central Kitchen said in a video shot from



A Palestinian girl carries water at a makeshift camp for displaced people in Rafah on Saturday. — **AFP**

the flotilla and posted to X.

With insufficient aid trucks entering Gaza by road more than five months into the war, famine warnings have multiplied, prompting efforts to get relief into the territory by air or sea.

But UN agencies have said repeatedly that overland deliveries are the only way of supplying aid in the volume needed. World Central Kitchen said the shipment from Cyprus contains items like rice, pasta, flour, legumes, canned vegetables and proteins.

The United Arab Emirates provided a special cargo of dates, which are traditionally eaten to break the daily fast during the holy month of Ramadhan, the charity said. **SEE ALSO P6**

WATERFRONT FACILITIES IN AL MUSANNAH



A tender has been awarded for developing the waterfront in Al Aweed area in the Wilayat of Al Musannah, the Al Batinah South Governorate. The 2-km waterfront will have multiple facilities and services to draw local and international tourists. These include upscale restaurants, commercial stores, children’s playgrounds, close and open-air sports facilities, beach games, recreation zones, biking and walking tracks, among others.

Oman Air’s revenues rise 30% as focus shifts to righsizing

VINOD NAIR
[@vinot_nair](#)

Oman Air, the national airline, announced a fixed fare for citizens on flights between Muscat and Salalah even as its ongoing transformation plan resulted in a 36-per cent reduction in net losses by the end of 2023 and a 30-per cent increase in revenue compared to that in 2022.

The company also did not obtain any additional bank loans or government guarantees during the year, which is unprecedented in the company’s history.

To promote domestic tourism, the airline will offer fixed national fares between Muscat and Salalah. A return economy class ticket will be priced at RO 64 throughout the year, while a one-way ticket will be RO 35.

However, during the khareef season, the return economy class ticket will be priced at RO 54.

Speaking to the media during the third press conference to update on the airline’s restructuring programme, Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, and Chairman of the Board of Directors of Oman Air, said that in terms of operations, the airline’s load factors improved by 9 per

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ENG SAID BIN HAMOUD AL MAAWALI
Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology

rightsizing and repositioning the company. So by 2027, it will be a healthy company and it is ready for growth. So questions about growth should be asked by 2027.”

“We have started coordinating with SalamAir from last year, and signed an MoU to increase the number of passengers through Muscat International Airport, and hopefully that will serve both the companies in future. We need to end up with a relationship where there is a proper codeshare between us.”

CUTTING LOSSES

The airline’s 2023 results were the outcome of the implementation of the transformation programme’s second phase, which was initiated in March 2023, which included strategic changes to flight destinations for the 2023 winter season, the closure of unnecessary facilities like the arrivals lounge at Muscat International Airport, and the reduction and cancellation of several non-essential service contracts.

The company has also curbed unnecessary expenses such as sponsorships, the most prominent being its agreement with Chelsea Football Club, which was terminated amicably and without financial consequences.

TURN TO P2



Sultan Qaboos
Award for
Culture, Arts and
Literature to be
announced today

MUSCAT: The Sultan Qaboos Higher Centre for Culture and Science will hold a press conference today (Sunday) to announce the details of the 11th edition of the Sultan Qaboos Award for Culture, Arts and Literature.

This year the Sultan Qaboos Award for Culture, Arts and Literature is dedicated to Omanis only.

The award is divided into 3 main categories namely culture, arts and literature each of which is divided into subcategories. The culture category deals with various cultural works and writings in the fields of human and social knowledge in general and includes: language, history, heritage, philosophy, translation, thought studies, economy, sociology, media and mass communication.

The category of arts deals with artistic production in all its genres: music, fine art, sculpture, photography, acting, directing and theatrical performance.

The literature category is concerned with various literary styles such as poetry, novels, short stories, literary criticism, theatrical writing and essay writing. – **ONA**

Municipal system to lay down
roadmap for smart cities

MUSCAT: Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat, said that the unified municipal system is considered as one of the national strategic projects that seek to lay down a roadmap for the governorates to set up smart cities and to expedite the execution of Oman Vision 2040 through the utilisation of modern technologies and commitment to apply the highest international standards in digital transformation.

By adopting those projects, the municipalities will be able to keep pace with the rapid changes in municipal work as well as present a comprehensive and integrated experience for individuals and establishments receiving services which will reflect positively when it comes to improving performance and accelerating the development process in various sectors.

Muscat Municipality rolled out a tender to implement the unified municipal system which aims at enhancing electronic readiness and harnessing information technologies and modern applications to improve municipal work in line with the government's efforts to achieve a comprehensive digital transformation in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040.

The unified municipal system aims to help municipalities in all governorates of the Sultanate

The system will provide 92 smart services in the municipal sector with many innovative digital applications to help municipalities enhance digital readiness and unify and simplify procedures to provide a smooth and sustainable experience for beneficiaries

AHMED BIN
MOHAMMED
AL HUMAIDI

Muscat Municipality Chairman

of Oman to enhance their digital readiness and provide them with modern applications such as artificial intelligence and innovative technologies to enable services geographically and enhance the services they provide. It also aims at unifying and streamlining procedures to provide an integrated, comprehensive and sustainable experience for service receivers. The project reflects the efforts

made by municipalities to realise the principles of digitisation and good management.

Ahmed bin Mohammed al Humaidi, Chairman of Muscat Municipality, said that the unified municipal system project aims to build a smart and unified system that focuses on enhancing the user experience. The system will provide 92 smart services with many innovative digital applications to help municipalities enhance digital readiness and unify and simplify procedures to provide a smooth and sustainable experience.

During the first phase of the project, the working team reviewed more than 200 documents, unifying more than 300 municipal services. Over 60 meetings were held between various stakeholders with the aim of unifying efforts to achieve common goals.

The initial phase focuses on studying the current situation at the municipalities in terms of technology infrastructure, existing programmes, geographic information systems, services provided by municipalities across Oman, and the future projects they are working on with the aim of assessing the current situation, identifying gaps, and preparing a future vision for municipal services. A specialised consultancy firm was appointed to oversee the project.



Oman Air sees 30%
increase in revenue

FROM P1

The airline also renegotiated many code-share agreements and terminated several sales agreements with companies that did not provide a direct benefit.

Agreements have also been terminated with many sales agents, with expenses being optimised on the passenger experience to ensure the airline reflects the spirit of Omani hospitality while controlling costs. Additionally, a large number of catering expenses were reduced during September 2023, contributing to achieving monthly savings. Furthermore, an extensive study was conducted regarding the process of joining the Oneworld Alliance.

PLANS FOR 2024

Oman Air will implement a series of changes to continue improving its financial and operational performance, starting with the restructuring of its route network and flight schedule as of April. During the transformation phase, the airline has preserved most of the current route network, with

only four destinations cancelled till date. However, the number of flights will be reduced, and the timing of flights will be optimised to suit the local market and inbound tourists.

Overall, the restructuring process will reduce the number of seats offered by Oman Air by about a third of its current levels. The Transformation Office 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.

During the coming months, Oman Air will seek to conclude new partnership agreements with international airlines.

These partnerships will be based on quantitative analysis with the establishment of specific pricing mechanisms and controls to ensure the airline benefits fairly from them. A comprehensive review will be conducted to determine the ongoing cost rationalisation aspects of the company.

Mubashir, Oman's leading digital out-of-home network, secures
funding from ITHCA Group to power growth into new markets



MUSCAT: ITHCA group has announced an investment in Mubashir, a leading digital out-of-home (DOOH) advertising network in Oman.

The investment will fuel Mubashir's expansion and technological plans as well as its mission to provide its clients with the most effective and comprehensive solutions both in the country and regionally.

Mubashir's platform reaches millions of people across Oman through its network of strategically located digital screens. The company offers a

ITHCA Group and Mubashir recognise the unique potential of Advertising Technology (AdTech) in contributing to expand technology investment

variety of advertising formats that leverages smart data and analytics to deliver targeted campaigns that generate measurable results for advertisers.

Beyond advertising, the network focuses on reaching



different consumer segments with infotainment communication that engages customers.

"Advertising Technology is changing rapidly, innovative AdTech companies in this space are leveraging data analytics, automation and AI to meet consumers where they are in the physical world, offering real-time targeting capabilities to advertisers," says Ameer al Alawi, Group Director Investments at ITHCA Group.

"We are thrilled about the investment in Mubashir and the technology platform they

have built to date. We lend them our support in their innovative journey to be a global player in this space."

"We are thrilled to partner with ITHCA, a renowned investor with a deep understanding of the region's growth potential," said Raif al Harthy, Chief Growth Officer of Mubashir.

"This investment is a strong validation of our vision and will enable us to accelerate our expansion, invest in new technologies and further enhance our offerings to clients."



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The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, with Omani Theatre Society, marked World Theatre Day.

Omani Theatre Society marks World Theatre Day

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, in conjunction with the Omani Theatre Society, marked World Theatre Day at the College of Banking and Financial Studies in Muscat Governorate.

The event, under the sponsorship of Sayyid Said bin Sultan al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Culture, gathered various officials from the theatrical realm, including artists, playwrights, actors, writers, and critics.

The ceremony commenced with an address on the significance of World Theatre

Day, delivered by a group of playwrights, among them Zaha Qadir, Khamis al Rawahi, Wafaa al Rashidiyah, and Zaher al Salami.

They underscored the role of theatre in conveying messages and addressing humanity's issues, such as dialogue, freedom, peace, and coexistence.

An integral part of the celebration was the official announcement of a theatrical writing competition. Dr Imad al Shanfari, President of the Omani Theatre Society, elucidated the competition's criteria and adjudication process. — ONA

Event introduces non-Muslims to Islam and Omani values in Nizwa

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, MARCH 30

The second edition of 'Getting to Know' event in Nizwa, was held to introduce the tolerant Omani and Islamic values that demonstrate the comprehensiveness of Islam and the breadth of its horizons on Friday in the Al Shahba Hall at the Intercity Hotel in Nizwa.

The event was organised by the Department of Awqaf and Religious Affairs in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, represented by the Department of Introducing Islam and Cultural Exchange, and in cooperation with local community institutions.

It was held under the auspices of Dr Asaad bin Hamoud al Muqaimi, Head of General Mufti's Office, Sultanate of Oman.

The event was conducted in English, targeting various communities residing in the Sultanate of Oman as well as tourists and foreign visitors of different non-Muslim nationalities and religions.

It included several programmes, including an awareness lecture delivered by Khalfan bin Said bin Khamis



al Mazrouei, a volunteer from the Centre for Introducing Islam, titled 'Omani Values,' where he emphasised that Islam encourages noble ethics, particularly generosity, which has a great impact on individuals and society. The lecture discussed various aspects of generosity, such as drawing closer to Allah and winning His paradise, purifying the soul from negative feelings like selfishness and possessiveness, spreading love and compassion among community members, and assisting those in need.

Additionally, the event featured cultural competitions

and an exhibition introducing Islam. The aim of the event is to introduce non-Muslims to Omani culture and clarify the message of Islam and its impact on souls, fostering unity, affection, and love among Muslim community members and involving them in the Ramadhan iftar experience.

The administration's interest in such events aims to highlight Omani and Islamic values to the various communities residing in the Sultanate of Oman, as they are fundamental factors for cultural advancement and key elements of the developmental vision sought through Oman Vision 2040. Embracing Islamic

values and noble morals, as encouraged by Islam, is a fundamental cornerstone in refining human behaviour, organising relationships on righteous foundations, and promoting love, affection, cohesion, and solidarity among community members, including individuals, families, the nation, and its leadership.

These values are a fundamental source of peaceful coexistence among nations. After the event, five women embraced Islam with full conviction, influenced by the kind treatment they received from the generous people of Oman.

Entrepreneurs offer insights from leadership talks

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 30

The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority organised the third round of the leadership talk evenings at the Washar Exhibition in Sur.

Mohammed bin Salem al Mukhaini, owner of Mast Rope Factory, Maryam bint Hamad al Rasbiyah, co-founder and CEO of the Modern Technological Creativity Company (Bviser) and Suleiman bin Mohammed al Sulaymani, owner of the Al Bustan Inn, and Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Bawareq Al Ahlia Company participated.

Journalist Rashid al Saadi opened with a talk about the objectives of the leadership talk sessions, which explored the entrepreneurs' journey, their own experiences and impact on the path of their projects, the success stories and failures that their entrepreneurial experience went through, and provide an open dialogue platform for exchanging ideas between officials, young people, and business pioneers.

The leadership talk which



was attended by Halima bint Rashid al Zariyah, Chairwoman, SME Development Authority, included inspiring pioneering experiences in the field of governance applications for meetings of members of boards of directors of companies and institutions. Maryam al Rasbiyah spoke about the importance of supporting Omani electronic applications which can compete regionally and globally. There is now a greater focus on artificial intelligence applications, and she stressed that supporting Omani applications helps them expand and grow.

Mohammed al Mukhaini spoke about experiences of the beginnings and the situation that changed his path to knock on the door of entrepreneurship and



establish his factory, challenges he overcame during the Corona pandemic, and the materials used in manufacturing ropes and the stages of delivering them to suppliers.

Suleiman al Sulaimani reviewed the experience of the Bawareq National Company in restoring the glory of Al Aqar neighbourhood and the possibility of transferring the experience to other governorates. He stressed the readiness of the Bawariq National Company in Nizwa and the youth to transfer the experience of Harat Al Aqar in a way that suits its nature, in addition to the possibility of hosting youth from Al Sharqiyah South Governorate.

Abdullah al Mukhaini, Director, SME Development



Department, Al Sharqiyah South Governorate, said: "These sessions and meetings confirm the participatory approach of the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority and consolidate the approach of communicating and listening to the challenges facing entrepreneurs and sharing inspiring entrepreneurial stories and experiences to pass on to different generations."

The Authority had held out two previous evenings under the title 'Entrepreneurship Talk' during Ramadhan, where the first evening reviewed experiences in the field of specialty coffee, while the second reviewed inspiring entrepreneurial stories from different generations in Al Aqr neighbourhood in Nizwa.

Time to tap inbound, domestic tourists for Eid

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Travel must be high on the plans for some citizens and residents during the upcoming Eid al Fitr holidays, which are just two weeks from now.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism in the Sultanate of Oman has been encouraging domestic tourism through various promotional campaigns, which include using social media networking sites and social media influencers.

As per the feedback assessed by the *Observer*, through its social media platform, it was revealed that most respondents preferred to travel within Oman, while others would be just staying at home and a small per cent considered travelling abroad.

For inbound tourists, travel operators too are in the fray with a range of packages that can be booked in advance or after arrival in the Sultanate of Oman.

It may be noted that three to five-star hotels saw an increase of 18 per cent in the number

of guests (433,856) in the first two months of 2024, compared to 366,969 in 2023, with the occupancy rate going up to 61.5 from 55.3 per cent in 2023.

With a range of hotels, hotel apartments, and resorts, the Sultanate of Oman is also an attractive and viable option for residents of other GCC countries due to its liberal tourist e-visa, visa-on-arrival, or visa-free schemes. Most GCC residents can enter the Sultanate of Oman using Visa Type 29A (Resident Tourist Visa), some categories of travellers may not need any type of visa for a short stay of less than 14 days.

Outbound tourism: Among popular destinations, Oman citizens can travel visa-free to Türkiye this year. In 2022, 130,000 Omanis entered Türkiye for tourism purposes, which is expected to increase with the ease of travel rules this time. Currently, Oman Air, SalamAir, Pegasus Airlines, and Turkish Airlines fly to destinations in Türkiye from the Sultanat of Oman with some fares starting from around RO 50 (one-way) to RO 150 (one-way).



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FROM FASTING TO FEASTING

MAINTAINING BALANCE IN RAMADHAN

KABEER YOUSUF
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FASTING during the holy month is the process of detoxifying our mind, body and soul, and the benefits of refraining from excess food and cleansing ones thoughts will have immense benefits.

