

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, Emir of the State of Qatar, on the occasion of the National Day of the sisterly State of Qatar. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his best wishes to the Emir of Qatar wishing him good health and long life, and praying to Allah the Almighty to return the occasion on him and the Qatari people with more progress and prosperity.



HM OFFERS CONDOLENCES TO EMIR OF KUWAIT



KUWAIT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Monday offered condolences to Shaikh Meshal Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait, Al Sabah Family and the people of Kuwait on the death of the forgiven, by the will of the Almighty Allah, the late Emir of Kuwait Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, when Shaikh Meshal received His Majesty the Sultan at the Emiri Airport.

During the meeting, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere and heartfelt sympathies on the immense loss, praying to the Almighty Allah to have mercy on his soul, to rest him in peace in heavens and grant the Al Sabah Family and the people of Kuwait fortitude to bear the loss.

On his turn, the Emir of Kuwait expressed his deep thanks and appreciation for His Majesty the Sultan and his accompanying delegation for their ardent sentiments. He prayed to the Almighty Allah to protect His Majesty the Sultan, grant him continued good health and spare Omani people all harm.

His Majesty the Sultan was accompanied during condolence offering by an official delegation that comprised HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, HH Sayyid Bilarab bin Haitham al Said, HH Sayyid Taimour bin Asaad al Said, Chairman of Board of Governors of the Central Bank of Oman, Sayyid Khalid bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of the Diwan of Royal Court, Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, Shaikh Abdulmalik bin Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council, Sayyid Hamoud bin Faisal al Busaidy, Minister of Interior, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information, Sayyid Faisal bin Hamoud al Busaidy, Adviser at the Diwan of Royal Court and Dr Saleh bin A'amir al Kharousi, Ambassador of Oman to Kuwait. — **ONA**

SEE ALSO P2

HM greets Sisi as he wins new term

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of congratulations to President Abdel Fattah al Sisi, President of the Arab Republic of Egypt, on the occasion of his re-election as President of the Republic for a new term.

In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere congratulations and wishes to President Sisi, wishing him good health and happiness, praying to God Almighty to grant him success in leading the brotherly Egyptian people to achieve all their aspirations towards further progress and prosperity, and for the relations of the two brotherly countries to further develop and flourish.



President Abdel Fattah al Sisi

Earlier, President Sisi won a new six-year term with 89.6 per cent of the vote, the election authority announced.

Turnout reached an “unprecedented” 66.8 per cent of voters, said authority head Hazem Badawy.

SEE ALSO P5

ROYAL HIJJANA ON ISESCO LIST



The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Royal Court Affairs, in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, and the Omani National Commission for Education, Culture and Science, succeeded in registering the Royal Hijjana on the list of intangible cultural heritage of the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO). This came during the Sultanate of Oman's participation in the eleventh meeting of the Heritage Committee in the Islamic World, which began on Monday at the organisation's headquarters in Moroccan capital, Rabat.

His Majesty offers condolences



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq on Monday offered condolences to Shaikh Meshal Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait, Al Sabah Family and the people of Kuwait on the death of the forgiven, by the will of the Almighty Allah, the late Emir of Kuwait Shaikh Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, when Shaikh Meshal received His Majesty the Sultan at the Emiri Airport. His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq returned home from the sisterly State of Kuwait after a short visit during which he offered condolences and sympathy to Shaikh Meshal Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of Kuwait.





POSTAL SERVICES IN OMAN READY TO GO GREEN: TRA

VINOD NAIR

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The Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) has said that several measures have been taken to reduce carbon emissions in the logistics and postal sector.

Last week, TRA published the results of the public consultation on environmental sustainability initiatives for postal services.

The report revealed that companies operating in the postal sector have agreed to convert 50 per cent of delivery

vehicles into environmentally friendly by 2040 while 60 per cent of companies have expressed readiness to purchase electric vehicles.

The measures from the government include issuing directives related to environmental initiatives for the sector, coordinating with authorities to work on setting environmental standards and goals for the logistics sector, intensifying environmental awareness in the sector, and cooperating with various sectors to work on joint environmental



initiatives.

Other proposals include the availability of electric vehicles on a rental basis, especially for the use of last-mile delivery

operations, steps such as solar panels in parking lots, drone delivery, paper recycling, and saving water and electricity.

The TRA will also seek to

coordinate with the Ministry of Transport and Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) on environmental initiatives for the transport sector by supporting infrastructure for electric vehicles.

The postal sector will be encouraged to use bicycles and electrical vehicles with battery charging stations.

It may be noted that several companies have switched from paper to online invoices, apart from implementing digital payment solutions to reduce the use of paper.

Globally, according to the International Post Corporation (IPC), over 50 per cent of users are willing to accept slower deliveries for less polluting alternatives, as consumers become increasingly aware of the environmental impact of delivery.

According to Green Postal Day, in response to the growing consumer demand for solutions with a low environmental impact, post offices are collectively aiming for a minimum of 50 per cent of their fleet to be powered by alternative fuel vehicles.

Be cautious with some beauty products

KABEER YOUSUF

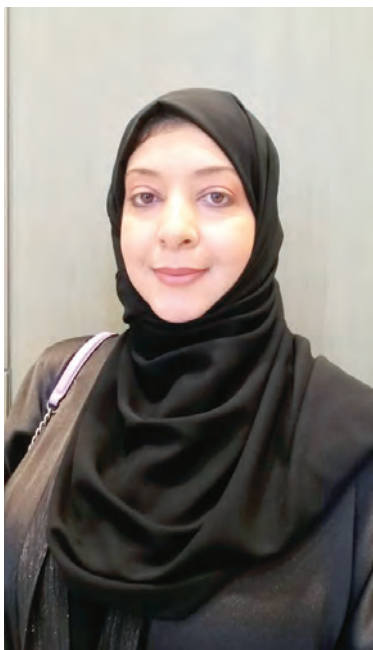
@kabeeryousef

Going only by the commercials while considering a beauty product is not a good idea. Commercials are designed to sell the products and have no intention of telling the buyers about their harmful effects. It is up to the buyer to take a call because substandard beautification products can have multiple effects on the skin, sometimes causing substantial damage to the cells, thus deforming the skin texture.

It also applies to those who buy cheaper products and near-expiry cosmetics to save a few bucks and those who resort to improper use of the same, according to experts in derma care.

Speaking to the Observer on the sidelines of the two-day 7th OmanDerm International Conference and Exhibition, Dr Asma al Numani (pictured), Consultant Dermatologist at Al Nahdha Hospital, said that products bought online seeing their advertisements have no authenticity and may impact adversely.

“These products may have different chemical ingredients; some may need prescription while others are OTC (over the counter). Many products are mixed in a container, and we are not sure about their medicinal value. Hence, buying such beautification products online



Dr Asma al Numani, Consultant Dermatologist at Al Nahdha Hospital, said that products bought online seeing their advertisements have no authenticity and may impact adversely

is a bit risky,” she said.

Dr Asma feels that henna as a herb is okay to use, but when it is mixed with chemicals for better results, it can cause allergies.

“I would advise all to buy products from a good source and check their ingredients in the catalogue before using them. By and large, awareness is the key to using good quality products and ‘let the customer beware’ is applicable in this case too,” she said, adding that “different pharmaceutical companies have different products, and it is not necessary for an expensive product to be of good quality and vice versa. My advice to the people is to differentiate between the products meant for treating and enhancing beauty.” About



the dermatological issues in Oman, Dr Asma said just as any country has dermatological concerns, Oman too has its own set of derma issues, and they vary from person to person mostly seen concerns are hyper pigmentation which is also called melasma, atopic dermatitis, psoriasis, vitiligo, and the like.