On the other hand, feasting, or having excess food over iftar and suhour can bounce back onto our physical as well as mental health. Observing moderation should be the key during the next few days.

Fasting in Ramadhan changes many things and the body adapts to these changes like maintaining the glucose levels for more than 12 hours during fasting, where body utilises the stored fat.

When one overeats after fasting, it triggers high sugar and can cause sudden changes in the body again, as it adapted to the fasting state leading to a sudden surge in sugar levels or cholesterol from fatty food.

Although moderation is the key, people tend to eat whatever comes their way immediately after iftar and keep on eating the same irrespective of the condition of the body even when the organs are breathing afresh.

Bombarding our system with too much food after starving for nearly 14 hours can really put one in danger and doctors and dieticians say what we consume directly affects our health and health is the key to happiness.

Mini Padikkal, Clinical Dietician, NMC, who campaigns better eating habits, advocates minimal intake and to take heavy foods after some time as it is of paramount importance to take care of one's health.

“One advantage of fasting for nearly 14 hours is that it fetches in a multitude of benefits both mentally and physically. The holy month of Ramadhan is a great opportunity for us to focus on striking a perfect balance between our intake of calories, vitamins,

“

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INTAKE AND THE
LIKE

**SYMPTOMS OF
OVEREATING**

NAUSEA VOMITING
ABDOMINAL FULLNESS
HEADACHES
CONSTIPATION
GASTRITIS
BLOOD SUGAR LEVELS
HEADACHES OR VERTIGO

water intake and the like,” the doctor says as she campaigns for the necessity of a well-balanced diet in schools and for corporates.

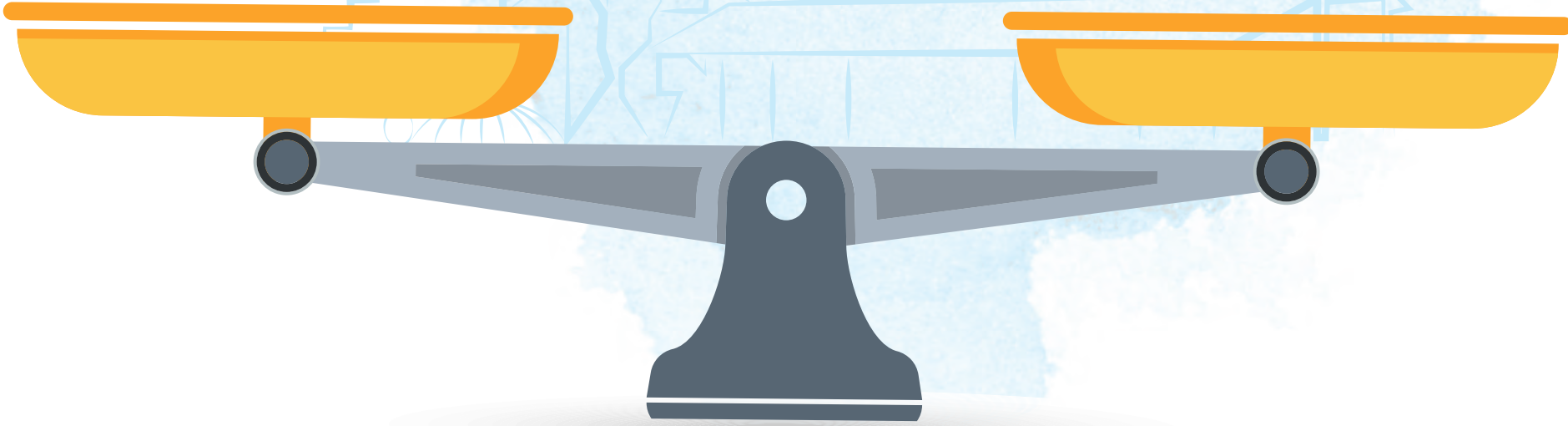
“While we fast, our metabolic function slows down and dietary fat is utilised during this period and our body has built-in regulatory mechanisms that are activated during fasting. Any food overeaten will make the function upside down and will lead to problems in due course,” she said, adding that a diet that comprises less than a normal amount of food but is sufficiently balanced will keep a person healthy and active during fasting.

What dieticians say about overeating has been understated by the reports from hospitals which see a large number of patients visiting doctors with gastrointestinal ailments most commonly abdominal pain immediately after Ramadhan due to overeating.

“The best way to prevent any such illness is to plan the iftar meal in advance and make sure that it is light, coupled with fluids to keep you hydrated and energised.”

Many symptoms after overeating are reported and they include, abdominal symptoms like nausea vomiting, abdominal fullness, headaches, constipation, gastritis, swing on blood sugar levels which will rise suddenly causing problems in diabetic patients. Additionally, chest pains among heart patients or shortness of breath in patients with heart failure due to the sudden change in diet are also reported which may worsen their condition.

Headaches or vertigo due to the sudden increase in food intake is also reported among some while some experience loose motions or pains in the abdomen because of the sudden change and increase in the food intake. Therefore, it is advised to take small portions of food which have high fibre slowly, low sugar like fruits, salads vegetables and gradually increase the quantity of food intake.





BIOMETRIC LAW: A QUALITATIVE LEAP TO ACCELERATE CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION

YUSEF AL HABSI
MUSCAT, MARCH 30

Oman's new Biometric Law marks a significant advancement in the criminal justice system, streamlining the process from crime detection to conviction. This law enhances the collection and analysis of evidence, contributing to the prompt resolution of criminal cases. This law positively affects the speed of evidence gathering and investigation. Moreover, biometric identification aids in the early detection of intellectual disabilities, such as Down Syndrome, contributing to their resolution and thereby enhancing the rights of persons with disabilities. The Biometric Law will introduce new tools and procedures for law enforcement, investigators and judicial authorities to achieve true justice in criminal matters.

AUTHENTICITY IN EVIDENCE
The Royal Oman Police clarified that biometrics are defined as measurable, distinctive characteristics used to identify a person from others. Similarly, genetic fingerprints are identified by the biological traits or genetic patterns of highly variable non-encoding DNA regions resulting from DNA analysis, which are unique and consistent between individuals, except in cases of identical twins.

The significance of the Biometric Law lies in its facilitation of identifying crime perpetrators and victims quickly, serving as reliable evidence in judicial entities. It establishes a crucial reference for information and data related to individuals with criminal records, accelerating their apprehension and presentation to justice. The law aligns with the goals and responsibilities of the Royal Oman Police as stipulated in Article 11 of the Police Law, which includes maintaining public order and security, protecting lives, property and honour, preventing and controlling crimes, and keeping up with scientific advancements in various biometric fields (facial,



The Biometric Law aligns with human rights and promotes fair trial principles, where the presumption of innocence is an international human right under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and relevant international treaties and conventions

iris, fingerprint, and genetic). The Royal Oman Police is responsible for collecting biometric and other fingerprints, with all data and systems being confidential and protected by law. This law also imposes criminal protection for violations of biometric data confidentiality, and its executive regulation will organise the collection of biometric fingerprints, data preservation, sample collection, storage and destruction. Regarding the law's impact on existing legislation, the Royal Oman Police explained that the Biometric Law complements Article 11 of the Police Law issued by Royal Decree No 90/35, which empowers the Royal Oman Police to maintain public order, decency, protect lives, honour, and property, prevent crimes and take necessary investigation and evidence-gathering measures. It also aligns with the Criminal Procedures Law issued by Royal Decree No 99/97 regarding investigation and evidence collection assigned to judicial police officers.

HUMAN RIGHTS
Dr Rashid bin Hamad al Balushi, head of the Oman Human Rights Commission, stated that the Biometric Law aligns with human rights and promotes fair trial principles, where the

presumption of innocence is an international human right under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and relevant international treaties and conventions. Additionally, biometric identification facilitates early detection of intellectual disabilities, such as Down syndrome, contributing to their resolution and enhancing the rights of individuals with disabilities. The law is among the most significant modern topics related to evidence in the criminal field, highlighting the critical role of science in identifying crime perpetrators, making biometric evidence a trusted method for uncovering the truth, thereby gaining confidence from various countries for solving criminal cases, regardless of the crime methods and types of biological samples involved. The law will introduce new tools and procedures for judicial police, investigators, and judicial authorities to achieve true justice in criminal matters, regulating numerous aspects related to personal data and information in conjunction with other related laws, such as the Personal Data Protection Law, the Cybercrime Law and the Criminal Procedures Law. It addresses the challenge of

documenting and maintaining the confidentiality of genetic data, crucial for preserving and securing these data. **SCIENTIFIC RELIABILITY**
Dr Rashid bin Salim al Badi, a lawyer at the Supreme Court, mentioned that the Biometric Law aims to keep pace with significant scientific and technological advancements, employing them for the community's security and service through various biometric techniques, including fingerprints, iris scans, facial recognition and DNA. The issuance of this law is a result of the pioneering and unique 'Yaqeen' project, which integrates all biometric fingerprints into a single technological system. The law is considered one of the most important legislations contributing effectively to preventing various crimes and discovering any that may occur, supported by the scientific and technological reliability of the biometric system. This contributes to identifying missing persons and remains in disaster situations, among other cases requiring biometric database consultation, thus maintaining public order and providing community members with security and peace of mind

amidst investment, economic and tourist openness. The Biometric Law comprises 15 articles divided into four chapters, including definitions, biometric database, biometric samples and data, and penalties. The law mandates the creation of a database for preserving data obtained from biological traces collected from crime scenes, corpses, accused and convicted individuals, missing persons and their relatives, citizens and residents, fingerprints and other data as determined by the Inspector General of Police and Customs. It allows competent authorities to use the database for solving crimes and identifying perpetrators and their crimes. It emphasises the confidentiality of the data and prohibits its use for purposes not specified in the law. These data are considered substantial evidence in judicial entities and the law forbids DNA fingerprinting tests for lineage verification. Additionally, the biometric biological sample reference is to be preserved for no more than 10 years according to established controls and procedures, while genetic fingerprint, fingers, palms, face and eye data are to be indefinitely stored in the biometric database.

THE LAW'S ENHANCEMENT OVER PREVIOUS PROCEDURES
Al Badi noted that the law aims to establish a legislative framework for handling biometric data and samples, aligning with the Criminal Procedures Law issued by Royal Decree No. 97/ 99 concerning preliminary investigations and evidence collection. This law delegates judicial officers to investigate crimes and gather evidence, underscoring the importance of documentation for easy reference to data, samples, and biometric fingerprints when needed to identify crime perpetrators, missing persons, remains, and other situations specified by the law. It also stresses the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of genetic biometric fingerprints to protect individual privacy and prevent unauthorised access to these data, as stipulated by the Personal Data Protection Law in Article '4'. **PENALTIES**
Al Badi highlighted that the law imposes various penalties for violating its provisions, including imprisonment for no less than three years and no more than ten years, and a fine not exceeding RO 5,000, or one of these penalties for anyone who forges biometric documents or uses them knowing they are forged. Additionally, anyone who discloses biometric data accessed through their profession faces imprisonment for no less than three years and no more than five years, and a fine ranging from RO 500 to 2,000. Destroying or tampering with biometric biological reference samples or biological traces is punishable by imprisonment for no less than three years and no more than seven years, and a fine ranging from RO 500 to 3,000. Furthermore, refusal to provide necessary samples for the purposes outlined in the law could result in imprisonment for no less than one month and no more than three months, and a fine ranging from RO 100 to 500, or one of these penalties.

‘Mandvi to Muscat’ lecture series delves into Indian rupee’s journey in Oman

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
MUSCAT, MARCH 30

The Indian Embassy hosted the 6th lecture in the ‘Mandvi to Muscat’ series, featuring Swagat Pani, an anthropologist and historian delivering a lecture narrating the presence of the Indian Rupee in Oman and the Gulf region. Pani delved into various facets, including British India Coins and Rupees in Oman, the history of the Maria Theresa Thaler, Rupees in biographies, the Rupee as a tool of emancipation, and the significance of the Gulf Rupee. Using currency as a medium, he traced the history of contact between India and the Gulf region, in particular Oman and the influence of the Indian currencies historically in nurturing cultural exchanges between India and

Oman. Pani looked at the importance of trade in history while reflecting on world history as well as in the broader context the silver mines of South, Flora de La Plata, Mughal India and Ming China. He highlighted the significance of trade, producers and consumers of silver. Pani explained how coins have been functioning as a form of historical record, Because of the durability of coins as opposed to parchment, paper leaves. It is also being a sign of sovereignty of the ruler and administrative power structure as well as form of communicated communication between the ruler and the ruled. In circulation was quarter Anna vasa and 112 Anna Ghazi Indian copper coins.” Amit Narang, Ambassador of India to Oman reflected on the success of the lectures, emphasised



on the lecture series' significant role in deepening understanding and appreciation of the contributions made by the Indian diaspora to the India-Oman relationship. The event also featured presentations by Amit Sampat, who focused on the rich history of the Naranjee Hirjee family tracing their roots to Mandvi, their journey as one of the prominent diaspora families from India in Oman and their successful integration with and contribution to the development of modern Oman. Indian-origin Omani citizen Dr Akbar Rafay was the other speaker for the event, and shared anecdotes from the life of his late father, Dr Syed Mohammed Rafay, who rendered distinguished service as the personal physician of the late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos

bin Said and made pioneering contributions in the development of medical service in the Sultanate of Oman. Adding a touch of artistic diplomacy, noted diaspora artist Sedunath Prabhakar presented the Ambassador with a painting depicting the milestone meeting of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik during the latter's maiden State visit to India in December 2023. This painting will be the latest part of the exhibition 'India-Oman: A Political Journey' that is on permanent display at the Embassy of India. The 'Mandvi to Muscat' lecture series continues to serve as a platform for cultural exchange strengthening the long-standing people-to-people ties between both countries.



Second aid shipment with 400 tonnes leaves Cyprus port

LARNACA: A second shipment of aid carrying almost 400 tonnes of food for Gaza left Cyprus's Larnaca port on Saturday, a witness said. The aid will be taken to Gaza by a cargo ship and a platform towed by a salvage vessel.

It will be the second dispatch of aid via Cyprus, where Cypriot authorities have established, in cooperation with Israel, a maritime corridor to facilitate pre-screened cargoes arriving directly in the besieged Palestinian enclave.

US-based charity World Central Kitchen (WCK) arranged the mission with Spain's Open Arms charity, with financing mainly from the UAE and support from Cypriot authorities

people are trapped by fighting. Across the whole of the enclave more than half its population of 2.3 million people could face famine by July.

Famine is quite possibly present in parts of the northern Gaza Strip, a senior US State Department official said on Friday, adding that an obstacle to getting more aid to Palestinians was a scarcity of trucks in the enclave under Israeli siege.

The United Nations has warned of a looming famine and complained of obstacles to getting aid in and distributing it throughout Gaza. The US also says famine is imminent, but the official on Friday told Reuters it might already be present.

"While we can say with confidence that famine is a significant risk in the south and centre but not present, in the north it is both a risk and quite possibly is present in at least some areas," the official said on condition of anonymity. — **Reuters**

Separately, the United States plans to construct a floating pier off Gaza to receive aid. The target date for completion is May 1, but it could be ready by around April 15, Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides said late on Friday.

The United Nations has warned that famine is imminent in the northern Gaza Strip, where 300,000



The Open Arms and a tugboat towing a barge depart with humanitarian aid for Gaza from Larnaca, Cyprus. — Reuters



A man walks past pro-Palestinian murals on the International Wall in support of Gaza, in Belfast, Northern Ireland. — Reuters

HEAVY CLASHES RAGE IN THE BESIEGED STARVING GAZA

GAZA: Heavy clashes and explosions shook Gaza, witnesses said on Saturday, as the Red Crescent reported several people killed during the latest chaotic aid distribution in the territory's north, where famine looms. The Palestine Red Crescent said five people were killed and dozens injured by gunfire and a stampede during an aid delivery in Gaza's north.