“Each disease comes with challenges for the patients as well as the healthcare professional in particular; most skin issues, such as vitiligo, psoriasis, and acne, are chronic. Such diseases have psychological impacts as well, such as the stigma associated with it in the patient.

Genetic disorders include a blistering disorder called epidermolysis bullosa, a rare

condition that causes fragile, blistering skin. The blisters may appear in response to a minor injury, even from heat, rubbing or scratching. In severe cases, the blisters may occur inside the body, such as the mouth or stomach lining, a genetic disorder common in the region because it is genetically mainly linked to consanguineous marriages.

“We counsel the families when we see such cases in inter-family marriages. We believe that education and awareness are required to control such skin diseases. When we diagnose any skin disorder linked to genetic origin, it is a multidisciplinary approach to address the issue of what is required, and they check the patient’s pedigree,” Dr Asma al Numani added.

Dhofar schools showcase Oman’s heritage

QASIM AL MAASHANI

SALALAH, DEC 18

Al Sharqiya School for Basic Education hosted a vibrant celebration of heritage and talent, featuring events that aligned with Oman’s Vision 2040.

The highlight was an exhibition titled “Our Heritage is Pride”, which was held under the auspices of Dr Tufoul bint Suhail Qattan. It showcased a rich tapestry of art displays, performances and heritage works presented by children of grades 5 to 10.

From ancient coins to the lives of Omani luminaries, students curated immersive displays, weaving history into the present. A captivating theatrical performance brought legendary navigator Ahmed bin Majid to life, while calligrapher Sami al Ghawi’s lecture illuminated the artistry of Arabic script.

This wasn’t just a journey through the past; it was a foundation for the future, instilling pride and a commitment to preserving national heritage in line with Vision 2040’s emphasis on cultural identity.

Meanwhile, Al Noor School’s “Awtana Majan” Student Talents Forum, graced by Yahya bin Mohammed Ghawas, Director of Financial Affairs at the Dhofar Governorate Education Directorate, took another leap towards Vision 2040’s focus on human capital development. Four distinct sections, each echoing

a historical era, showcased the evolution of Oman and its people.

“Oman in the Past” transported visitors to the heart of pre-Renaissance education, where students competed in Quran recitation, emulating the spirit of the Katateeb. Social Studies brought traditional crafts and games to life, from weaving to kneading Tawa bread, reminding everyone of the enduring value of these cultural treasures.

“The Renaissance of Oman” displayed the present flourishing, with students’ talents shining through captivating podcasts and debates in English, highlighting the nation’s commitment to education and progress.

“Oman’s Global Vision” unveiled the future brimming with possibilities, as students presented innovative ideas and projects aligned with Vision 2040’s aspirations. Finally, “Oman’s Youthful Energies” concluded in a crescendo of dance, music, and poetry, celebrating the vibrant spirit that will propel the nation forward. Both “Our Heritage is Pride” and “Awtana Majan” stand as testaments to the dedication of Dhofar’s schools in nurturing a generation grounded in tradition while embracing the future. These events aren’t mere celebrations; they are stepping stones towards achieving Oman’s Vision 2040, ensuring that the nation’s rich heritage becomes the fertile soil for a bright and prosperous tomorrow.



From ancient coins to the lives of Omani luminaries, students curated immersive displays, weaving history into the present

Forum discusses job opportunities in tourism sector

KABEER YOUSUF

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Aligned with the objectives of the National Tourism Strategy to create more than 500,000 jobs by 2040, a discussion forum focused on future job opportunities in the tourism sector.

Said al Shanfari, CEO of the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, presided over the event at the National Youth Centre on Thursday.

More than 120 people, comprising entrepreneurs and young Omanis from diverse sectors, including business and tourism, attended the forum, focusing on leadership and the future of business tourism in Oman.

The event stakeholders noted the audience’s general aspirations for the tourism sector. The dialogue was open and

constructive, with many asking questions about the development of Oman’s tourism strategy and the potential for sector growth. Attracting thousands of jobs per year, the business tourism sector in Oman is experiencing rapid growth, with many young graduates entering the industry annually.

“The Youth Centre is an incredibly creative space with resources to enable our Omani youth to explore new skills and be innovative. Youth Centre event will remain one of our highlights of 2023. We are deeply grateful to all the young Omanis who attended the talk and gave their vision of the future of business tourism in Oman,” said Al Shanfari, adding, “I am inspired and motivated to create an even more inclusive space at the OCEC to ensure all our young people can actively participate in some of the



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OCEC events that have strategic importance for the future of our country.” In alignment with the Youth Centre’s values around empowering and training Omani youth, Al Shanfari gave some personal insights into his career journey as the CEO of one of the leading venues in the Middle East, focusing on leadership and management competencies. The

CEO highlighted the profiles and skills required to enter the tourism sector, specifically soft skills such as creativity, determination, and genuine belief in Oman’s tourism potential.

Following some discussions with the youth, Al Shanfari added: “I remain firmly committed to ensuring that our youth has access to the right skills and support to

join a career in the rising tourism industry in Oman and bring their excellent ideas to reality.” He further said that this outreach event aligns with the OCEC’s overall strategy to empower young Omanis to achieve their professional ambitions and guide them to a career in the business tourism sector as part of this strategy, the OCEC is planning

to welcome 40 interns next year, a 100 per cent rise from last year’s number.

Maryam bint Nasser al Kharbushiyah, Acting Executive Director of the Youth Centre, said that the discussion session was very proactive and stemmed many ideas for employing more youth in the tourism sector.

“The Youth Centre will actively involve young people in various sectors, and this session comes with the CEO of the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre to discuss a group of topics in this sector, the most important of which is the future of the business tourism industry, incentives, conferences and exhibitions, the role of youth in promoting the events sector, and the promising opportunities for the sector, as well as identifying CEO experience in leadership,” Maryam added.



EMBRACE THE WARMTH, DON'T HARM



AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 18

Come winter, many start exploring nature and escaping the hustle and bustle of daily life, considering wilderness trips as an ideal opportunity to promote themselves and enjoy the beauty of wildlife.

However, some ‘campers’ lack self-control and exhibit behaviours that surpass the boundaries of respect for the environment and others. Such harmful practices whether on land or at sea, threaten the environment and cast shadows on the beauty of the winter season.

In addition to discarding “waste” in wilderness areas, a behavioural phenomenon hurts the environment. It involves logging, causing significant pressure on plant cover and the wilderness environment suffering from dryness and low rainfall for most months of the year.

There is a category of individuals who exploit the resources of jungle areas irresponsibly at the beginning of winter, engaging in logging and cutting down deciduous trees for heating during their gatherings or for sale during the camping season. Conversely, some people understand the value of environmental responsibility and express gratitude for trees’ heritage and ecological value. They take diligent measures to preserve these trees.

Naif al Amari, an environment enthusiast, stated that attacking the sanctity of trees and cutting them for heating undermines the heritage and environmental value of trees. He emphasised the importance of promoting a culture of individual and community responsibility towards respecting

wildlife and environmental cleanliness. Additionally, it is crucial to raise environmental awareness among visitors to wilderness areas to preserve the natural environment and wildlife and educate them not to harm the trees.

Al Amari said, “We must consider this life because the environment is already exposed to climate harshness and needs attention. Neglecting it means we won’t find joy in the wilderness.” Al Amari emphasised the importance of raising awareness among wilderness visitors to minimise violations during the camping season, promoting environmental conservation and wildlife protection.

POSITIVE TREND

Saif al Reasi commented that despite the positive trend of wilderness visits, some behaviours practised by some individuals are destructive to the environment. This includes attacking and breaking trees under the pretext of benefiting from their wood, among other negative behaviours that harm the environment, instead of being a helpful factor in its growth and safety in the service of humanity. He stressed the need to instil concepts that encourage respecting and nurturing trees in our society’s culture and supporting movements and initiatives calling for environmental and tree preservation.