Eyewitnesses said that Gazans overseeing the aid delivery shot in the air, but Israeli troops in the area also opened fire and some moving trucks hit people trying to get the food.

Fighting has not eased — including around the territory's largest hospital — and the latest toll from the health ministry in the Gaza Strip said at least 82 more people were killed in the previous 24 hours.

The enclave's press office reported more than 50 Israeli air strikes over the past day, with "civilian houses" targeted across the coastal territory, as well as tank fire in the Gaza City area and southern Gaza.

Israel's military on Saturday



Palestinian children react at the site of an Israeli strike on a house, in Khan Younis. — Reuters

said it had struck dozens of targets in central and northern Gaza.

Israel's retaliatory campaign has killed at least 32,705 people, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry.

Netanyahu's office said new talks on a Gaza ceasefire and hostage release will take place in Doha and Cairo "in the coming days... with guidelines for moving

forward in the negotiations".

Talks had appeared deadlocked despite a push by the United States — which provides billions of dollars in military aid to Israel — and fellow mediators Egypt and Qatar to secure a truce for the Muslim fasting month of Ramadhan, now more than halfway through.

In its ruling, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The

Hague said it had accepted South Africa's argument that the further deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Gaza required Israel to do more, with famine now "setting in."

On Saturday Israel's military said it was continuing operations around Gaza's largest hospital Al Shifa for a 13th day.

Most of the Palestinian territory's hospitals are not functioning and its health system is "barely surviving," the United Nations humanitarian agency, OCHA, said.

Israel's military accuses Palestinian groups of hiding inside medical facilities, using patients, staff and displaced people for cover — charges the groups have denied.

Troops first raided Al Shifa in November, but the army says Palestinian fighters have since returned.

On Saturday, Israeli troops continued aggression against Nasser Hospital and "besiege" Al Amal Hospital in the same city. The army said troops continue to operate in the Al Amal area of Khan Younis. — **AFP**

WHO says 9,000 patients need emergency evacuation

GENEVA: Some 9,000 patients in the Gaza Strip require evacuation for emergency care, with the war-torn Palestinian territory down to just 10 barely functioning hospitals, the head of the WHO said on Saturday.

"With only 10 hospitals minimally functional across the whole of Gaza, thousands of patients continue to be deprived of healthcare," World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus wrote on X.

Before the war, Gaza had 36 hospitals, according to the WHO.

"Around 9,000 patients urgently need to be evacuated abroad for lifesaving health services, including treatment for cancer, injuries from bombardments, kidney dialysis and other chronic conditions," he

With only 10 hospitals minimally functional across the whole of Gaza, thousands of patients continue to be deprived of healthcare

TEDROS ADHANOM GHEBREYESUS
WHO Director-General

said. That is up from 8,000 in the WHO's previous assessment at the beginning of March.

Israel vowed to eliminate Palestinian groups after the unprecedented October 7 attack



A Palestinian woman and a girl sit along a beach adjoining a makeshift camp for displaced people in Rafah. — AFP

on Israel, and has been bombing Gaza without respite, damaging many healthcare facilities.

Violent ground combat has also been under way for weeks, sometimes around

Gaza's hospitals, which are also providing refuge for thousands who have lost their homes or fled the fighting.

Gaza is subject to an almost complete blockade, and NGOs and the United Nations accuse Israel of preventing the delivery of humanitarian aid needed by the 2.4 million inhabitants who are mostly massed in Rafah at the territory's southern tip.

Israel has defended its policies as it pursues its stated goal of destroying the fighting groups, saying the UN should send more aid to Gaza, pushing back on reports by the UN and NGOs that cumbersome Israeli inspections are blocking food and other essentials.

The war began with October 7 attack that resulted in about 1,160 deaths in Israel, according to a

tally of Israeli official figures.

Palestinian groups also seized about 250 captives. Israel believes around 130 remain in Gaza, including 34 who are presumed dead. Israel's retaliatory campaign has killed at least 32,705 people, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's health ministry.

Tedros said that "so far, over 3,400 patients have been referred abroad through Rafah, including 2,198 wounded and 1,215 ill. But many more need to be evacuated."

"We urge Israel to speed up approvals for evacuations, so that critical patients can be treated. Every moment matters."

Before the war, 50 to 100 patients a day were transferred to East Jerusalem or the West Bank, half of them for cancer treatment. — **AFP**



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In brief

■ LIMA



PRESIDENT OF PERU'S HOME RAIDED IN LUXURY WATCH INVESTIGATION

Peruvian authorities raided President Dina Boluarte's home on Saturday as part of an ongoing corruption investigation related to undisclosed luxury watches. According to a police document, about 40 officials were involved in the raid, which was searching for Rolex watches that Boluarte had not publicly declared. The raid "is for the purpose of search and seizure," police said.

Authorities launched an investigation into Boluarte this month after a news outlet drew attention to pictures of her sporting luxury watches at public events. — AFP

■ JAKARTA



MASSIVE BLAZE ERUPTS AT INDONESIAN AMMUNITION SITE

Indonesian firefighters were on Saturday struggling to extinguish a massive fire that broke out at a military ammunition facility just outside the capital city, media reported. There were no immediate report of casualties in the incident in Bekasi, on the outskirts of Jakarta. Footage showed bright orange flames lighting up billowing clouds of smoke against the night sky, while loud explosions and screams could be heard from several kilometres away. KompasTV reported that the fire broke out at about 1830 local time and was not yet under control. — Reuters

■ NEW DELHI



INDIAN NAVY RESCUES FISHING VESSEL HIJACKED BY PIRATES

The Indian Navy said it had freed a hijacked Iranian fishing vessel from nine armed pirates in the Arabian Sea, rescuing its crew unharmed. The fishing vessel, Al Kamar 786, was southwest of the Yemeni island of Socotra on March 28 when it was reported to have been boarded by pirates, according to a statement from the navy late. The crew of 23 Pakistani nationals were safe, it said. "Indian Naval specialist teams are undertaking thorough sanitisation and seaworthiness checks of the vessel in order to escort it to a safe area for resuming normal activities," the statement said. — Reuters

Russia moves 5,000 children from Belgorod

MOSCOW: Five thousand children have been evacuated from Russia's Belgorod region bordering Ukraine following weeks of deadly bombardment by Kyiv, the region's governor said on Saturday. Regional authorities last week said 9,000 minors would be moved to other regions after a spate of cross-border shelling and drone strikes killed over a dozen civilians.

"Five thousand of our children are already outside the region. Yesterday, 1,300 children arrived in Saint Petersburg, Bryansk, and Makhachkala," governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said. Children who remain in the region and live in municipalities close to the border, including the region's capital Belgorod, will switch to remote learning next month, he added.

He said businesses that had been forced to close due to the attacks will be allowed to re-open as long as "staff are trained in first aid" and windows are taped up. Belgorod has been repeatedly targeted by what Russian officials have called indiscriminate Ukrainian attacks since the conflict began more than two years ago.

On Friday, a Ukrainian drone crashed into a multi-storey apartment building in Belgorod city, killing a man and wounding two others, including his wife, Gladkov said.

The Kremlin said on Saturday



Local residents walk next to their house damaged during a Russian missile and drone strike, in the city of Kamianske, Dnipropetrovsk region, Ukraine. — Reuters

Regional authorities last week said 9,000 minors would be moved to other regions after a spate of cross-border shelling and drone strikes killed over a dozen civilians

that President Vladimir Putin was still pained by last week's massacre at a Moscow concert hall, even if this was not outwardly visible. More than one week after gunmen stormed Crocus City Hall on the outskirts of the capital, killing 144 people and

injuring hundreds more, Putin has not publicly met with survivors or visited the scene of the attack. This is despite Russian media reporting that Western diplomats, including those from the European Union and United States, visited a makeshift

memorial for victims outside the venue on Saturday. Spokesman Dmitry Peskov told a state TV reporter that Putin was dealing with the tragedy in his own way. "Believe me, if you don't see tears on his face, it doesn't mean he's not in pain. And what he is going through, it is unlikely that anyone will ever recognise and understand," he said. Meanwhile, Ukraine said that it had imposed emergency blackouts on several regions after Russia fired dozens of

missiles and drones at its power stations overnight. Moscow has stepped up its aerial bombardment of Ukraine in recent weeks, targeting energy infrastructure in response to deadly Ukrainian assaults on Russia's border regions. National grid operator Ukrenergo said its dispatch centre was "forced to apply emergency blackout schedules in the regions of Dnipropetrovsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kirovograd until the evening". — AFP

Dutch hostage drama ends with suspect held



Members of the DSI special police forces patrol outside a cafe where several people were taken hostages in Ede. — AFP

EDE: A hostage drama in the Netherlands that lasted several hours on Saturday ended without bloodshed as all hostages were freed and police took the suspect into custody. Authorities have said there was no reason to suspect a "terrorist motive" for the ordeal, which took place at a spot popular with young people in the town of Ede. "The last hostage has just been released. One person has been arrested. We cannot share more information at this time," announced police on X, formerly Twitter. Several local media reported that a "confused" man had burst into the cafe in the early hours of Saturday morning and made threats, holding four people hostage. Police cleared the centre of the town and evacuated the residents of some 150 buildings near the

cafe. The local municipality said on its website that the town centre had been closed off and that riot police and explosives experts were at the scene. Authorities called on residents to avoid the town centre and train traffic was being diverted. An initial group of three people were released, with pictures from public broadcaster NOS showing them exiting the building with their hands in the air. "We see there are many questions about the motive. At this time there is no indication of a terrorist motive," police said. The fourth hostage was freed shortly afterwards, with the suspected hostage-taker then arrested. NOS images showed a man kneeling on the ground with his hands behind his back, as officers restrained him with handcuffs. "A terrible situation for all

these people. My concern and thoughts go out to them and their loved ones. I hope that the situation is now resolved quickly and safely," said Ede mayor Rene Verhulst. Last year, a 27-year-old man armed with two guns held several people hostage at an Apple store in Amsterdam, sparking a tense five-hour ordeal. That stand-off ended when the suspect was hit by a police car as he chased his last hostage who made a desperate break for freedom and ran out of the store. He later died in hospital from his injuries. The Netherlands has seen a series of terror attacks and plots but not on the scale of other European countries, such as France or Britain. In 2019, the country was stunned by a shooting spree on a tram in the city of Utrecht that claimed four lives. — AFP

Bulgaria, Romania to join Europe's vast visa-free zone

BUCHAREST: After 13 years of waiting, Bulgaria and Romania are to partially join the Europe's vast Schengen area of free movement on Sunday, opening up travel by air and sea without border checks in a "historic" move. Land border controls will however remain in place due to Austria's opposition to the eastern European countries becoming full members of the Schengen zone for fear of an influx of asylum-seekers. Despite the partial membership, the lifting of controls at the two countries' air and sea borders is of significant symbolic value. Admission to Schengen is an "important milestone" for Bulgaria and Romania, symbolising a "question of dignity, of belonging to the European Union," according to foreign policy analyst Stefan Popescu. "Any Romanian who had to walk down a lane separate from other European citizens felt being treated differently," he said. "Europe for all our citizens," EU chief Ursula von der Leyen said in a statement on Saturday. Bulgaria and Romania joining from Sunday, the Schengen zone will comprise 29 members — 25 of the 27 European Union member states, as well as Switzerland,

Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein. According to the Romanian government, Schengen rules will apply to four sea ports and 17 airports, with the country's Otopeni airport near the capital Bucharest serving as the biggest hub for Schengen flights. More staff ranging from border police to immigration officers will be deployed to airports to "support passengers and detect those who want to take advantage to leave Romania illegally," the government said. Random checks will also be carried out to catch people with false documents and to combat human trafficking, including of minors. Bulgaria and Romania both hope to fully integrate into Schengen by the end of the year, but Austria has so far only relented about allowing them to join by air and sea. Croatia, which joined the EU after Romania and Bulgaria, beat them to becoming Schengen's 27th member in January 2023. Created in 1985, more than 400 million people can travel freely inside the Schengen area without internal border controls. Bucharest and Sofia have both said that there will be no going back. — AFP



A worker changes the signs towards newly installed border control points inside the Henri Coanda International Airport in Otopeni, Romania. — AFP

How is your Ramadhan?



Dr Hamed al Sinawi
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The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

Ramadhan is that time of the year when fasting Muslims go through purification of the body and soul.

When fasting one is surrendering to Allah who ordered Muslims to fast so they can feel the suffering of those who are less fortunate and spend some time reading the holy Quran and reflecting in its meaning.

The extended prayers allows us to strengthen our spiritual life and ask God for forgiveness.

Ramadhan is also time for family gathering and trying different food cuisines where we reward our self after a long day of fasting with different food items.

While many people eat with moderation we often hear about those who spend lots of time and money in preparing and purchasing food which ends up being wasted because it's beyond their ability to consume.

The different advertisements about iftar buffets that we see in social media platforms may also encourage people to over eat especially with the variety of food offered most of which containing high amount of sugar and carbohydrates.

Therefore one should not be surprised to hear that certain people gain weight during Ramadhan despite fasting from dawn to sun set.

Alongside chasing food offers some of us get distracted with television series which for some reason uses the holy month to broadcast different programmes and drama series.

These are prepared in ways to capture viewer's attention and keep them glued in front of their TV wasting time which could have been used for prayers and reading Quran.

Since Ramadhan is followed by Eid which is a festive season it is understandable that we would need to prepare for Eid and buy clothes, food items and gifts for our loved ones.

This can be time consuming and also financially exhausting to the family with young children especially when shops compete with each other's in displaying the latest items and tempting consumers to overspend.

Therefore, one has to plan his financial situation well before indulging in excessive shopping. The last ten days of Ramadhan are believed to be the most time Muslims get rewarded for their good deeds so

DURING
RAMADHAN
WE OFTEN GET
DISTRACTED
FROM FOCUSING
ON PRAYERS AND
OTHER GOOD
DEEDS"

it is worth planning your time well to get the most of these precious days.

Avoid the distraction described above and give yourself a break from social media which is, in my opinion is the main distracter.

Switch off your notifications to avoid interruptions and if possibly keep your mobile away when your are not expecting important calls or texts.

Some Muslims choose to spend the last ten days inside the mosque and dedicate his or her time for prayers, reading the holy Quran and asking God for forgiveness.

Some mosques offer regular lessons to strengthen one's understanding of the meanings of Islam and how to gain positive behaviour and continue to live the spirit of Ramadhan all year long.

One of the challenges most fasting Muslims face is maintaining the spiritual behaviour after Ramadhan when life return to its previous rhythm.

The long working hours may stop some of us from performing all prayers in the mosque.

Finally, I hope you can make the best of the remaining days of the holy month and that you are able to maintain the spiritual journey when it ends.

Scandals leave UK royal family looking depleted

MICHAEL HOLDEN

King Charles is due to make his first public appearance at a royal event since his cancer diagnosis on Sunday, but the likely absence of son Prince William and the heir's wife Kate will spotlight how depleted the monarchy has become.

Buckingham Palace said the 75-year-old monarch would attend the traditional Easter Sunday church service at Windsor Castle alongside his wife Queen Camilla, one of the annual engagements usually attended by all the senior royals.

However, William, Kate and their children George, 10, Charlotte, 8, and Louis, 5, will not attend after the Princess of Wales revealed last week that she had begun preventative chemotherapy for cancer following abdominal surgery in January.

"King Charles really wanted to have a slimmed-down monarchy when he took on the throne but he never could have anticipated slimming down to where it is now," said Erin Hill, People magazine's senior royal editor. "This is going to definitely be a complicated time for the royal family"

Charles' desire for a 'slimmed-down' institution was designed to counter accusations it was bloated, with distant relatives living off taxpayer-funded handouts.

But there are now gaping holes in his immediate circle - most dramatically, with the departure of his younger son Prince Harry, 39, and wife Meghan, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, to the US three years ago.

Meanwhile, Charles' younger brother Prince Andrew, 64, was banished from public life in 2019 over his friendship with the late US offender Jeffrey Epstein.

"Well, I think the 'slimmed-down' was said in a day when there were a few more people around to make that seem like a justifiable comment," the king's younger sister Princess Anne said in an interview last year.

"It doesn't sound like a good idea from where I'm standing, I have to say. I'm not quite sure what else... we can do."

Of the remaining official working royals - those that carry out duties for the king, such as opening new buildings, giving out honours and meeting foreign dignitaries - many are now from the late Queen Elizabeth's generation.

Princess Alexandra, 87, her cousin and long-time friend, is rarely seen in public nowadays, while Elizabeth's other cousins Prince Edward, the Duke of Kent and Prince Richard, the Duke of Gloucester, are 88 and 79 respectively. — **Reuters**

Exploring barriers to women’s micro-entrepreneurship in Oman



Dr Aziza Saleem Alhabsi

The writer is an experienced editor, entrepreneur and journalist. She is currently a doctoral student at Manchester Metropolitan University

As a woman who chose to start her own small business, I chose to work in a field similar to my journalistic work, in which I spent 20 years moving between writing news, conducting interviews and undertaking investigative journalism concerning Omani society.

When the opportunity arose to establish my business, I benefited from the support of a SME organisation that had been established, along with the creation of business incubators.

I was fortunate to be among the first group to work in partnership with these incubators, which provided me with a space at a lower cost compared to the market rates. The expenses associated with setting up a micro business were reduced.

Likewise, the business incubator reduced the amount that I pay for bills as a start-up. Nonetheless, my experiences as regards the incubator, which was supposed to promote microenterprises, failed to meet my expectations and ambitions.

If truth be told, I imagined my business developing rapidly within the nurturing environment provided by the incubator, anticipating faster growth and greater profits than what transpired.

I had in fact hoped for more comprehensive advice, support and guidance to explore further opportunities. Therefore, I decided to leave the incubator and launch my business independently.

Like any business in the initial stages, I experienced highs and lows. I also encountered a degree of difficulty in establishing the professional relationships that would allow my business to develop and provide it with the opportunities that are necessary to enable it to progress.

Through my small business, I hosted seminars presenting the role of Omani women in creating job opportunities through their own and innovative businesses and contributing to the country's economy.

Through seminars, I ascertained that women entrepreneurs exist



THE WRITER CONDUCTS A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN MUSCAT GOVERNORATE, EXPOSING THE CHALLENGES HINDERING THE GROWTH OF WOMEN-OWNED MICRO-BUSINESSES IN OMAN

and work hard to prove themselves in challenging settings. However, they are few in number and in their contribution to the establishment of private companies and in their ability to create job opportunities.

My own vision, similar to that of the other businesswomen, was not just about creating a small company where I could spend my time after leaving my position as a journalist, it was to establish a business that is capable of innovation, creativity, continuity, profit and creating employment opportunities.

From my perspective, as the owner of a small company, micro-businesses encounter barriers on a regular basis when working with incubators and current legislation.

Consequently, the idea came to mind to study women's micro-businesses in an attempt to make a small contribution to the study of societal and institutional practices that prevent the growth of women's micro-businesses in a way that makes a valuable contribution to the economy and create employment.

The research was established based on the contribution of women in Omani society, as they represent 49.7 per cent or over three million of the total population, according to the latest

population census. Based on Oman Vision 2040, this figure confirms that women play a significant role in the economic diversification of the local economy, as they account for 73 per cent of SMEs in Oman. The total number of SMEs reached 89,452 in 2023.

According to the Authority for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (Riyada), last year women were running 8,502 micro-businesses in Oman. Despite this, women are affected the most by the high unemployment rate. The current estimate implies that approximately 100,000 Omanis are unemployed of this, 17 per cent are women whereas 12 per cent are male job-seekers.

The government is exploring ways to develop a post-oil economy. Preparation for the post-oil period is being undertaken by encouraging and diversifying various economic sectors and preparing each one to contribute to the country's GDP by promoting the growth of SMEs.

It is important to state that the contribution of SMEs amounted to RO 2 billion in Omani non-oil exports in 2022. On account of the government's support of SMEs, women have launched micro-businesses to enable them to earn a living and participate in reducing the unemployment rate.

When establishing a SME, women are encountering challenges connected with the growth and expansion of existing institutions pertaining to gender owing to society's norms.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences, feelings and opinions of women entrepreneurs regarding the development of their micro-businesses.

The research also seeks to explore the perceptions of women's entrepreneurs regarding the barriers that must be overcome.

The study also investigates the potential benefits of women entrepreneurs in areas such as success in business, micro-business growth and leadership, to contribute to the national economy and GDP within the Oman Vision 2040.

Social media: Be a little afraid...

If we ever needed a definition of a two-edged sword, it would surely be social media, an online platform we can use to communicate, and share information with others, to stay ‘connected’ with family and friends. So many, especially ‘at school teens,’ want to be ‘normal,’ yet their focus is online... so, how normal is that?

Certainly, it has its benefits to families, friends, and work place associates, or ‘followers’ as they are popularly identified, as they can share images, videos, just chat, or even tag themselves with status or relationship updates. It’s all the same stuff we used to ‘talk’ about, in the ‘olden days,’ but it seems it’s not enough to just share with your ‘mates’ and ‘buddies,’ you are encouraged to share with the world.

From a positive perspective, social media platforms are available and accessible to, and can accommodate, almost everyone, and provide instant, global, real time connections with an unrivalled diversity of choice, as to how one will connect, engage, and share. However, there is a school of thought that, especially in our teens, we feel we are ‘connecting,’ when actually, we are connecting with unknowns, often unseen’s, while actually disconnecting with those around us.

Gaming is a social media option that offers challenges to all participants, with a variety of consoles, tablets, phones, computers, and other devices used therefore increasing hi-tech diversity, while there are also critical skills that may be enhanced through gaming such as hand-eye coordination, imagination, and creativity, and to be fair, there are some memorable, enriching, graphics, features, storylines, and characters that can seriously enhance media tech skills. In today’s educational environments, this can only be a positive thing. At the end of the day though, social media while a technological revolution, is a sociological phenomenon.

Negative considerations with social media may be its current propensity for containing harmful, misleading, offensive, and even unhealthy perspectives to which young people, in particular, are susceptible. Such are



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the pitfalls of a new world, and its new technology, to which we find ourselves distinctly vulnerable. We can be, or feel, pressured by the often unhealthy expectations of any of the social media platforms. You only have to look at how ‘filters’ have altered the personas of many of those we know. ‘Warts and all’ has no place on social media it seems.

The first major concern to emerge from even the most facile review of social media, is the challenge of ensuring that young people are not being introduced to toxic media content that is inappropriate to their age, culture, or societal expectations. The other key concern is that social media could be a ‘Trojan Horse,’ means of evading household security, placing private information such as passwords, account numbers, and the like, at risk of falling into malevolent hands. Parents have a key role to play in ensuring that young people and children have limited time on social media and gaming, and that the age limitations and restrictions recommendations are applied. Parental awareness and concern would appear, globally, to be around 60 per cent checking their children’s activity, however most of those reported checking once and never again. I get the need to trust their children, but between 10 and 16 years of age, they are incredibly vulnerable to online exploitation, so parental responsibility can hardly be optional, can it?

Successful cyber-attacks on educational establishments are, I feel, just a single malevolent step away, and can have, potentially devastating effects on so many students who deserve greater security of their learning. I guess the key is for educational institutions to always be alert, always be ready, as attacks can come from anywhere. In fact, maybe the Sultanate is in a high state of awareness and preparedness, though UK statistics from 2021/22 show that 60 per cent of schools have no cyber-security training, 70 per cent have staff training in place, 80 per cent do not have air-gapped backup systems so all-in-all, that environment appears extremely vulnerable.

Maybe, social media is something we should be more afraid of than we are now?

PARENTS HAVE A KEY ROLE TO PLAY IN ENSURING THAT YOUNG PEOPLE AND CHILDREN HAVE LIMITED TIME ON SOCIAL MEDIA

CALLING FOR TRUCE!



■ A pro-Palestinian demonstrator wearing a keffiyeh takes part in a protest in central London on Saturday, calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. – AFP

Human trafficking: What’s in a name? Context, semantics and perspective

I was motivated to write about this topic by the recent coverage of the BBC on the domestic workers’ situation in the Sultanate of Oman. Whether you call it trafficking in persons (TIP) or human trafficking, it remains a grave violation of human rights and a serious global issue that affects many countries, including Oman.

As a policy analyst and a person who has volunteered and worked with trafficked persons in Oman and listened to several stories for long hours, I have observed that while so many parties mean well, there are issues of context, semantics, and, of course, perspectives.

No matter how sympathetic we are, we will not be able to fully understand what goes on in the minds of victims.

A human trafficking victim (or even for that matter a potential victim) often has a mindset of fear, distrust, and, worst, denial.

Then, once they fall into the trap of being trafficked, they become hostage to an additional complication: conflicting obligations of family, lenders, self, contractual, legal, etc.

Moreover, foreign victims have the additional concern of deportation, imprisonment, or, simply, stigmatisation and loss of future employment opportunities.

Hence, they do not use available



Ahmed Al Mukhaini

The writer is a Muscat-based policy analyst and international interlocutor

MANY VICTIMS DO NOT USE AVAILABLE REMEDIES OR REDRESS MECHANISMS PROVIDED FOR BY GOVERNMENTS OR NGOS

remedies or redress mechanisms provided for by governments or NGOs, whether in countries of origin or destination countries. That has been the case in Oman, from my experience.

The above situation is further compounded by a lack of awareness or limited resources. While I am certain that several of us have noticed the numerous times the posters and billboards as well as multi-lingual flyers that have been circulated by the OHRC and the National Committee for Combating Human Trafficking, they do not always reach the target audience.

We, as individuals who claim to be of good standing, have a duty as fellow humans to relay such information to TIP victims and provide them with a reason to dispel their mistrust.

This duty stems also from being good citizens to assist the country in fulfilling the objectives of laws and response mechanisms that have been put in place by testing their resilience and adequacy.

Continuing on the above point, I remember the several sessions I had with trafficked persons who had no idea about locally and legally available remedies either

because of their education level, the above-mentioned fear and distrust, or the fact that they live in camps or very controlled areas.

In addition, a lack of resources in their native languages or simply an inadequate number of support staff or capacity of shelters has contributed to their plight. That is particularly true in the case of embassies.

They tend to have limited human or financial resources. Several NGOs and private donors in Oman assist in trafficked cases, which has been helpful.

Also, there is a good number of volunteers, Omanis and expatriates alike, who help either as interpreters, lawyers, or just friends to talk to.

One final point to be added here before I move on to another aspect of this matter is gender.

Often the focus has been to protect women victims. Shelters provided, whether by authorities or foreign embassies, cater mainly, perhaps understandably, for women.

Only in documented trafficked cases, where victims come forward, do they manage to use the facilities provided. The majority of those tend to be women. A lot of the

undocumented trafficked cases are usually men.

There are several reasons for that such as social and familial expectations to persevere and continue to provide fuelled at times by a lack of sympathy from respondents.

On the other side of the equation, let us not demonise employers. We do have some honest and genuine employers who are also victims, albeit not in the eyes of the law.

They need protection because they take the brunt of all the duty of care and diligence called for by anti-human-trafficking laws and regulations in Oman.

They can also be preyed on by workers and recruiting agencies, both at home and abroad.

Recruiting agencies play a pivotal role in the trafficking process.

They can deceive victims at home even before arriving in Oman. They can also deceive employers by giving a false impression that all papers are in order and that the offer and acceptance part of the employment relationship is also set in place.

That is why international legal frameworks require authorities in

source and destination countries to mitigate such risks and address vulnerabilities by close supervision of the recruitment process.

Destination countries tend to get most of the blame since they are usually rich countries.

Moreover, the abuse is more visible in destination countries than in source countries. A case in point is the requirement upon employers to demonstrate that they have exercised their duty of diligence before the discovery of a trafficked case and their duty to care once a case has been discovered.

In conclusion, while a lot has been done during the past decade, challenges remain in addressing TIP in Oman.

Factors such as limited victims awareness of and accessibility to available resources, gaps in implementation and enforcement of anti-trafficking laws, and the complex nature of the crime pose obstacles to effectively combatting the issue.

In my opinion, enhancing victim identification and assistance mechanisms are key areas that require further attention and can make a transformative impact on the lives of potential victims and Oman’s TIP records.

sport

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Coach Jamal shares future plans for Seeb Volleyball Club

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, MARCH 30

MUSCAT: It was another special season for Seeb spikers as they repeated last year's accomplishment by claiming three titles this season including the recent triumph at the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth Shield volleyball, Super Cup, and the first league. Earlier last week, Seeb players impressed as they managed to defeat Al Salam 3-1 in a thrilling final clash of the Ministry Shield at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher to claim another title. Jamal al Mamari, Head coach of Seeb Club, credited the continuous support of Seeb's board directors represented by HH Sayyid Shihab bin Tarik al Said and the board members for making another impressive

season by winning three titles. "The great interest and continuous help from the Chairman of the club HH Sayyid Shihab and his son HH Sayyid Malik bin Shihab al Said as well as the board members were behind the success of the team during the previous years. There was a clear outlining plan for each season in coordination with the technical staff to achieve all domestic competitions and also to compete at the International level," Jamal al Mamari said. "There was also a keen focus from the club's board on maintaining technical and administrative staff stability throughout the last five years. All local competitions were achieved especially in the last two seasons through achieving historic accomplishments including the Super Cup, the League, and the Ministry Shield. Besides that, the

club had signed the right players based on the recommendation of the technical staff and the board's commitment to renewing the contracts of some local and expatriate players each season. "Moreover, the club's loyal fans delivered remarkable support for the team over the past five seasons," he added in an exclusive remark to the *Observer*. Responding to an inquiry on the plans for Seeb to compete at the board level, he said: "As champions of the league and the Ministry Shield, we are expecting to represent the Sultanate of Oman in different Gulf and Arabian competition events. In the previous season, Seeb Club had managed to earn the silver medal at the Arabian level." "Our target this season is to vie for the gold medal. We understand the difficulty of accomplishing this target but I am confident with the required support from the club and player's commitment we can reach this goal," he added.

"Seeb consists of a pool of great volleyball players for all positions. I would like to thank all the team squad for their outstanding show. For the future requirement, we may need to upgrade the level of some professional players in some specific positions. This will be discussed with the club's board level ahead of the new season start. Moreover, the team's plan and requirement of the domestic and external camps besides the friendly matches will be discussed with the board level too," clarified

the national experienced coach. Coach Jamal concluded his remarks with some recommendations to the Oman Volleyball Association (OVA). "I suggest that the first-placed team in the qualifiers stage should get some preference during the finals. In the current system, the topper of the qualifiers will advance to the final in the semis. We hope the system will change to allow the clubs to play more games," he mentioned.



Manchester City seek win over Arsenal ahead of run-in Rodri



Manchester City's John Stones and Kyle Walker shake hands. – Reuters

MANCHESTER: Manchester City can set themselves up to succeed once again on multiple fronts and lift their confidence for the season's run-in with a win over title rivals Arsenal in Sunday's blockbuster Premier League clash, midfielder Rodri said. A point separates the top three teams after 28 games, with Arsenal and Liverpool tied on 64 points and Manchester City in third place

with 63 points. Asked about City's clash against Arsenal, Rodri told reporters: "I'm not saying it's going to be decisive, but it will be very important for our confidence, and we will show them that we are here again. "It's not just this game that's like a final, it's all of them from now until the end of the season. We're still in every competition, but any game that you lose can practically leave

you out of the running. "Really that's the level that this league demands from you, to reach between 90 and 100 points to be able to win the league. So, we have to win practically every game and that starts against Arsenal, who are currently the league leaders." Apart from being involved in the Premier League title race, City have also reached the quarterfinals of the Champions League and the FA Cup

semifinal. Rodri did not shy away from discussing the club's ambitions to match last season's historic treble, saying: "Our objective is basically this: if we were able to show that we could win everything we won last season, then why can't we do it again? "Of course, it's incredibly hard to do, the world of football is very difficult, but we'll take it step by step." — Reuters

Al Siyabi to referee basketball World Cup in Mexico

MUSCAT: The International Basketball Federation has selected Omani international referee Issam al Siyabi to officiate at the Under-17 World Cup in Mexico on July. Al Siyabi is considered one of the elite referees in Asia and has officiated many important matches in various Gulf championships and leagues. It is worth noting that Issam obtained the international badge in 2014 and is considered one of the best referees at local, Gulf and Asian levels. He has officiated many finals at the local, Gulf and Asian league levels. This selection comes after the Omani international referee's brilliance in officiating the Asian Cup matches and the World Cup qualifiers in Asia.