Yousef Ali considered illegal cutting down trees during the winter season a violation committed by some wilderness enthusiasts, either knowingly or unknowingly, against laws and regulations enacted by the state to protect the environment. He argued that trees subject to cutting provide benefits to wildlife, offer shade to humans, absorb carbon dioxide, and release oxygen. Indiscriminate logging eradicates these benefits.

THE REGULATIONS
STATE THAT OFFENDERS
WILL BE SUBJECT
TO AN ADMINISTRATIVE
FINE OF NOT
LESS THAN

RO 200
AND NOT EXCEEDING
RO 1,000

Yousef Ali added that if violations such as cutting down trees for heating or littering are found, they are behaviours that should not be emulated but corrected and warned against due to their harmful effects. He emphasised the need for young people and families to train their children to respect and preserve wildlife.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Permits for logging are granted to certain categories, including those covered by social security, not employed in any government or private sector job, aged 30 and above. Permits are also granted to workers or retirees whose monthly salary or pension does not exceed RO 350.

Logging permits are issued based on wood availability in the designated areas, and competent authorities have the right to suspend, cancel, or not renew permits. A permit for wood charring activity is granted to citizens with logging permits, provided the charring sites are determined and approved by the authority. The authority has the right to dispose of wood, plant charcoal, tools, and equipment seized in case of violation, according to legal procedures in this regard.

Regarding penalties for violators, the regulations state that offenders will be subject to an administrative fine of not less than RO 200 and not exceeding RO 1,000. The fine is doubled for repeated violations. Individuals violating Article 3 of these regulations will be fined administratively, ranging from RO 50 to RO 500, with the fine doubled for repeated violations. Those violating the conditions of their granted permits will face an administrative fine of not less than RO30 and not exceeding RO 300, doubling for repeated fines.



Egypt's Sisi secures a third term as president with 89.6% of vote



Hazem Badawy (L), head of Egypt's National Elections Authority, announces the results of the 2024 Egyptian presidential elections in Cairo. – AFP

CAIRO: Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has won to a third, six-year term as Egypt's president, winning 89.6% of votes, the National Election Authority announced on Monday.

The election took place as Egypt struggles to manage the risk of spillover from the war in Gaza, which borders Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.

Some voters said the eruption of conflict in Gaza had encouraged them to vote for Sisi, who has long presented himself as a bulwark of stability in a volatile region - an argument that has also proved effective with Gulf and Western allies providing financial support to his government.

Voting in Egypt was held over

three days on Dec. 10-12, with the state and tightly controlled domestic media pushing hard to boost turnout, which the election authority said had reached 66.8% - above the 41% recorded at the last presidential election in 2018.

Egypt's state media body has said the vote was a step towards political pluralism and authorities have denied violations of electoral rules.

Sisi was elected to the presidency in 2014, and re-elected in 2018, both times with 97% of the vote. The constitution was amended in 2019, extending the presidential term to six years from four, and allowing Sisi to stand for a third term.

Many admire an infrastructure drive including a new capital built

from scratch in the desert east of Cairo.

Sisi's backers say security is paramount, and that some groups have benefited under his rule.

That included women, said Nourhan ElAbbassy, Assistant Secretary-General of the youth branch of the pro-Sisi Homat AlWatan party.

"We would love to see more females in key positions, more female ministers in the cabinet as long as they're qualified, and revisions of personal rights laws that have to do with issues like marriage, divorce and alimony," she said.

Authorities have sought to address criticism of Egypt's human rights record with steps including

Egypt's state media body has said the vote was a step towards political pluralism and authorities have denied violations of electoral rules

opening a national dialogue and releasing some prominent prisoners.

Reuters reporters who covered the vote in Cairo, Giza, Suez and the Sinai Peninsula witnessed people in to some polling stations and lingering outside them waving national flags or banners as patriotic music played. — Reuters

Erdogan visits Hungary to deepen bilateral ties

BUDAPEST: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan arrived in Budapest on Monday to meet with his Hungarian ally Viktor Orban, in his second visit to the country within four months aimed at deepening ties.

Erdogan will be received with military honours in Budapest's historic Heroes' Square before heading into a meeting with Hungarian President Katalin Novak.

He will then hold bilateral talks with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

Current "regional and global issues" and "steps to be taken to deepen bilateral cooperation" will be discussed, according to the Turkish presidency.

Energy security and Sweden's Nato membership are expected to be on Monday's agenda as well, with Hungary and Turkiye being the only holdouts among the alliance to not have ratified the Nordic country's bid yet.

Hungary has still not voted to approve Sweden's entry into Nato, aligning itself with Turkiye which had long blocked Stockholm's membership and has been stalling the process even after Erdogan lifted his veto in June.

Earlier this month, Erdogan made Turkiye's ratification of Sweden's Nato bid conditional on the US Congress "simultaneously" approving Ankara's request for F-16 fighter jets.

Erdogan's visit coincides with the 100th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The two leaders will co-chair a meeting of the Turkish-Hungarian High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council.

The signing of several bilateral agreements with Orban is also scheduled. Hungary is the only EU member state that has maintained close ties to the Kremlin since the beginning of Ukraine war. — AFP



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban (R) and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan attend a joint press conference after talks at the prime minister's office at the Carmelite Monastery in Budapest, Hungary. – AFP

Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Defence
ENGINEERING SERVICES

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Ministry of Defence invites Contractors specialized in the under mentioned works and registered with the Govt. Tender Board and Ministry of Defence to participate in the following tender.

Tender No.	Tender Name	Contractors Grade	Last Date to Obtain Tender	Tender Submission Date	Tender Price (RO)
43/2023	Electromechanical work (STP) - Izki	Excellent - Specialized in Electromechanical (STP)	04 January 2024	05 February 2024	480/- RO
36/2023	Building works - Thumrait	First & above - Civil work	04 January 2024	05 February 2024	165/- RO
38/2023	HVAC system works - MAM	First & above. Specialized in HVAC System	04 January 2024	05 February 2024	175/- RO
44/2023	Building works - Raysut	First & above - Civil work	04 January 2024	05 February 2024	65/- RO
41/2023	Building work - Al Seeb	First & above - Civil work	04 January 2024	05 February 2024	136/- RO
45/2023	Maintenance work - Muaskar Al Murtafa'a - Muscat	First & above - Civil work	04 January 2024	05 February 2024	100/- RO
46/2023	Electromechanical work (STP) - Murtafa'a - Muscat	First & above Specialized in MEP works	04 January 2024	05 February 2024	125/- RO

***For more information about the above Tenders please visit gate number (14)**

- Tender Documents (Electronic Tender Document) can be obtained from the Tender office, Gate No: 14, Muaskar Al Murtafa'a after payment of the tender fee indicated above.
- The Payment should be made electronically by using SMART CARD, VISA CARD and VISA ELECTRON. Sunday to Thursday (0900 - 1300 Hours).
- The Bid to be accompanied by Tender Bond in the value of (1%) of the bid value in the form of a Bank Guarantee or Certified Cheque issued by a local bank and addressed to HE the Chairman of the Tender Committee.
- Bids are to be submitted in sealed envelopes addressed to HE the Chairman of Tender Committee and marked with Tender Number and Name. Name of Bidder or any other marks should not be printed on the envelopes.
- Bids to be deposited in the Tender office at Gate No: 14 Muaskar Al Murtafa'a before 1300 hours on the assigned day for submission of the Tender.
- We would like to draw your attention to the importance of adherence to the submission date, request and any queries related should not be submitted to MODES fourteen days prior to submission of offer & that queries must be on electronic (Microsoft word).
- You are requested to submit the following items within your tender submission, failure to submit the required information may result a disqualification of your offer without any further notification.
 - Percentage of Omanisation within the company supported by an authenticated certificate from the Ministry of Labour (Updated Copy).
 - Detailed priced breakdown to be specified as per scope of works and drawings.
 - Tender Form and Tender Bonds to be submitted as hard copy and others documentation shall be as **SOFT COPY (USB)** in two separate files:
 - A. Financial (**bill 1&2 separated file from bill3**)
 - B. Technical files.
 - Confirmation of site visit.
 - All addendums and circulars.
 - List of sub-contractors/suppliers and their acceptance letter to this project.
 - List of current and executed projects for the last Five years.
 - Valid Registration Certificates from Tender Board.
 - Financial Statement for the last Three years.

At least 11 killed in Guinea oil terminal blast; extent of damage unclear

CONAKRY: At least 11 people were killed and 88 injured in a blast at an oil terminal in Guinea's capital Conakry early on Monday, head of civil protection Jean Traore said, as the government warned the incident could directly impact the country's population.

The explosion at the West African nation's main oil terminal rocked the Kaloum administrative district in downtown Conakry, blowing out the windows of several nearby homes and forcing hundreds to flee, according to a witness.

The extent of the damage to the terminal was unclear. Guinea is not an oil producer and has no refining capacity. It imports refined products, mostly stored in the Kaloum terminal and distributed via trucks across the country.

The origin of the fire was unknown, and an



Firemen work to extinguish fire after a blast at an oil terminal in Conakry, Guinea. – Reuters

investigation would be launched to determine its cause and any parties responsible, the government said in a statement.

It said the scale of the incident "could have a direct impact on the population."

A huge fire and billowing black smoke were visible from miles away as firefighters rushed to the area, while several tanker

trucks left the depot, escorted by soldiers and police.

Workers, excluding defence and security forces and medical personnel, were advised to stay at home. Public and private schools and most gas stations were also closed.

A reporter said people rushed to several emergency stations to secure fuel ahead

of possible shortages.

The country has a small oil depot at the port in Kamsar, north of Conakry, which is mostly used by mining firms.

The repercussions of the blast were felt elsewhere in the country amid concerns over a fuel shortage. In the town of Mamou, around 260 km from Conakry, vehicle owners besieged gas stations.

"A litre of gasoline is currently being sold for \$2.35 on the black market. It's at this price that I was able to obtain a few litres to continue work," said Alpha Bah said, a motorcycle taxi rider.

A thick column of smoke and some flames were still visible on Monday afternoon after firefighters brought the blaze under control.

A source close to Conakry's central prison said the blast had caused damage to the building, located not far from the oil terminal. — Reuters

Iraqis vote in first provincial elections in a decade

BAGHDAD: Iraqis voted on Monday in the first provincial council elections held in a decade.

The vote comes at a time of widespread political apathy and disillusionment in the country of 43 million.

Turnout at noon had reached just 17 per cent, said election commission official Omar Ahmed, who urged voters to come out and "contribute to the success of the electoral process."

The vote is seen as a key test for Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani ahead of a general election due in 2025.

Sudani, after casting his ballot in Baghdad, hailed the councils as "a pillar of the executive" which help the government implement policies.

The premier has pledged to boost public services and rebuild infrastructure ravaged by decades of conflict and turmoil.



Members of an Iraqi family show their ink-stained fingers after voting in the 2023 Iraqi provincial council elections, outside a polling station in Sadr City in eastern Baghdad. – AFP

He urged Iraqis to elect "honest" representatives. Some 17 million people are eligible to vote, with 6,000 candidates vying for just 285 council seats.

In the end, turnout will be "the ultimate gauge of satisfaction," Renad Mansour said, a senior research fellow at think tank Chatham House.

It will show "whether the Sudani government's economic populism -- the policy of giving out (public sector) jobs -- can be successful and can capture the

young population".

Elections were held in 15 provinces, but not in the three which make up an autonomous Kurdish region in the north.

Voting was held amid tight security, and polls were due to close at 6:00 pm, with preliminary results expected 24 hours later, the electoral commission said.

One quarter of candidates are women under a system that also reserves quotas for the Christian, Yazidi and Sabian minorities.

The vote was expected to boost the ruling bloc called the Coordination Framework coalition.

Mansour said some alliance heavyweights hope the elections will "prove they have a social base and that they are popular" following disappointing results in 2021 national elections.

Tensions around the Israel-Gaza war were not seen as a major factor in the elections, despite recent drone attacks against US-led coalition troops based in Iraq.

No security breaches were reported during the morning, Interior Minister Abdel Amir al-Chammari told reporters.

Observers kept a close eye on the northern province of Kirkuk where historic rivalries could resurface between parties representing its Arab, Kurdish and Turkmen communities.

— AFP



China, N Korea hold high-level meeting amid missile launches

BEIJING: China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi held talks with a senior North Korean official in Beijing on Monday, coinciding with Pyongyang's launch of a missile capable of reaching almost anywhere of far distances.

China always views its ties with North Korea from a strategic and long-term perspective, the foreign ministry said in a statement, citing Wang's comments in the meeting with North Korean Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Pak Myong Ho.

Beijing is willing to strengthen two-way communication and co-ordination while deepening exchanges and co-operation, Wang added.

Wang and Pak exchanged views on issues of "common concern", on which the ministry did not elaborate.

The meeting was held in a friendly atmosphere, Pyongyang's state media KCNA said, North Korea's ambassador to China Ri Ryong-nam also present.

North Korea is officially China's ally. Both countries are bound by a treaty signed in 1961 to take all necessary measures, including military assistance, to help each other in the event of an attack or an attempted attack by a third country.

The missile has a potential to travel more than 15,000 km, meaning it can reach anywhere in Japan and the mainland United States, Japan's Parliamentary Vice Minister of Defense Shingo Miyake said.

South Korea's National Security Council said it was a solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), labelling the launch a



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and North Korean Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Pak Myong Ho attend a meeting in Beijing, China. — Reuters

destabilising act that ignored international warnings and multiple UN Security Council resolutions.

President Yoon Suk Yeol had ordered the upgrading of the effective operation of "nuclear deterrence" by South Korea and the United States, it added.

Pyongyang has condemned the United States for orchestrating what it called a "preview of a nuclear war," including the arrival of a nuclear-powered US submarine in South Korea on Sunday.

All of North Korea's ballistic missile activities are banned by

Both countries are bound by a treaty signed in 1961 to take all necessary measures, including military assistance

United Nations Security Council resolutions, though Pyongyang defends them as its sovereign right to self-defence.

North Korea will keep strengthening multilateral ties with China to "safeguard common interests" and "maintain regional peace and stability," Pak was cited

as saying in the Chinese statement.

Pak arrived in Beijing last week on a rare official visit ahead of the 75th anniversary next year of the establishment of diplomatic ties.

A spokesperson of China's foreign ministry said the Korean peninsula issue was complex, and urged dialogue by all concerned parties to resolve their issues.

"Attempts to solve the problem through military deterrence and pressure will not work," Wang Wenbin told a regular press conference. "They will only backfire, further intensifying contradictions and tension."

— Reuters

Macron's govt signals progress over immigration bill

PARIS: President Emmanuel Macron's government on Monday said agreement was possible over a controversial immigration bill as lawmakers and senators were set to decide the fate of the flagship reform.

His government has been seeking to push through legislation to harden France's immigration law but members of the right-wing and left-wing opposition last week joined forces to vote down the draft law without even debating the measures.

The government, which does not have a majority in parliament, has been locked in intense talks with the opposition in a bid to rescue the legislation over the past week.

A mixed parliamentary commission consisting of seven upper house senators and seven lower house lawmakers was expected to meet on Monday afternoon in a bid to thrash out a compromise text.

Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin indicated that agreement with the conservative Republicans, whose cooperation is crucial, was possible.