DIMITROV BATTLES PAST ZVEREV TO BOOK MIAMI FINAL WITH SINNER

Miami: Italy's Jannik Sinner destroyed defending champion Daniil Medvedev 6-1, 6-2 in just 69 minutes on Friday to reach the final of the ATP Miami Open, where he will take on Grigor Dimitrov.

Bulgarian Dimitrov made his third Masters 1000 series final after he beat fourth-seeded Alexander Zverev 6-4, 6-7 (4/7), 6-4.

The win means Dimitrov will return to the top ten in the ATP rankings for the first time since 2018, his 260 week wait is the third longest in the history of the rankings.

Sinner though will be the favourite against Dimitrov, after his display of power and skill at Hard Rock Stadium swept away Medvedev.

The Italian had lost to the Russian in the Miami final last year but rallied from two sets down to beat him in the Australian Open final in January.

The outcome was never in doubt this time as Sinner utterly dominated from the outset.

Sinner broke Medvedev's first service game to go 2-0 up in the opening set, pinning the Russian in the corner at the end of a long rally before blasting a winner past him.

While the 22-year-old looked fresh and fired up, blasting with power from the baseline and inventive when he came to the net, Medvedev was struggling to just hold his serve and the Italian broke again in the fourth game, taking advantage of his fourth break point. A rattled-looking Medvedev finally held in the sixth game, but Sinner served out to love to complete a first-set rout in just 33 minutes.

It was the same story in the second set, Sinner breaking to love to start. The Russian looked dejected after he went wide on a break point to fall to 4-1 down, one of a series of unusually poorly executed shots from the 28-year-old.

Sinner met little resistance on his way to serving out for the match and acknowledged that his emphatic win was helped by the out of sorts nature of his opponent's play.

"I felt great on court today. Usually the more you go on in a tournament, the more comfortable you feel and I'm very happy about today's performance," he said.

"I think Daniil didn't feel this well today. He made a lot of mistakes which he usually doesn't make, so I just took the chance. I was expecting a really tough match."

Different player, different person

Sinner has won five straight matches against Medvedev after having lost their first six encounters. Sinner, who enjoyed a run of 19 wins before losing to Carlos Alcaraz in the semi-final at Indian Wells, said he is now a very different proposition than when he missed out in the Miami final last year.

"I'm a different player, a different person," he said.

Medvedev was blunt in his assessment of his performance.

"He played good. I didn't play well enough. We could speak for hours but in the end I didn't play good enough, he played good, he won easy. That's the end of the story, to be honest," he said.

The second semi-final was a

much tighter affair which was decided by a handful of key moments.

Dimitrov, who ousted world number two Carlos Alcaraz in the quarter-finals, broke when 5-4 up in the first set, Zverev mis-timing a return which ballooned out of court to hand the advantage to the Bulgarian.

The big-serving German was solid throughout the second set and while he wobbled at 6-2 up in the tie-break he held on to win 7-4 and force a deciding set.

With Dimitrov always busy, frequently going to the net, Zverev was relying on his baseline play to get him through.

But he was broken in the seventh game when Dimitrov came towards the net, slipped but somehow managed an overhead volley while almost on the floor to win break point.

The Bulgarian was buzzing with energy as he saw out the set and said his improvised winner had shown his mentality.

"I was not letting any balls pass through me...I just thought, OK, I'm seeing the ball, I am going to scramble for it.

"It was a dogfight on both ends, we really went at each other after that first set," he said.

Before defeating Alcaraz and Zverev, Dimitrov had also taken care of another top 10 opponent in Hubert Hurkacz and he said that the run showed he had found the consistency that has sometimes eluded him.

"What is best above all is that I have been able to put those matches back-to-back. The consistency of beating top players, that to me is a way bigger success than anything else," he said. — AFP



Jannik Sinner (ITA) celebrates after match point against Daniil Medvedev. – USA TODAY Sports



Grigor Dimitrov (BUL) reaches for a forehand against Carlos Alcaraz. – USA TODAY Sports

Wembanyama's big night trumps Brunson's 61 points in Spurs win over Knicks

Los Angeles: Sensational San Antonio rookie Victor Wembanyama scored 40 points and grabbed 20 rebounds to help the Spurs withstand a stunning 61-point performance from New York's Jalen Brunson in a 130-126 NBA overtime victory over the Knicks on Friday.

French star Wembanyama became the first rookie to record a 40-point, 20-rebound game since Shaquille O'Neal had 46 and 21 in 1993.

The 20-year-old added seven assists, two steals and a blocked shot as he and the Spurs spoiled a career night for Brunson — who finished one point shy of the Knicks' franchise record of 62 points in a game, set by Carmelo Anthony in 2014.

The scintillating show in San Antonio overshadowed Minnesota's 111-98 victory over the reigning champion Denver Nuggets that vaulted the Timberwolves into a tie for the Western Conference lead, alongside the Oklahoma City Thunder — which beat the Phoenix Suns 128-103.

The Nuggets dropped from first to third, one half-game behind the Timberwolves and Thunder.

Brunson notched the fifth-



Julian Champagnie (30) shoots over Donte DiVincenzo (0) and Jalen Brunson (11). – USA TODAY Sports

highest points total of this high-scoring season, but he missed a potential go-ahead three-pointer with 5.4 seconds left in overtime.

Wembanyama's three-pointer with 1:12 left in overtime had put the Spurs up 128-124.

After Spurs guard Tre Jones made two free-throws with 1.1 seconds left, Wembanyama came up with a steal and it was over.

The Spurs, who won a third-straight game for the first time this season, scored 74 points in the first half and led most of the night.

But the Knicks, fuelled by Brunson's 38 second-half points,

grabbed the lead for the first time when Donte DiVincenzo's three-pointer made it 113-112 with 4:39 left in regulation.

After a Wembanyama alley-oop dunk tied it at 119-119, Brunson drove for a basket that put the Knicks up 121-119 with 1:14 left in regulation, but Wembanyama made two free throws to force overtime.

"He's pretty special," San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich said of Wembanyama, adding that the Spurs' ability to withstand an "amazing" Brunson and the Knicks' late charge showed how

much they have developed this year.

"All teams lose leads," Popovich said. "But how you come back from it is important and earlier in the year we would not have sustained our own execution, our own pace. You can see the maturity that they've developed during the season.

"(They) stayed strong when New York made a heck of a run."

In Denver, Anthony Edwards scored 25 points, Mike Conley added 23 and Rudy Gobert finished with 21 points and 11 rebounds in a convincing victory over the Nuggets.

Rockets win 11th straight

Elsewhere, Kawhi Leonard and Paul George came through in the clutch for the Los Angeles Clippers, making back-to-back baskets in the final minute to seal a 100-97 victory over the Magic in Orlando. The Houston Rockets shook off a slow start to push their winning streak to 11 games with a 101-100 victory over the Utah Jazz.

The Brooklyn Nets drilled 25 three-pointers in a 125-108 home victory over the Chicago Bulls, tying the NBA record for treys in a half with 18 after the break.

— AFP

Top-order blitz puts Sri Lanka 314-4 in Bangladesh Test

Chittagong: A top-order batting blitz brought Sri Lanka to 314-4 and left the tourists firmly in command of the second and final Test against Bangladesh on Saturday.

Kusal Mendis top-scored with 93 in Chittagong while openers Dimuth Karunaratne (86) Nishan Madushka (57) helping power the innings.

Dinesh Chandimal was batting on 34 alongside skipper Dhananjaya de Silva on 15 at stumps.

Bangladesh struggled to make an impact after being put in to bowl, with Sri Lanka batting through the morning session without losing a wicket.

Madushka was run out attempting a double shortly after lunch but Karunaratne and Mendis drove the tourists forward with a 114-run stand.

Hasan sent back Karunaratne, who chopped a delivery into the stumps, before the tea break.

He struck eight fours and a six in his 129-ball innings,

surviving a run-out scare on 18 after a mix-up with Madushka while taking a single off Hasan Mahmud.

Shakib Al Hasan denied Mendis his 10th Test century, forcing an edge to Mehidy at second slip.

Hasan picked up his second wicket when Mehidy caught Angelo Mathews (23) from the same spot in the first over after the second new ball.

Chandimal struck two sixes to move past his early shakiness before helping Sri Lanka pass the 300-run mark with a four off Hasan.

Sri Lanka lead the two-match series 1-0 after winning the opening Test by a resounding 328 runs.

Veteran all-rounder Shakib returned for Bangladesh after a long Test absence, and the hosts also handed a debut to Mahmud. Sri Lanka brought Asitha Fernando in for injured Kasun Rajitha in their only change to the squad from the opening Test. — Reuters



Dimuth Karunaratne (R) celebrates with teammate Kusal Mendis (L).– AFP

BARNES LATE SHOW FIRES NEWCASTLE TO DRAMATIC WIN OVER WEST HAM



Newcastle United's Harvey Barnes celebrates scoring their fourth goal. — Reuters

NEWCASTLE: Substitute Harvey Barnes struck twice as Newcastle United fought back from 3-1 down to beat West Ham United 4-3 in a thrilling Premier League match at St James' Park on Saturday.

Jarrod Bowen had put West Ham 3-1 ahead soon after half-time up but Alexander Isak's second penalty 13 minutes from time gave Newcastle hope and the livewire Barnes equalised with a clinical finish.

Barnes then lashed in a sweet shot from outside the box in the 90th minute to spark delirious scenes of celebration.

"A lot of emotions in that game, we

were swinging all over the place really, ups and downs, injuries, sending off but just brilliant from the lads, brilliant comeback when it was a real challenge at 3-1 down," coach Eddie Howe told TNT.

Newcastle climbed three spots to eighth in the table on 43 points after 29 games, a point behind West Ham in seventh.

The hosts had started well and led through Isak's early penalty before Michail Antonio and Mohammed Kudus put West Ham 2-1 up at half-time.

Bowen extended the visitors' lead with his 15th Premier League goal of the

season, before Barnes entered the fray in the 67th minute.

His second goal put the hosts ahead and although Newcastle forward Anthony Gordon was sent off in stoppage time after picking up his second yellow card for kicking the ball away, they hung on. "It was one of the maddest games I have played in for sure," Barnes told the BBC. "We were obviously disappointed to be where we are in the game and then we had a mountain to climb. This team is all about team spirit and never give up and that showed in abundance today."

Barnes has endured an injury-plagued

season.

"So every time I am on the pitch I went to help the team. The atmosphere here is always amazing. Today it is a winner and it is a great feeling."

On the negative side for Newcastle, who have won only two of their last five matches, were more injury concerns as Jamaal Lascelles, Emil Krafth, Tino Livramento and Miguel Almiron were all forced off the pitch.

Howe praised his squad's character. "When you're 3-1 down at home with the recent run we've been on and everything seemingly going against us,

very, very difficult for the players to regroup and go again but they did second half and it was just a wonderful feeling at the end," Howe said.

West Ham manager David Moyes was disappointed after his team's third match without a win.

"We have lost a game when we should have won a game. In the Premier League," Moyes told BBC.

"This is a tough place to come and for a long period we looked as though we were going to be the side who finished on top. We didn't see the job through and weren't tough enough." — Reuters



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S&P revises Oman’s outlook from stable to positive



Oman is returning to achieving financial surpluses after seven years of achieving deficits: S&P

MUSCAT: International Credit Rating agency Standard & Poor’s (S&P) issued its first credit rating report for the Sultanate of Oman for 2024, in which it modified the future outlook from stable to positive, while fixing the credit rating level at “BB+”.

According to the agency, this is due to the continuous improvement in the state’s public financial performance indicators and the achievement of financial surpluses in addition to government efforts to reduce net public debt.

The agency stated in its report that Oman is returning to achieving financial surpluses after seven years of achieving double deficits.

This is due to government measures taken to control public spending and control its levels, and taking other measures to increase non-oil revenues, in addition to the positive results from the restructuring of government companies.

The agency explained that the average financial surplus in the state’s general budget is expected to reach about 2.6 per cent of the gross domestic product for 2023, and about 1.2 per cent during the period extending from 2024 to 2027.

This is in addition to achieving a financial surplus in the external (current) account of about 2 per

cent in 2023 and an average of 1.2 per cent during the years 2024-2027.

The agency has set its expectations that the average price of Brent crude will reach about \$85 per barrel in 2024 and \$80 per barrel during the period 2025-2027.

The agency also expects the public debt rate to decline from 36 per cent in 2023 to reach about 31 per cent of GDP in 2027.

S&P expects the real GDP to grow from 1.6 per cent in 2023 to 2 per cent on an annual basis during the period 2024-2027, noting that the non-oil sector will witness growth of about 2 per cent.

S&P also said the inflation rate in 2023 is about 0.9 per cent, and will remain moderate at an average of 1.5 per cent on an annual basis during the period 2024-2027, and this is due to the government measures taken to control inflation and protect society from its effects.

The agency said that the government’s continued implementation of its measures aimed at strengthening the financial position and improving its indicators, in addition to the economic measures followed that contribute to enhancing economic growth, and the continued reduction of the state’s public debt, will lead to an improvement in the credit rating. — **ONA**

Efforts ongoing to position Dhofar as year-round tourism destination

QASIM AL MAASHANI
SALALAH, MARCH 30

In a strategic move to solidify Dhofar Governorate’s position as a year-round tourist destination, Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, convened a high-level meeting with key stakeholders from the country’s tourism industry.

Representatives from international companies, resort and hotel managers, airlines, airport specialists and travel and tourism agencies participated in the discussions held on Friday.

The central theme of the meeting revolved around the development and promotion of Dhofar as a multifaceted tourist destination. Strategies focused on enhancing awareness of the region’s captivating natural beauty and rich cultural heritage.

Additionally, the agenda emphasised improvements in tourism infrastructure, visitor services and the creation of diverse travel packages catering to a wide range of interests and budgets.

A critical aspect of the plan involves collaboration with airlines to establish direct flights from international source markets like Europe and Russia to Salalah Airport.

Later, in exclusive remarks to *Oman Daily Observer*, Al Mahrouqi elaborated on the



Tourists disembarking from a cruise ship at Port of Salalah.



Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi
Minister of Heritage and Tourism

ministry’s plans for Dhofar.

He highlighted ongoing communication with Omran Group — the government’s tourism investment arm, travel agencies and Dhofar’s Governor to establish a roadmap for developing the region’s tourism

sector.

Acknowledging Dhofar’s immense potential while recognising existing challenges, he emphasised the importance of workshops and meetings to brainstorm solutions and pave the way for success.

A multi-pronged approach encompassing ongoing projects, planned initiatives, and discussions with international investors is strategically designed to elevate Oman’s, and particularly Dhofar’s, tourism offerings, he noted.

A central pillar of the development strategy involves establishing direct flight routes connecting Dhofar Governorate to key tourist markets.

In conjunction with this goal, the Ministry is also committed to intensifying promotional activities to solidify Oman’s position in established markets while exploring new ones. The focus lies on providing tourists with diverse experiences that cater to their desire for discovery and create lasting memories.

The Minister attributed the success of the previous season in Dhofar Governorate to the seamless integration and cooperation between relevant authorities.

He further emphasised the exceptional outcome of Oman’s participation in the recent ITB Berlin Travel Fair, highlighting the collaborative efforts of various sectors that contributed to this achievement. **TURN TO P15**

Biochar: Cultivating sustainability in the sands of Oman

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, MARCH 30

In the realm of sustainable agriculture, a groundbreaking innovation is quietly taking root in the arid landscapes of Oman. Biochar, a transformative soil amendment crafted from organic waste, is on the brink of revolutionising agricultural practices in the Middle East and in particular, Oman.

According to UK Biochar Research Centre, heating biomass (renewable organic material that comes from plants and animals) in a zero-oxygen environment to temperatures of 250°C or greater yields energy-rich gases and liquids and a solid charcoal, or char. “When this char has been produced specifically to have beneficial effects — for example as a soil improver or to store carbon — we call this material biochar.”

Ahmed bin Rashid bin Salim al Rubaiee, a PhD candidate at Sultan Qaboos University, is spearheading the biochar movement in Oman. His unwavering dedication to environmental conservation and soil rejuvenation has fuelled his visionary pursuit of biochar’s role in sustainable agriculture.



Ahmed aims to tailor biochar formulations to meet the unique soil conditions of Oman, optimising its effectiveness in enhancing soil health and crop yields.

Ahmed passionately states, “Biochar embodies the promise of transforming agricultural landscapes in Oman by enhancing soil fertility, productivity, and sustainability.”

In an exclusive interview with *Oman Daily Observer*, Ahmed delves into the



The moisture-retaining, nutrient-enhancing, and carbon-sequestering properties of biochar collectively represent a holistic approach to sustainable agriculture.

transformative power of biochar and its implications for agricultural innovation in the region. “My academic odyssey has been inspired by the transformative potential of biochar to combat soil degradation and catalyse agricultural sustainability,” Ahmed asserts.

Through his research, he aims to tailor biochar formulations to meet the unique soil conditions of Oman, optimising its effectiveness in enhancing soil health and crop yields.

Amidst a burgeoning wave of eco-conscious entrepreneurship, NTZ Solutions has emerged as a front-runner in biochar production for the Omani market. With a steadfast commitment

to supporting Oman’s ambitious net-zero emission goals, NTZ Solutions has meticulously developed tailored biochar products that cater specifically to the distinctive soil characteristics of Oman.

By harnessing the power of biochar to retain moisture, enrich nutrients and sequester carbon, NTZ Solutions is paving the way for a sustainable agricultural transformation in the region.

“Biochar epitomises a sustainable pathway towards bolstering soil health and minimising environmental impact,” Ahmed passionately articulates.

The moisture-retaining, nutrient-enhancing and carbon-sequestering properties of biochar collectively represent a holistic approach to sustainable agriculture, aligning seamlessly with Oman’s ecological stewardship objectives and climate action commitments.

While the road to widespread biochar adoption in Oman poses challenges such as soil alkalinity and awareness gaps, Ahmed and his team remain steadfast in their mission to surmount these obstacles through innovative research and strategic partnerships.

By conducting meticulous field trials

and fine-tuning biochar formulations, they are at the vanguard of showcasing the tangible benefits of biochar for Omani farmers and policymakers alike.

“Customised biochar formulations are the cornerstone of unleashing the full potential of sustainable agriculture in Oman,” Ahmed affirms.

By demonstrating biochar’s prowess in enhancing soil health, boosting crop yields and mitigating climate change, he aspires to catalyse a paradigm shift towards environmentally conscious agricultural practices across the region.

Looking ahead, the horizons for biochar in the Middle East shimmer with promise and potential. As awareness burgeons regarding biochar’s myriad benefits and successful case studies underscore its transformative impact, the demand for sustainable soil amendments is primed to skyrocket.

With cutting-edge advancements in production techniques and an escalating emphasis on environmental sustainability, biochar stands poised to carve a niche as a quintessential component of sustainable agriculture and climate resilience efforts in the region.

SBA announces Toyota’s Biggest Excitement raffle draw winner

MUSCAT: Saud Bahwan Automotive (SBA) recently announced one more winner of Toyota’s Biggest Excitement campaign’s raffle draw. The winner of the Toyota Crown is Said bin Moshin bin Fael bin Mohammed al Jahhafi (pictured) from Izki.

To bring customers closer to owning their favourite Toyota vehicle, the Biggest Excitement campaign offers customers buying a new Toyota, a chance to enter the raffle draw & win one from 5 Toyota Crown cars and avail exclusive benefits including service from 3 Years / 30,000 kms up to 10 years / 100,000 kms (whichever is earlier), insurance 1 year and free registration.

Apart from that customers can also avail attractive instalments. The campaign is valid from March 3, 2024 up to May 1, 2024 (Prospective buyers may be advised that the benefits vary between model variants, model year and manufacturing year. EMI calculated are for base models with 20 per cent down payment for 10 years.

Loan approval is based on the sole discretion of banks. Terms & Conditions apply. Customers



can visit any Saud Bahwan Automotive showroom for exact details.)

An excited Said sharing his thoughts said, “Thank you Toyota Oman for this wonderful Ramadhan gift. I am very happy to have won this. I cannot describe in words how excited and happy I

am. Indeed being a customer of Toyota definitely has its benefits.” Speaking about why he choose a Toyota, he said, “I have always been a customer of Toyota due to its exceptional characteristics of quality, durability and reliability. Something that really enhances the joy of owning a vehicle that

stays with you longer.

This time, I purchased a Toyota Hilux S/C 2.7 GL-S Premium and although I was wishing to win a Toyota Crown, I never really imagined it would happen. As we all know no one can predict luck. I am definitely going to enjoy driving experiences in the Crown, that is for sure.”

Building on the legacy of one of the world’s best-loved vehicles since the 1950s the Crown has been built to provide an intuitive driving experience that will exceed expectations and establish a new benchmark.

When the first generation was launched, the Crown came to symbolise “innovation” and “pushing the limit” within Toyota. Since then, it has gained recognition in Japan as Toyota’s premium sedan. The Toyota Crown is built around the Toyota New Global Architecture (TNGA-K) platform.

For the latest press releases, test drive requests and more, please visit www.toyotaoman.com, www.youtube.com/toyotaoman, www.facebook.com/toyotaoman, and instagram.com/toyotaomanofficial/.



Al Omaniya Financial Services announces RO 3.201m net profits

MUSCAT: The annual general meeting of Al Omaniya Financial Services was held on March 27, 2024 and the meeting was presided by the Chairman Khalid bin Said al Wahaibi, Chairman of the board of directors stated that the shareholders have given their approval for the audited financial statements of the company as well as for the 13.25% dividend comprising of 8.25% cash dividend and 5% unsecured non-convertible redeemable bonus stock bonds.

The board of directors appreciated the measures taken by the Central Bank of Oman and the Capital Market Authority with a view to strengthening the financial sector in the Sultanate of Oman.

Aftab Patel, Chief Executive Officer added that the company’s loan book stands at RO 140 million at the year end of 2023. The total revenues of the company stood at RO 17.327 million. The pre-tax profit stands at RO 3.755 million and the net profit is RO 3.201 million.

The earnings per share is RO 0.010 and net worth of the company stands at RO 70.908 million. The book value of the share is RO 0.217.

He further added that the company has a well diversified portfolio of assets with the lowest NPA ratio of 2.65% in the industry (As per IFRS9).

The cumulative ECL provisions towards Instalment finance receivable including special reserve for non-performing assets stands at RO 18,349K which covers 493% of the non-performing assets.

Patel stated that the company has been at the forefront of issuing innovative financial instruments and that the company has pioneered the issue of bonus stock convertible bonds as dividends over several years.

The company has been paying consistent dividend and has the unique distinction of paying dividend every single year since inception. The cumulative total dividend paid so far is 491.83%.

Sohar International sets benchmark in GCC banking sector

MUSCAT: Sohar International, the fastest-growing bank in the Sultanate of Oman, has showcased remarkable growth among top banks in the GCC as it firmly positions itself as a pioneering institution with a strong road-map and a vision for progress.

This has come to light in a new KPMG report, titled: ‘GCC Listed Banks’ Results: Adaptation and Growth’. The report factored in countries comprising the GCC (i.e. Oman, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait) and summarised the financial results and selected key performance indicators (KPIs) of the 52 leading GCC banks for the year-ended December 31, 2023.

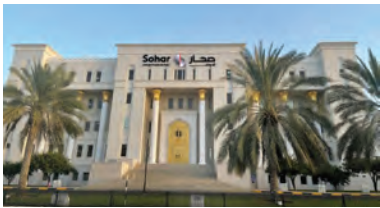
Demonstrating unparalleled growth and robust financial performance throughout the fiscal year 2023, Sohar International achieved top rankings in Total Assets and Return on Equity (ROE) among all GCC banks, solidifying its status at the forefront of excellence and innovation in the financial sector.

Record-breaking growth in total assets: Sohar International led the charge with the highest year-on-year growth in total assets across the GCC, marking a staggering 61.9 per cent increase.

This remarkable achievement underscores the bank’s strong financial health, strategic asset management and commitment to expanding operations and market reach.

Sohar International’s asset growth not only reflects its operational excellence but also its strategic foresight in navigating the dynamic and quickly evolving GCC financial landscape.

Excellence in shareholder value: In addition to its asset growth, Sohar International has also distinguished itself by securing the second position in the return on equity (ROE) category across the GCC. This notable accomplishment is a testament to the bank’s efficiency in utilising equity and generating significant profits from its assets.



Mazda Oman unveils latest Ramadhan campaign

MUSCAT: Mazda Oman proudly announces its latest campaign, “Season of Blessings in Every Mazda Drive.” This specially designed initiative celebrates the holy month with exceptional offers that resonate with the values of generosity and joy. As families and communities come together during Ramadhan, Mazda Oman recognises the importance of giving back.

They are dedicated to providing customers with not just a vehicle, but a journey filled with blessings, comfort, and unparalleled excellence. Renowned for its focus on innovation, safety, and driving pleasure, Mazda is making it easier than ever to embark on a rewarding ownership experience with a range of exclusive Ramadhan offers.

These offers are designed to ensure that every Mazda drive is a journey filled with blessings. Customers can enjoy complimentary first-



year registration and insurance coverage in Oman, ensuring a seamless and worry-free transition to Mazda ownership. Additionally, the Iinjaz+

Service package extends over 5 years or 100,000 kilometres, guaranteeing the continued excellence of their Mazda. AAA Roadside Assistance,

available for 3 years, supports peace of mind readily available for any adventure. Mazda Oman’s Equated Monthly Instalment (EMI) plans are specifically designed to make owning a Mazda a reality.

Attractive EMI starting prices begin at only RO 89, available on popular models like the Mazda 6, Mazda CX-30, Mazda CX-9, Mazda CX-60, and Mazda CX-90. These thoughtfully designed plans feature a 20% down payment showcasing Mazda’s commitment to affordability and customer satisfaction.

The “Season of Blessings in Every Mazda Drive” campaign, valid until May 18, 2024, offers a unique opportunity to experience the joy and satisfaction of owning a Mazda.

This Ramadhan, let Mazda be a part of your journey. Their vehicles are not just cars, but companions that represent safety, innovation, and the joy of driving.

Alfa Romeo Tonale: Setting new standards in performance and luxury

MUSCAT: MHD Automobiles, the premier distributor of luxury performance automotive brands in Oman, is delighted to announce the launch of the all-new Alfa Romeo Tonale.

This latest addition to the Alfa Romeo lineup sets a new benchmark in its class, offering unmatched power, advanced technology, and an exceptional ownership experience.

The Alfa Romeo Tonale is engineered to deliver exhilarating performance, featuring the most powerful engine in its class. With a 2.0 Turbo engine paired with a 9-speed automatic transmission, the Tonale delivers an impressive 268horsepower,ensuringdynamic acceleration and an exhilarating driving experience. Its remarkable

0-100 km/h acceleration time of just 6.5 seconds demonstrates its unparalleled performance on Oman’s roads.

The Tonale is available in two distinctive trims: Ti and Veloce. The Ti version features sporty design elements both inside and out, including a satin chrome V front bezel, 20-inch dark finish diamond cut alloy wheels, gloss-black body kit, black painted mirror caps, and a sport leather steering wheel.

Inside, the Veloce offers fully electrical ventilated black leather seats and aluminium door sills. Safety is paramount in the Tonale, with advanced features designed to provide peace of mind on every journey. Equipped with all-wheel-drive (AWD) capability, the



Tonale offers enhanced traction and stability, ensuring confident handling in all driving conditions. To further enhance the

ownership experience, MHD Automobiles is offering exclusive Ramadhan offers on the Alfa Romeo range. Customers can

enjoy a segment-leading 7 years/200,000 km manufacturer’s warranty, along with 5 years/120,000 km complimentary service, complimentary first year insurance, registration and 5 years /100,000 km roadside assistance.

Additionally, customers can take advantage of special financing options, including a 50% down payment and 50% payment in 12 months with 0% interest, subject to credit approval from the selected bank and finance company.

Customers visiting the Alfa Romeo showroom in Al Hail during the offer period also have the chance to win an iPhone.

“We are thrilled to introduce the Alfa Romeo Tonale to the customers in Oman,” said Mohsin bin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of

MHD Automobiles.

“With its combination of performance, technology, and safety features, we believe the Tonale will exceed expectations and redefine luxury driving experiences in the Sultanate of Oman. We invite all automotive enthusiasts to visit our showroom and discover the remarkable Tonale for themselves.”

The Alfa Romeo Tonale is available for a starting price of RO 18,995 with convenient EMI options starting from RO 199. This exclusive offer is valid for a limited time. For more information about the new Alfa Romeo Tonale and the exclusive Ramadhan offers, customers are encouraged to visit the Alfa Romeo showroom in Al Hail or call 80022008.



Credit Oman posts 7% growth in insured export, domestic sales

MUSCAT: Credit Oman's performance last year witnessed a growth of 7 per cent in the total volume of insured export and domestic sales to reach RO 356.96 million, compared to RO 333.289 million in 2022.

During the past year, Credit Oman achieved a profit of RO 719,185, a growth rate of 20 per cent compared to 2022.

Shaikh Khalil al Harithi (pictured), CEO of Credit Oman, said: The percentage of insured export sales on Credit Oman out of the total insurable Omani non-oil exports amounted to 6.62 per cent.

In a statement to the Oman News Agency: "This increase comes as a result of intensified efforts to serve manufacturers and exporters, which led to an increase in the total insurance premiums in 2023, reaching RO1.168 million, with a growth rate of 17 per cent compared to 2022, when it reached RO 994, 969.

Credit Oman worked to allocate more funds to debt instruments and company shares, as the ownership value reached RO 17.4 million compared to 2022, which amounts to RO 16.5



million, compared to its original capital of RO 10 million, while the total assets exceeded RO 19 million.

Credit Oman witnessed in 2023 an increase in the total credit ceilings granted to policyholders for local sales and exports to reach RO 221.896 million compared RO 188.826 million in 2022. The number of buyers whose credit is insured by Credit Oman increased by 19 per cent, reaching 3,407 buyers in 2023.

He stressed that Credit Oman continues its efforts to enable Omani exports and local sales through a package of insurance services that it provides, which contribute to the sale of these products locally and globally, entering promising markets in various countries of the world, and reducing commercial and non-commercial risks. — **ONA**

Monenco named OETC consultant for Dhofar grid station projects

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 30

Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC), the majority state-owned operator of Oman's national power grid, has tapped leading engineering design services firm Monenco to provide consultancy services linked to the establishment of a number of grid stations and associated overhead transmission lines in Dhofar Governorate.

Monenco Oman, with experience spanning the Power, Oil & Gas, Renewables, Infrastructure, Mining and Rail sectors, was among a number of firms that received contract awards totalling RO 332 million in value last week.

Those contracts covered Phase 2 of OETC's North-South Interconnection Project (Rabt), the construction of a number of grid stations, installations of hundreds of kilometres of overhead lines, and network upgrades in Dhofar.