"We are closer to an agreement than a disagreement," Darmanin, who has championed the bill, said on French television channel LCI.

"At this stage we cannot speak of an agreement" but "it is progressing positively," he said.

He added that "a lot of details" had yet to be agreed upon.

"We also have our red lines, we cannot accept just anything."

But Bruno Retailleau, who presides over the Republicans group in the Senate, said the new version of the bill, adopted after a



French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin visits a police station, a day after French lawmakers rejected his immigration bill, in Maisons-Alfort near Paris. — Reuters file photo

meeting on Sunday evening, was "not completely satisfactory."

The failure of the bill would be a "magnificent" boost for hard-right figurehead Marine Le Pen, Darmanin said.

"Madame Le Pen doesn't want these solutions, she wants problems," he said.

Originally proposed by Macron's centrist government with a mix of steps to expel more undocumented people and improve migrants' integration, the draft law has been hardened during its earlier passage through the upper house, which is controlled by the right.

The current version has however been criticised by both the far right and the far left for opposing reasons.

The left have said the bill should be dropped, while the far right say Macron's plan to reform immigration law does not go far enough.

Advocacy groups have criticised the bill, saying France relies on migrants including undocumented workers in many industries. — AFP

Serbian ruling party hails election dominating victory

BELGRADE: Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic looked poised to tighten his grip on power on Monday after his party secured a parliamentary majority with a dominating victory at the polls, even as the opposition called for protests.

According to the initial results, Vucic's right wing Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) won 127 out of the 250 seats in parliament.

"My job was to do everything in my power to secure an absolute majority in the parliament," Vucic told reporters as he celebrated what he said was the SNS's victory late on Sunday.

Even though Vucic was not personally on the ballot during the

Vucic's decade in power has brought stability and billions in investments to the once chaotic country ravaged by a string of wars

parliamentary and local elections over the weekend, the contest was largely seen as a referendum on his government.

To his supporters, Vucic's decade in power has brought stability and billions in investments to the once chaotic country ravaged by a string of wars in the former Yugoslavia and bouts of hyperinflation in the 1990s.



Serbian president, Aleksandar Vucic (C), addresses media at the headquarters of Srpska Napredna Stranka (Serbian Progressive Party) in Belgrade. — AFP

"I want Serbia to continue on the same path. It seems that this path is the most reasonable for the greatest number of people, whether rich or poor," Svetlana Nikolic said, a 70-year-old Vucic

supporter in Belgrade.

Vucic has been particularly deft at balancing ties between east and west, vowing to keep Serbia on a course for European Union membership — while also remaining friendly with Russia and courting China and Washington.

On Monday, Moscow congratulated Vucic and the SNS on their victory, with Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov saying he hoped the win would lead to the "further strengthening of friendship" between the countries.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban also praised Vucic, calling the win an "overwhelming election victory".

The SNS also said it secured a

win in municipal elections in the capital Belgrade, where the party faced their stiffest challenge from a loose coalition of opposition parties and candidates running under the Serbia Against Violence banner.

That movement was formed in the wake of back-to-back mass shootings earlier this year. They spurred hundreds of thousands to take to the streets in rallies that morphed into anti-government protests over several months.

The movement vowed to take to the streets again, calling for supporters to rally on Monday night against what the group called "electoral theft" during the local elections in the capital. — AFP

CAIRNS

Flood disaster unfolds, hundreds evacuated

Stranded residents sheltered on a hospital roof as flash floods swamped northeastern Australia on Monday, with raging waters severing roads and flushing crocodiles into towns.

Rescue teams evacuated more than 300 people overnight, police said, and military helicopters were dispatched to help inundated areas cut off by the floods.

Damage was reported along an expanse of coastline that stretched about 400 kilometres across northern Queensland state.



Resort manager Cassie Hounslow said entire houses were submerged in Mossman, a small inland town at the foot of the heritage-listed Daintree rainforest. — AFP

WARSAW

Truckers resume blockade of Ukraine checkpoint

Polish hauliers on Monday resumed their blockade of the largest freight border crossing with Ukraine following a court order that allowed the truckers to go back to the Dorohusk checkpoint.

The truckers have been blocking the border for over a month to demand the reintroduction of permits to enter the European Union for their Ukrainian competitors.

The bloc had waived the permits system after Russia



attacked Ukraine, but the Polish road carriers say the move took a toll on their earnings.

The police confirmed that the truckers were once again blocking cargo traffic. — AFP

BRUSSELS

Belgium holds drug mega-trial after apps cracked

Belgium launched one of the biggest drug trafficking trials in its history, with more than 120 defendants in the dock, thanks in large part to investigators cracking encrypted messaging apps.

Suspects from Belgium, Albania, Colombia and North Africa accused of involvement in a vast criminal operation face justice at the hearings in a high-security courtroom in the former headquarters of military alliance Nato in Brussels.



The alleged multi-national drug smuggling enterprise involved numerous criminal gangs and was dismantled following raids by police in Belgium, Germany and Italy. — AFP



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Gaza

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People inspect the damage in a room following Israeli bombardment at Nasser hospital in Khan Yunis. — AFP



Israeli soldiers operate in the Gaza Strip amid the ongoing raids. — Reuters

Israel bombs Gaza amid accusation it is ‘starving’ Palestinians

GAZA: Israel kept up heavy bombing of Gaza on Monday as it faced accusations from a human rights group that it is deliberately starving Palestinians in its campaign.

Fighting raged on in the third month of the bloodiest ever Gaza war, with the Palestinian health ministry reporting another 110 people killed in strikes on Jabalia, outside Gaza City, since Sunday.

The UN Security Council in New York was set to vote later in the day on another call for a ceasefire in the besieged territory, after previous bids were vetoed by Israel's key ally the United States.

And Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin was expected back in Israel on Monday as part of a Middle East tour aimed at stopping the conflict from spreading further.

Gaza's health ministry says Israel's military response has killed more than 19,453 people, mostly women and children, while reducing vast areas to rubble.

Israeli forces are deliberately blocking the delivery of water, food and fuel, while wilfully impeding humanitarian assistance

International alarm has mounted over the dire plight of 2.4 million Gazans now enduring bombardment, food and water shortages, mass displacement and plummeting winter temperatures.

The New York-based campaign group Human Rights Watch charged that Israel “is using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare in the occupied Gaza Strip, which is a war crime”.

“Israeli forces are deliberately blocking the delivery of water, food and fuel, while wilfully impeding humanitarian assistance, apparently razing agricultural areas, and depriving



A man checks the ruins of a house after an Israeli air raid in Majdal Zoun, Gaza. — AFP

the civilian population of objects indispensable to their survival,” it wrote in a report.

The head of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, Philippe

Lazzarini, earlier said that he “would not be surprised if people start dying of hunger, or a combination of hunger, disease, weak immunity”.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday again vowed Israel will “fight until the end”.

The army has reported 127

deaths in Gaza since it launched ground operations in late October.

Israel has faced mounting global pressure to either slow, suspend or stop hostilities — including from families of the remaining 129 hostages believed held in Gaza.

The families’ anger and fear intensified after Israeli forces mistakenly shot dead three hostages who had escaped their captors inside Gaza.

The trio had waved white flags and had used food leftovers to write a Hebrew-language message on a white sheet before they were shot, reports said.

Army chief of staff Herzi Halevi, in a message to troops, stressed that if enemy fighters “lay down their arms and raise their hands, we capture them, we don’t shoot them”.

“We extract a lot of intelligence from the captives we have, we already have over 1,000.”

— Reuters

FRANCE FM SET FOR LEBANON TALKS ON CALMING ISRAEL BORDER

BEIRUT: France’s top diplomat was due in Beirut later on Monday for talks on de-escalating near-daily exchanges of fire on the Israel border, which have triggered fears of all-out conflict.

Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna was expected to call for responsibility and restraint in her meetings with Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati and parliament speaker Nabih Berri.

Since October 8, the day after the Israel-Gaza conflict started, the frontier between Lebanon and Israel has seen escalating exchanges of fire, mainly between the Israeli army and Lebanese groups, which say it is acting in support of Palestinians.

Fears of a widening war have been growing, with other groups attacking US-led coalition forces in Iraq and Syria, and Yemen targeting shipping in the Red Sea.

In Israel on Sunday, Colonna called on all parties to “de-escalate” along the Lebanon-Israel border.

“If things were to spiral out of control, I don’t think anyone would benefit,” she said.

A French diplomatic source expressed concern that Beirut could underestimate Israel’s determination to protect its borders.

Foreign Minister Eli Cohen



France’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Catherine Colonna (L) meets with Lebanon’s Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri (R) in Beirut. — AFP

said on Sunday that Israel “has no intention to start another front on our northern border” and that France could play a “positive and significant role” in preventing an all-out war.

But he warned that ensuring the security of Israelis near the border “north of the Litani River,” some 30 kilometres north of the border.

On Sunday, senior Lebanese lawmaker Mohammed Raad, whose son was killed in an Israeli bombing last month, said groups are “not afraid of (Israel’s) intimidation or the slogans it puts out via international intermediaries to remove our people” from parts of south Lebanon. — AFP

EU’s Borrell slams Israel’s ‘appalling lack of distinction’ in Gaza

BRUSSELS: Israel’s military is showing “an appalling lack of distinction” in its targeting in Gaza, the EU’s top diplomat said on Monday, highlighting the deaths of Israeli hostages, worshippers and other Palestinian civilians.

“We are witnessing an appalling lack of distinction in Israel’s military operation in Gaza,” European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell posted on social media. “Worshippers, three Israeli hostages, and hundreds of other civilians have died during the most recent military operations,” he said.

“This must stop. A humanitarian pause is urgently needed.”

The criticism followed Israel’s admission that its forces had on Friday mistakenly shot dead three hostages who had escaped their



High Representative of the Union for Josep Borrell Fontelles talks to the media as he arrives at the European headquarters, in Brussels. — AFP

captors inside Gaza.

On Saturday, a Palestinian Christian mother and daughter were shot dead “in cold blood” by an Israeli soldier on the grounds of Gaza’s only Catholic church, the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem said.

Pope Francis on Sunday

deplored the women’s killing, saying it happened in a church complex “where there are no terrorists, but families, children, people who are sick and have disabilities”.

Israel’s military said it was looking into that incident.

More than 19,453 Palestinians

— around 70 per cent of them women, young children and adolescents — have been killed in the Gaza Strip in Israeli bombardments since October 7, according to the government’s health ministry.

The EU’s 27 nations are divided over how Israel is carrying out its military operations in Gaza.

Most back a call for a ceasefire endorsed by the overwhelming majority of the United Nations General Assembly.

But some believe that such a move would bind Israel’s hands as it seeks to achieve its stated objective of eliminating Palestinian groups.

“Far too many civilians have been killed in Gaza, as pointed out among others also by the French, German and UK foreign ministers,” Borrell said in his post.

— Reuters

Celebrating prehistoric ties between Oman and India



Sandhya Rao Mehta

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

The bilateral relations between Sultanate of Oman and India have been termed to be historical and civilisational. In fact, these historical ties are still being unearthed in ongoing archeological findings.

Links between North Oman and the ancient Harappan civilisation, part of the Indus Valley, have been found to go as far back as the Bronze Age, around 3,000 BCE. There is evidence that traders moved in canoes and small boats between the trading ports of western India, all along the Sea of Oman during this time.

Archeological evidence such as pottery and inscribed coins, shards, and beads dating to circa 2,400-2,000 BCE have also been found and are presently housed in the National Museum of Oman in Muscat. In fact, historian Burkhard Vogt states that “Harappan impact on the Oman peninsula possibly started as early as the middle of the third millennium BC”.

A Harappan jar which was excavated a few years ago is also being restored as it was found

broken into hundreds of shards.

Continuing excavations and discoveries show evidence of connections between the two sides of the Arabian Sea, with trade in copper and other materials being routine. Other evidence such as pots and jewellery, as well as burial material show that these contacts where not only of physical objects but also transferred to social connections.

In 1982, a small ceramic shard was also found in Ras al Jinz, further pointing to connections with the Indus Valley civilisation in the Bronze Age. In addition, a grave was also found in Dhofar which points to the presence of iron and copper brought from afar.

In addition, Sindh pottery found in Dahwa near the Hajar mountains indicates the extent of trade activity between Oman and Sindh during the early Bronze Age This archaeological site is the oldest settlement to date to have been discovered in the north of the Batinah plain.

In the early Bronze Age, Oman’s first recorded civilisation, Majan, established sea trade with the Indus Valley civilisation. This is proved through

THE CIVILISATIONAL TIES BETWEEN OMAN AND INDIA ARE POISED TO STRENGTHEN, TRANSCENDING MERE PHYSICAL CONNECTIONS TO EVOLVE INTO PROFOUND CULTURAL, LINGUISTIC, AND SOCIETAL BONDS

the presence of ornaments and stamp seals which have been found in Ras al Jinz and Ras al Hadd.

These ancient links are not only restricted to Western India. There is archeological evidence that shows a link between the ancient port town of Pattanam in Kerala, in south India, and its trade links to ancient Rome, Yemen, and the Nabatian civilisation of the Arabian Peninsula.

According to Professor K Rajan of Pondicherry University, the use of the Tamil-Brahmi script on a pottery shard near the Khor Rori, the ancient port of Sumhuram in Dhofar near Salalah “confirms Sumhuram’s link with the ancient frankincense route and its cultural links with the frankincense-based kingdoms in southern Arabia”

These archaeological discoveries are only the tip of the iceberg.

As excavations continue and more evidence is found, the civilisational links between Oman and India are only bound to increase. These links later become more than physical objects and turn into cultural, linguistic, and societal connections, which continue, to the present time.

Christmas muted in ‘grieving’ Bethlehem

STUART WHITE

Outside Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity in the Palestinian West Bank, the throngs of tourists and pilgrims who normally rub shoulders with costumed Santas and marching bands are missing this year.

There are no festive lights strung overhead and no sign of the huge tree normally erected to celebrate the event that Christians believe took place on this spot 2,000 years ago: the birth of Jesus Christ.

As the war between Israel and Hamas rages around 100 km away in Gaza — Christmas will be a muted affair in the occupied West Bank.

In a normal year, Bethlehem would be a “city full of people, full of tourists”, said 30-year-old Abood Suboh, standing in his empty shop where he sells cashmere scarves and leather handbags.

“This war stopped everything.”

Church leaders in Jerusalem and the Bethlehem city council took the decision last month to forego “any unnecessarily festive” Christmas celebrations in solidarity with Gazans.

The Latin patriarch of Jerusalem will still come to deliver his traditional midnight mass on Christmas Eve, but with pilgrims staying away and access to the city restricted by Israeli authorities, turnout is likely to suffer.

The war could not have come at a worse time for locals who depend on the Christmas tourist trade.

Jack Giacaman, of the Christmas House souvenir shop, said 80 per cent of their sales came at the end of the year.

“Suddenly, in October, tourists disappeared from the streets. And now Bethlehem is completely closed from all directions,” he said, referring to the Israeli checkpoints that restrict movement into the walled-off West Bank.

In the workshop behind Giacaman’s store, half-finished shepherds and magi stood watch over deserted workstations.

He had already been forced to borrow money to tide over the business after the slump caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, but had a three-year plan to get back on track.

“Now we don’t know how to cover this year,” he said.