"Monenco Oman is honoured to be part of this great development in the Sultanate of Oman as OETC Consultant for the construction of three grid stations (GS) — Mudhi GS, Shahab Aseeb GS, Mazyunah



OETC is making substantial investments in upgrading Oman's power transmission system.

GS as well as the extension of the Thamrait GS along with associated 280km of overhead transmission lines in Dhofar (Governorate)," it announced in a post.

The three grid stations planned at Mudhi, Shahab Aseeb and Mazyunah are rated at 132kV/33kV each equipped with an array of switchgear bays, transformers and assorted protection and control equipment. The existing Thamrait GS will be expanded to include several GIS bays and other hardware. All four grid stations will be interlinked via a network

of overhead transmission lines of a total distance of 280km.

Underscoring its presence in the Omani power services space, Monenco was also contracted to design the tie-in of a first-of-its-kind polysilicon manufacturing project, the ground-breaking on which was celebrated in Suhar recently, with a 400kV substation.

The client was United Solar Holding Co, which is investing RO 520 million in a 100,000 tonnes per annum capacity polysilicon plant at Sohar Freezone. The ground-breaking was witnessed by top officials of the Omani

government.

"We are pleased to announce that consultancy services of the power supply tie-in plan design of a 400kV substation for the 100 kilotonne per annum polysilicon project in Sohar Freezone has been awarded to Monenco Consulting Engineers by United Solar Polysilicon (FZC) SPC Co. The projects includes System Study, Engineering Services, Tendering, Bids evaluation and supervision of project successful implementation," Monenco added in a separate post.

Oman real estate trading valued at RO 394 million

MUSCAT: The total value of real estate trading in the Sultanate of Oman witnessed a decrease of 11.7 per cent, reaching by end of February 2024, RO 394.9 million, compared to RO 447.3 million during the same period in 2023.

Preliminary statistics issued by the National Center for Statistics and Information (NCSI) indicated that the fees collected for all legal transactions amounted to RO 11.6 million, a decrease of 7.2 per cent from the end of February 2023, while the traded value of sales contracts amounted to RO 196.2 million for 11,543 sales contracts with a



The number of properties issued by end of February reached to about 39,378.

decrease in value 5.4 per cent.

However there was an increase in the number of contracts by 6.6 per cent.

The traded value of mortgage contracts decreased by 17.5 per cent, recording RO 196.5 million for 2,989 contracts, while the number of swap contracts reached 299, RO 2.2 million.

The number of properties issued by end of February reached to about 39,378, an increase of 0.8 per cent, while the number of properties issued to GCC citizens reached 212 properties, an increase of one per cent.

— **ONA**

Oman imports vehicle spare parts worth RO 114.2 million

MUSCAT: Oman's total imports of vehicle spare parts in 2023 amounted to RO114.228 million, a decrease of 29.1 per cent compared to 2022 with RO 161.106 million.

Data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) indicated that the total weight of vehicle spare parts imported by Oman last year reached to about 27.277 million kilogrammes.

The United Arab Emirates topped the countries in supplying vehicle spare parts to Oman in 2023 with a value of RO 46.087 million, followed by Japan with RO 41.059 million, Thailand with RO 6.703 million and China with RO 4.577 million.

On the other hand, statistics showed that the total value of Oman's exports of vehicle spare parts in 2023 was about RO 92.102 million, a decrease



of 15.3 per cent compared to the value of exports in 2022 with RO 108.745 million. The total weight of vehicle spare parts exported in 2023 reached 40.978 million kilogrammes.

The United Arab Emirates came at the forefront of countries importing vehicle spare parts from Oman last year, with a value of RO 39.124 million, followed by the United States with RO 8.226 million, Czech Republic with RO 7.67 million.

The total number of institutions and establishments selling spare parts for motor vehicles in Oman in 2022 reached 3,202 institutions. — **ONA**

Efforts ongoing to position Dhofar as year-round tourism destination

FROM PAGE 13

Turning to other initiatives planned elsewhere in Oman, Al Mahrouqi said that landmark projects, such as the Al Jabal Al Akhdhar initiative, are expected to significantly enhance Oman's competitiveness within the global tourism landscape.

In this regard, he underscored the importance of promoting local content, increasing the sector's

contribution to job creation, and implementing best practices in sustainability.

Looking ahead, participation in upcoming exhibitions like the Arabian Travel Market in Dubai, and a London exhibition later this year, is planned. The ministry is actively strategising to ensure distinct and impactful participation in these events. Additionally, efforts are under way to target East Asian

nations with a large number of non-tourist Umrah performers, with the aim of attracting them to Oman as a stopover destination on their pilgrimage journeys.

Following the high-level discussions on Friday, Al Mahrouqi, accompanied by ministry officials, embarked on field visits to assess the progress of ongoing projects and preparations for the upcoming Khareef season, renowned for its

unique monsoon climate.

These visits aimed to evaluate the readiness of tourist facilities, monitor development initiatives, and ensure the availability of essential services for visitor comfort. Expressing his appreciation to all partners, the minister acknowledged their vital role in propelling Dhofar Governorate's transformation into a global tourist hub.

5G Innovation Centre to be established in Dhofar University

MUSCAT: Transforming how young students learn and share knowledge, Ooredoo partnered with ZTE, a global leading provider of information and communication technology solutions, and Dhofar University to establish a cutting-edge 5G Innovation Centre (5GIC).

The smart and next-gen 5G campus will be located at Dhofar University's Faculty of Engineering and will drive innovation and continuous learning, shaping a brighter future for all stakeholders in Oman.

Meanwhile, the name of the tripartite university-industry

partnership will be the 'Dhofar University — Ooredoo — ZTE 5G Innovation Lab Project'.

Bassam Yousef al Ibrahim, Chief Executive Officer at Ooredoo, said, "This collaboration between industry and academia is part of our commitment to playing a significant role in driving Oman's digital transformation and supporting Omani youth and education.

The smart 5G campus will upgrade the learning environment for students in Oman and support the emerging Internet of Skills. In an increasingly connected world, we need to leverage the



The Centre drive innovation and continuous learning, shaping a brighter future for all stakeholders in Oman.

many powers of 5G and IoT technologies, which, thanks to 5G's ultra-low latency and super-fast connectivity, includes the creation

of outstanding remote and virtual learning environments."

Zhang Meng, Managing Director of Ooredoo Group

Business Unit at ZTE, said, "We are honoured to cooperate with Ooredoo and Dhofar University in Salalah, Oman, to establish a cutting-edge 5G Innovation Centre. The collaborative efforts demonstrate ZTE's commitment to the Omani society by driving innovation, fostering continuous education and nurturing telecommunications industry talents at Dhofar University and across Oman."

Professor Amer al Rawas, Dhofar University (DU) Vice Chancellor, said, "We are excited that a 5G Innovation Centre will be established at our campus.

This centre will serve as a national hub for education, research and training, empowering students, faculty, and professionals to explore the full potential of cutting-edge 5G technologies and related Internet of Things (IoT).

This initiative aligns with DU's commitment to academic excellence by integrating the latest technological advancement in our curriculum to help equip graduates hone their practical skills and be ready to contribute to the development of our beloved nation in line with Oman Vision 2040."

High risk, high reward? SBF sentenced as crypto volatility surges

Sam Bankman-Fried, the former CEO of the collapsed cryptocurrency exchange FTX, was sentenced to 25 years in prison after being found guilty of fraud and money laundering. His sentence follows a dramatic fall from grace, once being considered a visionary in the industry. The ruling sends a strong message of potential consequences for misconduct within the cryptocurrency space. FTX, established in 2019, rapidly ascended the ranks to become one of the world's leading cryptocurrency exchanges. Its sister company, Alameda Research, was a trading firm with deep financial ties to FTX. The downfall of both companies began in November 2022 when investigations revealed a web of mismanagement and the misuse of billions of dollars in customer funds. The FTX scandal served as



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THE FTX SCANDAL SERVED AS STRONG REMINDER OF THE INHERENT RISKS OF CRYPTOCURRENCY, ONE OF THE MOST HIGHLY VOLATILE AND SPECULATIVE ASSET CLASS ON THE MARKET.

strong reminder of the inherent risks of cryptocurrency, one of the most highly volatile and speculative asset class on the market. Unlike traditional financial markets, crypto companies might operate with less rigorous oversight. While investors must always approach crypto with extreme caution and understand that gains and losses can be swift, there are two distinct schools of thought regarding regulation. One perspective advocates for increased regulation, arguing for exchanges that prioritise transparency, security measures, and adhere to know-your-customer (KYC) verification protocols. Proponents of regulation believe these practices could help safeguard investors. Conversely, others express concerns that heavy-handed regulation could stifle innovation and the decentralised nature of cryptocurrencies. They argue that the self-

regulatory potential of the industry shouldn't be dismissed. The Sam Bankman-Fried fraud case also fuelled an unexpected surge in meme coins bearing his name. Tokens like "Sam Baseman Fraud" on the Ethereum scaling network Base saw a stunning 35,000 per cent jump in price before ultimately collapsing. This volatility is becoming more and more second nature for the unpredictable and speculative meme coin market. Meme coins, inspired by internet culture and often lacking intrinsic value, have become an established phenomenon within the cryptocurrency space. These projects embody a culture where investors speculate for potential short-term profits with less focus on long-term implications, often referred to as 'degen' behaviour. The degen mindset embraces highly-risky bets on projects they believe could rapidly rise in value ("go to the moon"), regardless of

whether the underlying project offers genuine utility or long-term viability. While some meme coins experience explosive price surges, the survivorship bias obscures countless projects that fail to gain traction. "Som Bonkman Fraud," a Solana-based token, spiked around 15,000 per cent shortly after its creation, followed by a swift decline exceeding 90 per cent in the past 24 hours. Despite the rapid depreciation, the token has seen enormous trading volumes, surpassing \$24 million in just a day. Opinions on meme coins within the crypto community are sharply divided. On the one hand those who argue that meme coins draw attention and new users to the cryptocurrency space, potentially fuelling broader adoption. On the other hand those who believe that meme coins distract from the fundamental

value proposition of blockchain technology and its potential for innovation and real-world applications. Financial assets such as stocks and shares could be traded on blockchain-based exchange, holding the key to mainstream adoption. This would integrate traditional financial processes within a blockchain framework. Similar to how Initial Coin Offerings (ICOs) introduced a new form of technology-driven fundraising, tokenised assets could offer increased efficiency, transparency, and accessibility compared to traditional stock exchanges. ***Disclaimer:** The information provided in this article should not be considered financial advice. The cryptocurrency market remains dynamic and carries risks. It's essential to conduct your own thorough research and consult with qualified professionals before making any investment decisions.*

New technology fosters ongoing synergy between green and blue economies

By 2030, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent the greatest strategy to establish a recovered future for all. These goals requires intervention from all countries, developed and developing, to boost economic growth while protecting the environment. To achieve these goals, it is necessary to implement policies that promote economic growth, address a variety of social as well as environmental issues by combating climate change and preserving oceans and forests, and by consequent combating poverty. As far as environment sustainability is concerned, the blue and green economies reflect two different economic approaches, to achieve sustainable economic growth, through different sectors including ecotourism, renewable ocean energy, green shipping, and sustainable fishing. The 'blue' and 'green' economies complement one another in terms of attaining the three main pillars of SDG: economic, social and environmental. The concept 'blue economy' used synonymously with 'sustainable ocean-based economy' originates from the widened blue colour of our oceans and seas. The efficient use of scare blue resources can generate new job opportunities and social equity. The blue economy applies sustainability concepts especially to marine and oceanic habitats. Whereas the green economy adopts a broader perspective that includes changes in all economic sectors. As human economies and ecosystems are intertwined, the success of one ultimately depends on the other. Developments in the green economy in the areas



DR KARIMA SAYARI

The author is an Associate Professor in the Department of Managerial and Financial Sciences at Al Zahar College for Women. She holds a bachelor's degree in international trade, a master's degree in economics and international finance, and a PhD in Finance and Economic Sciences.

AS FAR AS ENVIRONMENT SUSTAINABILITY IS CONCERNED, THE BLUE AND GREEN ECONOMIES REFLECT TWO DIFFERENT ECONOMIC APPROACHES, TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH, THROUGH DIFFERENT SECTORS INCLUDING ECOTOURISM, RENEWABLE OCEAN ENERGY, GREEN SHIPPING AND SUSTAINABLE FISHING.



The 'blue' and 'green' economies complement one another in terms of attaining the three main pillars of SDG: economic, social and environmental.

of transportation, energy, infrastructure, and agriculture may prevent ecological harm to priceless marine resources, especially land-based pollution. On the other hand, the sustainability of the interconnected terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems protected under the auspices of the green economy is crucial for the sustainable utilisation of the potential of oceans and coasts through blue economy principles in sectors such as fisheries, shipping, tourism, and renewable ocean energy. The blue and green economies thus merge together on the canvas of sustainable development, much more so than different shades on a palette. The primary arguments illustrate incidental relationships, which mean that actions in the green economy impact results in the blue economy and vice versa. The development of the blue economy and the wellbeing of marine ecosystems depend on the adoption of green economy principles in terrestrial economic activities. To minimise pollution and runoff into rivers and oceans, for example, major sectors such as industry, agriculture, and energy can switch to more sustainably generated goods and services. The sustainable use of ocean resources by the blue economy might expedite the shift of the land economy toward a circular economy by providing renewable energy, ecologically acceptable raw materials, transportation, and other essentials. In addition, the adoption of smart blue economy policies creates more 'green jobs' in the maritime sectors, such as green shipping, renewable marine energy, eco-tourism, and marine conservation. The green economy's efforts to cut emissions are directly aided by the blue economy's emphasis on low-carbon mobility, renewable ocean energy, and coastal carbon sequestration. Therefore, we can ensure the future existence of aquatic species by protecting significant related ecosystems, such wetlands and forests. In essence, the synergies also suggest that progress in the land-based green economy or

the ocean-based blue economy cannot happen independently. Supporting one has a positive impact on the outcomes of the other. Encouraging collaboration and communication across the policies, technology, and financial flows that drive both is essential to their shared success. Because the blue and green economies are causally linked, they must grow together to achieve sustainable growth. Technological innovation plays a primordial role in promoting this synergy and accelerating the achievement of sustainable economic growth. For this reason, the innovative use of technology needs to be considered in the continuous pursuit of new practical paths to green growth. Greener growth and a sustainable blue economy are facilitated by the energy industry's increased innovation and by utilising new technologies in developing ocean-based enterprises. Utilising sustainable technology makes it feasible to produce renewable ocean energy. Smart fishing technology includes things like artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and vessel monitoring systems that can aid with more precise and sustainable fishing while reducing bycatch and environmental impact. Artificial intelligence, drones, sensors, and satellites all help to increase the efficiency of resource management. Moreover, green maritime transport is more achievable through technology like onshore power supply, wind/solar assisted propulsion, and improved hull and propeller design provide significant reductions in shipping emissions. Sustainability necessitates significant technology advancements in every industry, not just surface-level adjustments. Before they attain maturity, these systemic changes —to renewable energy systems, circular material flows, regenerative agriculture, and green mobility—need to be patiently nurtured over extended periods of time. The path from laboratory to market is fraught with technological and business hazards that are too great for private companies to handle on their own. Alongside technical advances, new arrangements for legislation, industrial partnerships, infrastructure, and societal acceptability need to be made. Therefore, governments must carefully design ecosystems and undertake targeted interventions to assist technology overcome certain challenges to drive innovation. A variety of policy tools are needed to address the current state of the climate and the environment, in part because the obstacles to emerging sustainable technologies are complex and frequently vary between different technologies.

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HADITH

GUIDE FOR THE FAITHFUL



Abu Ayyoob Al-Ansaari, may Allah be pleased with him, reported that the Messenger of Allah, may Allah's peace and blessings be upon him, said:

"It is unlawful for a Muslim to desert his fellow Muslim for more than three nights. As they meet, both of them turn their backs on each other. However, the best of them is the one who starts by greeting the other".