Since the outbreak of the war, the West Bank has seen a surge in violence, with more than 290 Palestinians killed by Israeli forces or settlers, local health officials say. — AFP

Ukrainian marines on ‘suicide mission’ in crossing the Dnieper River

THE OPERATION ACROSS THE DNIEPER IS UKRAINE’S LATEST ATTEMPT IN ITS FLAGGING COUNTEROFFENSIVE TO BREACH RUSSIAN DEFENCES IN THE SOUTH AND TURN THE TIDE OF THE WAR

THERE was a faint tremor in the marine’s voice as he recounted the murderous fighting on the east bank of the Dnieper River, where he was wounded recently.

“We were sitting in the water at night and we were shelled by everything,” the marine, Maksym, said. “My comrades were dying in front of my eyes.”

For two months, Ukraine’s Marine Corps has been spearheading an assault across the Dnieper River in the southern region of Kherson to recapture territory from Russian troops. The operation is Ukraine’s latest attempt in its flagging counteroffensive to breach Russian defences in the south and turn the tide of the war.

Soldiers and marines who have taken part in the river crossings described the offensive as brutalising and futile, as waves of Ukrainian troops have been struck down on the river banks or in the water, even before they reach the other side.

Conditions are so difficult, a half-dozen men involved in the fighting said in interviews, that in most places, there is nowhere to dig in. The first approaches tend to be marshy islands threaded with rivulets or meadows that have become a quagmire of mud and bomb craters filled with water.

The soldiers and marines gave only their first names or asked for anonymity for security reasons, and commanders declined almost all media requests to visit military units in the Kherson region.

Several soldiers and marines spoke to journalists out of concern about the high casualties and what they said were overly optimistic accounts from officials about the progress of the offensive. The General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine said that it was not immediately possible to comment on the soldiers’ accusations but that it would provide a response in due course.

Some of the heaviest fighting has been in the village of Krynky, on the east bank 20 miles upriver from Kherson city, where Ukrainian troops seized a narrow strip of fishermen’s



A surveillance drone operated by an Ukrainian soldier monitors Russian positions across the Dnieper River, at a compound in the Kherson region of southern Ukraine.

houses — the only place where they managed to establish a toehold.

But footage of the area, livestreamed from a drone and seen by The New York Times, verified soldiers’ accounts of heavy Russian airstrikes that have destroyed the houses and turned the river bank into a mass of mud and splintered trees.

Fresh troops arriving on the east bank have to step on soldiers’ bodies that lie tangled in the churned mud, said Oleksiy, an experienced soldier who fought in Krynky in October and has since crossed multiple times to help evacuate the wounded.

Some of the dead marines have been lying there for as long as two months, as units have been unable to retrieve the bodies because of the intense shelling, said Volodymyr, a deputy company commander who was attending the funeral of one of his men, identified only as Denys, last week.

“The left bank is very difficult,” Volodymyr said.

“Those who do it are the real heroes, men with great will power.”

With Ukraine’s counteroffensive bogged down and the United States and even the European Union showing signs of cutting back aid, the cross-river offensive has been keenly watched for signs that Ukraine can regain

momentum against Russian forces. The hope is that they can create a breakthrough deep enough to threaten Russia’s supply routes and its hold in the south.

The Marine Corps, rebuilt to full strength this year with several newly formed brigades, was assigned the task.

Since the war’s outset, Ukrainian officials have sought to maintain a positive narrative in an effort to maintain morale at home and support abroad. Casualty numbers are not published, nor are details of setbacks suffered by Ukrainian troops.

In the case of the Dnieper, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine and other officials have suggested recently that the marines have gained a foothold on the eastern bank. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs posted a statement last month claiming they had established several strongholds.

But marines and soldiers who have been there say these accounts overstate the case.

“There are no positions. There is no such thing as an observation post or position,” Oleksiy said. “It is impossible to gain a foothold there. It’s impossible to move equipment there.”

“It’s not even a fight for survival,” he added. “It’s a suicide mission.”

— *The New York Times*

To comment & email: opinion@omanobserver.om

Ministry of Information
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Sultanate of Oman

A book in your hand...

The days are rushing towards the New Year, yet it seems a long way as we continue to look for answers to problems around the world.

While the big picture is the world, at the micro level is our mind and our thoughts. We might be far away from the location but every video or an image from the conflict zone stirs emotions and a friend while showing a video of two children being pulled through the rubble, sighed and said, “I don’t think I can handle this anymore.”

Would we see a conclusion to this before we open a new chapter with the new year?

A percentage of world population is also getting ready to send out season’s greetings and that is when a friend send this wonderful note.

Anne Bouji has always been in the world of books and it was the most appropriate message she had sent, “In Iceland, books are exchanged as Christmas eve presents, then you spend rest of the evening reading the book and eating chocolates. The tradition is part of the season called Jolabokaflod, or ‘The Christmas Book Flood’ because Iceland is the nation that publishes more books per capita than any other country, sells most of its books between September and November due to people preparing for the holiday.”

Intriguing culture don’t you think so? Wanted to know more and went on to search for information and so it happens that it is actually a war that brought about this tradition.

According to jolabokaflod.org, the tradition began during World War II as during this period ration was ongoing and paper was one of the commodities that was not rationed in Iceland. Books made perfect gift in comparison to other commodities that were in short supply.

A necessity can become a habit and soon a custom and then a tradition. And now Iceland is a nation that celebrates with books. And so now everyone must be looking for the right book gift. The interesting facts about Icelanders and books are many as the Guinness World Records note that the



Lakshmi Kothaneth @lakshmioman

The writer is a senior journalist and a radio anchor

ICELAND PUBLISHES MORE BOOKS PER CAPITA THAN ANY OTHER COUNTRY IN THE WORLD

island nation has a population of just a little over 300,000 but the country has more writers per head of population than any other country. The Guinness World Records stated that in their life time one in 10 Icelanders will publish a book. They go on to explain that Iceland’s ancient tradition of sagas and tall tales might have a thing or two to do with the special interest in writing that went along with the long winter nights. Apparently the sagas were written down from 13th Century onwards.

Another fascinating development is the involvement of technology in this tradition because it has been observed that the public benches of Iceland have barcodes so one can scan it and listen to it on one’s smart phone. Now you know which place could be the biggest market for books — the land where story telling is still enjoyed.

But what about children and adults in other parts of the world who are in refugee camps?

Would they find comfort in books? Can books reach them? And would you write a book?

When in pain, one of the best ways to remain calm is get distracted. And writing and reading could be perfect means to attain that. A book can be a best friend. When people are left bewildered with the happening around the world which are not desirable, we can think of solutions. Would a starving child likes to study? Would an insecure child trusts anything or has a mind to read?

When they see people around them bleeding would they ever have the capacity even to read a line?

But we can hope for better days, and with time the words can heal them.

But what about the writers who have been caught in the conflict zones of the world. Their narratives are important. Their days, their thoughts, expressions are all crucial for continuity for the children who would look for an anchor. Would these writers ever find publishers?

For now, there in Iceland, they say gift a book you cherish and hope you receive the book you desire. And on December 24 everyone would have a book to read.

FIGHT FOR CHICKEN!



In this photo taken on Monday, Siberian tigers fight over a live chicken released into their enclosure after a snowfall at the Siberian Tiger Park in Hailin, in China's northeast Heilongjiang province. – AFP

Drones help solve forest carbon capture riddle

On a hillside overlooking cabbage fields outside the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, a drone’s rotors begin to whirl, lifting it over a patch of forest. It moves back and forth atop the rich canopy, transmitting photos to be knitted into a 3D model that reveals the woodland’s health and helps estimate how much carbon it can absorb.

Drones are part of an increasingly sophisticated arsenal used by scientists to understand forests and their role in the battle against climate change. The basic premise is simple: woodlands suck in and store carbon dioxide, the greenhouse gas that is the largest contributor to climate change.