FATWA



HIS EMINENCE
SHAIKH AHMED BIN
HAMAD AL KHALILI
GRAND MUFTI OF OMAN

If a pregnant woman is bleeding during Ramadhan, can she fast?

She can fast and pray if it does not affect her health.

QURAN

VERSE OF THE DAY

But man wants to deny what is ahead of him. He asks, "When is the Day of Resurrection?" When vision is dazzled. And the moon is eclipsed. And the sun and the moon are joined together.

(al Qiyamah)



Ramadhan

SUNDAY | MARCH 31, 2024 | RAMADHAN 20, 1445 AH

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CHARITY IN ISLAM: THE POWER OF GIVING

BY KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

In Islam, the term 'Giving' encompasses a multitude of meanings, and it is one of the acts that the religion urges its followers to experience and feel the warmth of, because charity, including Zakat, is one of the most essential parts of Islam's Five Pillars.

According to Islam, the act of giving is not merely a matter of

ticed by a wealthy person. And start giving first to your dependents and the upper hand is better than the lower hand'. It means that he who gives in charity is better than him who takes it and that one should start giving first to his dependents.

During the holy month, it is a regular sight that foods and other provisions are generously given to people from different walks of life irrespective of their backgrounds or ethnic origins in and

in Ruwi, told the *Observer*.

These small yet significant initiatives make a real difference in the lives of many, providing great relief to fasting individuals who are either on the move, away at work, or unable to break their fast on time.

Side by side, the mass iftars and suhoors happening in the country offer another relief for people on the move as they help them complete their fasting on time.

Every day, around sunset, a large number of labourers are seen lining up for their turn to enter the tent and break their fast as the prayer call sounds from the nearby Sultan Qaboos Mosque.

"We provide iftar for many from the iftar tent in Ruwi as part of our CSR, and we allocate a portion of our charity works for such initiatives that support society every year. We are glad that our iftar tent in Ruwi has been well received and has become a stop for those in need," said repre-



personal choice or generosity; it is a religious obligation, and the holy Quran explicitly commands people to give a portion of one's earnings after keeping the required provision for oneself and one's family.

In the holy Quran Surah 70, verse 24-5, it is said that charity is a "recognised right, for the needy and deprived over our wealth and so by giving for the sake of others, a Muslim is fulfilling a duty to those in need and preventing him or her from becoming proud of their own generosity".

Prophet Muhammad (May Peace Be Upon Him) said, 'The best charity is that which is prac-



around the cities.

Towards sunset, individuals, corporations, associations, and different organisations and groups of people bring loads of iftar kits to be distributed to the long queues of people who make it a point to be in line for the day's meal. Such distributions are happening at far-flung places where people are engaged in arduous jobs and other works related to construction and maintenance.

"We distribute, not to mention, nearly 50 to 100 iftar kits as part of our CSR initiatives every day to the people who gather at several areas of the cities," representatives of Unimoni Exchange, who were seen distributing food kits



sentatives of Malabar Gold, which has built a tent in downtown Ruwi just to cater to fasting individuals.

Similar food distribution initiatives have been seen in other parts of the city, albeit on a smaller scale, thanks to the efforts of individuals within and outside the capital area, aimed at serving people who are on the move.

"I'm not concerned about whether the receiving person is fasting or not because for a Muslim, giving is most important, not someone's identity," says Abdullah al Ajmi, an Omani national who distributes food from his 4x4 in Rusail Industrial area every day.

FASHION

Valentino's creative director is departing

THE FASHION HOUSE Valentino announced on Friday that Pierpaolo Piccioli, its creative director, would be leaving after more than two decades at the brand and just weeks after unveiling a much heralded womenswear collection during Paris Fashion Week.

Piccioli was instrumental in redefining Valentino for the era after the retirement of the brand's founder, Valentino Garavani. Worn by celebrities such as Frances McDormand and Florence Pugh, his work combined ease and elegance in an ineffably modern way.

"I've been in this company for 25 years, and for 25 years I've existed and I've lived with the people who have woven the weaves of this beautiful story that is mine and ours," Piccioli, 56, said in a statement. The news of his departure sent reverberations around the fashion industry. "I'm between stunned and stupefied," Linda Fargo, fashion director of Bergdorf Goodman, wrote in an email.

Piccioli had been the sole creative director of Valentino since July 2016, when Maria Grazia Chiuri left to become creative director at Dior. The duo had run the design side of the

house since 2008, a decade after joining the Rome-based company in 1999.

Although it had often been presumed by observers that the romance of their clothes came from Chiuri and the edge from Piccioli, when the pair separated, it became clear that he was, in fact, the more dreamy of the two.

His shows often seemed like immersions in a painterly netherworld of unexpected palettes and gorgeous lines, complete with ostrich feather hats that trembled like sea anemones with the breeze. He held couture extravaganzas on the Spanish Steps in Rome and at the Château de Chantilly near Paris.

In 2022, he devoted almost an entire ready-to-wear collection to a new hot pink — called "Pink PP" after his initials — that proved a hit with celebrities and an effective viral marketing tool. However, his most recent



ready-to-wear collection was entirely black, a reflection of the dark times in which we are living, he said before the show.

"When you are aware of the darkness, you can look to the light," Piccioli said. "But we have to face that, not escape it."

Beloved of the atelier — he often brought the entire team out on the runway with him to take a bow after his couture shows — and an anomaly in a fashion world where founders often resent the designers who later helm their brands, Piccioli retained a close relationship with Garavani and his co-founder, Giancarlo Giammetti, both of whom were often applauding from the front row of Piccioli's shows.

"Thank you, PP, for these twenty years together and may your path continue with your head held high and with the success you deserve," Giammetti wrote on Instagram.

— NYT

HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF MUSLIM FAITH

632

Prophet Muhammad dies in Medina

In 632, Prophet Muhammad passed away in Medina, marking the end of his leadership. This event, known as the "death of the Prophet," holds immense significance for Muslims. It symbolises the completion of his mission, leaving a profound legacy of faith, guidance and community-building.

RAMADHAN REFLECTIONS

THIS RAMADHAN, THINK BEFORE YOU POST



BY LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

Being considerate is an attribute of Ramadhan. When observing the Holy Month of Ramadhan, one of its attributes is being considerate. There are numerous ways in which one can demonstrate consideration through actions, words and intentions. However, there is a particular behaviour in which many of us may have engaged knowingly or unknowingly, which warrants reconsideration.

Hatim bin Harith al Abdissalaam, a Life Coach and member of the Islamic Information Centre, elucidated that this behaviour pertains to the sharing of certain types of images on social media. What we choose to portray on social media, even if done innocently, can significantly impact others. While our posts may convey happiness and excitement, they can evoke feelings of despondency in those who are struggling.

"We should be considerate of others and move away from the notion that everything revolves solely around us. We should consider the well-being of other people. The reason I emphasise this is because we witness it firsthand. On the very first day of Ramadhan, we witnessed images and videos of people in Gaza lacking the means to break their fast or having very little," said Hatim.

He emphasised that although we may not be able to alleviate their situation entirely, we can still make an effort, no matter how small. It is essential to reduce the frequency of sharing images and videos depicting lavish meals and gatherings so as not to inadvertently hurt the feelings of our brothers and sisters in Gaza, who are enduring challenging circumstances.

"Every time we showcase a picture of a lavish meal we're about to enjoy, someone elsewhere in the world is deprived of that. And when they see it, it may stir feelings of envy or sadness in their hearts. We should avoid creating opportunities for others to envy what we possess," he remarked.

Hatim underscored that a way to show appreciation and gratitude to Allah for the blessings bestowed upon us is to utilise them wisely and consume only what is necessary.

"Let us refrain from excess and refrain from filling our tables with an array of foods only to discard them later," he urged.



THE GUARDIANS OF OMAN'S MOUNTAINS AND SYMBOLS OF RESILIENCE

BY ARWA AL HASHIMI

PHOTOS BY ABDULRAHMAN AL MUQBALI

During the holy month, Muslims around the world prepare for a period of spiritual reflection, fasting, and increased devotion. Among the many virtues celebrated during this time, the pursuit of knowledge holds a special significance.

In Islam, seeking knowledge is highly encouraged, and Ramadhan provides an opportunity moment to deepen one's understanding of faith and the world. Engaging in educational activities during this sacred time not only fosters personal growth but also strengthens communal bonds.

The benefits of being out in nature complement the learning experience during Ramadhan. Nature's tranquillity provides a conducive environment for contemplation and reflection, enhancing the spiritual journey of individuals. Moreover, the mental and physical well-being that comes from spending time outdoors supports a more positive and productive learning process.

One of the fascinating things to experience when going out and about in Oman during Ramadhan is the opportunity to also learn a lot of things about some of Oman's treasures. For one photographer, his lens captures the beauty of Sarh trees.

Maerua Crassifolia is the scientific name of the Sarh tree, commonly found in the dry and open areas of Oman.

The Sarh tree, a large shrubby plant, typically reaches a height of 5 meters. It is indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula, particularly Oman and the UAE, and is often grazed by camels.

This evergreen tree boasts numerous branches, a round crown with a flat top, and thrives in arid regions with sandy, gravel and silt soils. Sarh branches are characterised by their pale green colour and thorns, while the leaves, usually dense and elliptical in shape, may feature a light layer of fluff.

With its remarkably strong taproot, the Sarh tree demonstrates resilience to salinity and harsh desert conditions, including frost and winds. Its leaves and fruits are favoured by animals, though horses and donkeys abstain. The sweet-tasting



fruits are also suitable for human consumption.

The horn-shaped fruits of the Sarh tree are edible, while its single radial flowers bloom from January to February, maturing into small fruits by March.

Dubbed the "desert umbrella" for its widespread presence in desert areas, the Sarh tree offers ample shade and boasts medicinal properties, aiding in the treatment of various ailments such as toothache and

chest diseases.

Al Jabal Al Akhdhar in Oman notably values the Sarh tree for its wood, commonly used in furniture making. Additionally, its oil is utilised to alleviate joint and bone pain and to combat acne. Furthermore, the tree's properties extend to dental care, and its flowers serve as a food source for certain bees, contributing to the production of natural honey.

In regions like Africa, the

Sarh tree serves as a food source for preparing soup and various dishes.

In a bid to preserve the species, the Environment Authority of Oman has mandated that Sarh trees not be felled without proper authorisation, imposing fines for violations. Furthermore, it has included the tree in the National Initiative of Planting 10 million trees, a collaborative effort with various institutions aimed at increasing tree cover.



Ramadhan

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SUNDAY | MARCH 31 | 2024

BRAZIL'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLE TURN TO EU TO SAVE THEIR SAVANNA

AN EU LAW BANNING deforestation-derived products comes into effect at the end of 2024, but for Brazilian Indigenous people it contains an unbearable loophole: the Cerrado, Brazil's vast wooded savanna, is excluded from its scope.

An Indigenous delegation taking up the issue during a visit to Brussels said that the oversight — for a region that supplies Europe with soy — is “a question of survival” for them.

“The Cerrado is my home,” declared Eliane Xunakalo, her feathered head-dress waving in Belgium's spring weather.

The president of the Federation of

cent last year.

- REACHING POINT OF 'NO RETURN' -

The European Commission this year will study possibly enlarging the anti-deforestation law to include other ecosystems and products. The revision will depend on the outcome of a debate between EU member countries and the European Parliament which could take place next year.

For Brazil's Indigenous people, though, urgency is needed.

“Half of the Cerrado has already disappeared,” its prairies and woods giving way to farms turning out soy or other crops, said Isabel Figueiredo of the

growths of native green vegetation. Farm output is only profitable for big multinational companies able to produce at scale.

“The risk is that this amazing ecosystem, with its immense biodiversity and carbon-capture and climate-regulation capacities, will just collapse, and with it its ability to supply water to all parts of Brazil,” Figueiredo warned.

“That would be a point of no return,” she said.

Samuel Caetano, from another NGO, Cerrado Network, underlined that including the Cerrado in the European law “is a question of survival”.

The savanna largely feeds into the

Amazon,” said Giulia Bondi, of the NGO Global Witness.

- LAW'S 'WIDER IMPACT' -

For now, NGOs and activists are looking closely at how the existing legislation will be applied.

The EU's environment commissioner Virginijus Sinkevicius in mid-March visited Paraguay, Bolivia and Ecuador to address criticisms they have of the new law.

The bloc has offered technical and financial help for importers to get their tracing systems up to the needed level, responding to complaints that the EU changes will be costly for smaller farms.



Indigenous Peoples of Mato Grosso, one of the big Brazilian states across which the savanna extends, she visited Brussels last week with other activists to press the European Union to “improve” its anti-deforestation law.

Adopted last year, the legislation requires importers to show their products come from “deforestation-free supply chains” and not from land deforested after 2020.

Its scope covers palm oil, beef, soy, coffee, cocoa, timber and rubber as well as derived products such as furniture and chocolate. It comes into force at the end of December this year.

However the definition of “forest” in the text does not extend to wooded ecosystems such as the Cerrado, which extends through central Brazil and into neighbouring Paraguay and Bolivia.

Much of the soy imported into Europe comes from that zone, and deforestation within it jumped 43 per



Brazilian NGO ISPN (Instituto Sociedade, Populacao e Natureza).

That agriculture and deforestation is preventing water from seeping down to refill artesian supplies, she said.

After harvests, the Cerrado resembles a patchwork of expansive brown-earth fields punctuated with some

Amazon basin's watercourses, “guaranteeing the hydrological balance of Latin America,” he said.

The EU may require importers to abide by environmental rules in producing countries, but “the Cerrado is not protected by Brazilian laws — most of the Brazilian laws are looking at the



“The regulation is indeed quite challenging in terms of traceability, and in terms of the data and data flow that is needed for it to work,” said Nicole Polsterer, from the NGO Fern.

But that should be “favourable” for smallholders as “they would be more visible” if larger companies support them, she said.

Eliane Xunakalo said: “We really hope that this law will have wider impact on Brazil, creating political pressure for greater oversight.”

Bondi, of Global Witness, noted that the EU does require companies to uphold human rights laws in producing countries.

She said companies must be required to respect indigenous peoples' rights in line with national laws.

The EU requirements “can also be used as a tool” to put pressure on the Brazilian government to uphold Indigenous rights, she added. — AFP

Pompeii building site reveals ancient Roman construction methods



ARCHAEOLOGISTS IN POMPEII have unearthed an ancient building site that sheds light on construction techniques used by the Romans to make iconic structures such as the Colosseum and the Pantheon, Italy's culture ministry said on Monday.

The site was probably active until the volcanic Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD, destroying Pompeii in southern Italy, the ministry said in a statement.

The archaeologists found working tools, stacked roof tiles, tuff bricks, and heaps of lime and stones used to create walls.

The Romans had an original technique for making cement, the ministry said, citing findings by the archaeologists who worked with researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.



The Pompeii site, rediscovered only in the 16th century, has seen a burst of recent archaeological activity aimed at halting years of decay and neglect.

Concrete appeared to have been made through “hot mixing”, whereby quicklime was initially mixed with dry pozzolana, or pozzolanic ash, with water added only shortly before walls were erected.

This meant that during wall construction, the mixture of lime, pozzolana and stones was still hot due to a thermal reaction. That helped it dry more quickly, shortening the construction time of the structure.



Normally, quicklime is slaked in water long before use in construction.

Gabriel Zuchtriegel, director of the Pompeii site, said the latest finding “helps us understand many aspects of the great Roman Empire, not least the use of concrete”.

“Without concrete, we would have neither the Colosseum, nor the Pantheon, nor the Baths of Caracalla,” he said.

Archaeologists also found amphorae storage jars which were used to ‘quench’ the lime used for plastering as well as to store other tools, from lead weights used to erect a perfectly vertical wall, to iron hoes to prepare mortar and work lime. — Reuters