But how much they absorb is a complicated question.

A forest’s size is a key part of the answer — and deforestation has caused tree cover to fall 12 per cent globally since 2000, according to Global Forest Watch. But composition is also important: different species sequester carbon differently, and trees’ age and size matter, too.

Knowing how much carbon forests store is crucial to understanding how quickly the world needs to cut emissions, and most current estimates mix high-level imagery from satellites with small, labour-intensive ground surveys.

“Normally, we would go into this forest, we would put in the pole, we would have our piece of string, five



Sara Hussein is Future of the Planet correspondent, covering climate, environment and science across Asia for AFP

KNOWING HOW MUCH CARBON FORESTS STORE IS CRUCIAL TO UNDERSTANDING HOW QUICKLY THE WORLD NEEDS TO CUT EMISSIONS

metres long. We would walk around in a circle, we would measure all the trees in a circle,” explained Stephen Elliott, research director at Chiang Mai University’s Forest Restoration Research Unit (FORRU).

But “if you’ve got 20 students stomping around with tape measures and poles... you’re going to trash the understory,” he said, referring to the layer of vegetation between the forest floor and the canopy.

That is where the drone comes in, he said, gesturing to the Phantom model hovering overhead.

“With this, you don’t set foot in the forest.”

Three measurements are needed to estimate a tree’s absorptive capacity: height, girth and wood density, which differs by species. As an assistant looks through binoculars for birds that might collide with the drone, the machine flies a path plotted into a computer programme.

“We collect data or capture (images) every three seconds,” explained Worayut Takaew, a FORRU field research officer and drone operator.

“The overlapping images are then rendered into a 3D model that can be viewed from different angles.”

The patch of woodland being surveyed is part of a decades-long

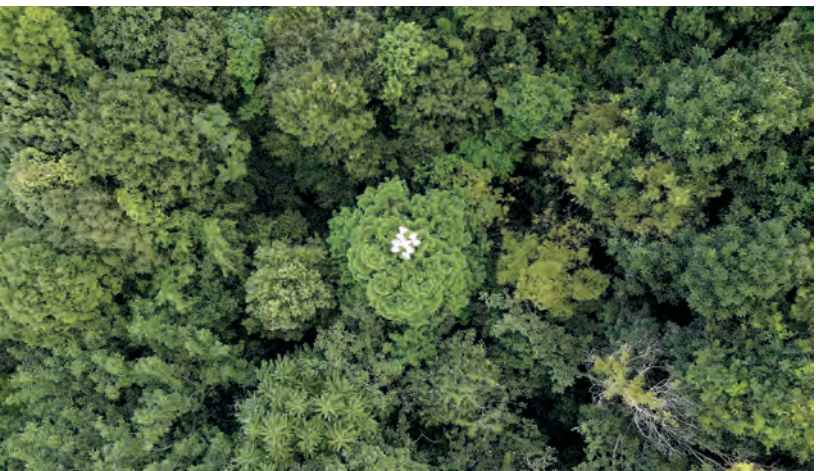
project led by Elliott and his team that has reforested around 100 hectares by planting a handful of key species.

Their goal was not large-scale reforestation, but developing best practices: planting native species, encouraging the return of animals that bring in seeds from other species and working with local communities.

The drone’s 3D model is a potent visual representation of their success, particularly compared to straggly untouched control plots nearby.

But it is also being developed as a way to avoid labour-intensive ground surveys.

“Once you’ve got the model, you can measure the height of every tree in the model. Not samples, every tree,” said Elliott.



This aerial photograph shows a drone doing a forest restoration survey over a reforested area in Chiang Mai. – AFP

A forest’s carbon potential goes beyond its trees, though, with leaf litter and soil also serving as stores.

So these too are collected for analysis, which Elliott says shows their reforested plots store carbon at levels close to undamaged woodland nearby.

But for all its bird’s-eye insights, the drone has one major limitation: it cannot see below the canopy.

For that, researchers need technology like LiDAR — high-resolution, remote-sensing equipment that effectively scans the whole forest.

“You can go inside the forest... and really reconstruct the shape and the size of each tree,” explained Emmanuel Paradis, a researcher at France’s National Research Institute for Sustainable Development.

He is leading a multi-year project to build the most accurate analysis yet of how much carbon Thailand’s forests can store. It will survey five different types of forests, including some of FORRU’s plots, using drone-mounted LiDAR and advanced analysis of the microbes and fungi in soil that sustain trees.

“The aim is to estimate at the country level... how much carbon can be stored by one hectare anywhere in Thailand,” he said.

The stakes are high at a time of fierce debate about whether existing estimates of the world’s forest carbon capacity are right.

“Many people, and I’m a bit of this opinion, think that these estimates are not accurate enough,” Paradis said.

“Estimations which are too optimistic can give too much hope and too much optimism on the possibilities of forests to store carbon,” he warned.

The urgency of the question is driving fast developments, including the launch next year of the European Space Agency’s Biomass satellite, designed to monitor forest carbon stocks.

“The technology is evolving, the satellites are more and more precise... and the statistical technologies are more and more precise,” said Paradis. — AFP

sport

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Ahli Sidab, Sohar face off in HM Cup title showdown

ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, DEC 18

Oman hockey powerhouse Ahli Sidab will target their 13th title while dark horses Sohar aim their second trophy when both the teams clash in the final of 53rd His Majesty's Cup hockey championship on Tuesday.

Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat, will be chief guest for the final to be held at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher at 7 pm.

In the semifinals, last year's runner-ups Ahli Sidab edged Salalah 2-1 and Sohar prevailed over defending champions Al Nasr 5-4 in an exciting match.

Ahli Sidab head coach Ayman al Kathiri said the team is fully ready for the showdown.

"We want to complete the domestic double after winning the Oman Hockey League. Last year we lost in the final of HM's Cup. This year, we are ready for the challenge again, Ayman told a pre-match press conference at the Oman Olympic Committee headquarters on Monday.

"Our players are all ready and raring to go in the final. We had some really exciting matches in this year's tournament. The players showed their experience and skill in reaching the final," Al



Kathiri said. Ahli Sidab captain Rashad al Fazari said the team is confident of a good show.

"We are prepared for an excellent outing in the final. We want to win the coveted trophy after our junior teams excelled in the OHA's age-group competitions," Rashad told Oman Daily Observer.

The star Oman player said the technical standards of the game is rising every year in the country.

"It will be a tight match but we are confident of getting through," Al Fazari added.



Ahli Sidab and Sohar coaches and captains pose with their team jerseys along with the Oman Hockey Association officials at the OOC headquarters. – Khalfan al Rusaiki



SOHAR IN FULL STRENGTH

Sohar head coach Abdulrahman al Balushi said his side has the plan to derail Ahli Sidab's run in the tournament.

"We will employ some good plan against Ahli Sidab in the final. Our players are capable of stopping Ahli Sidab's run in the championship," Abdulrahman said.

The Sohar team is in good strength this edition with the presence of several players who earlier played for other clubs.

"We have got our good players who earlier featured in other clubs. So, technically we are up

for the challenge. And in terms of foreign players we have one player each from India, Argentina and Egypt," the coach added.

Former Oman captain Younis al Noufali said his team is a mixture of youth and experience.

"We will deliver a good performance in the title-clash. The boys are eager to clinch a second HM's Cup for the club," the Sohar captain said.

Sohar won their only title in 2021 edition when they beat Ahli Sidab 2-1 in penalties after a 1-1 draw at regulation time.

Ten clubs participated in

this edition of the competition: Ahli Sidab, Seeb, Sohar, Al Ittihad, Mirbat, Al Nasr, Muscat, Salalah, Dhofar and Saham. The Oman Hockey Association's Competitions Committee employed a new format for the HM's Cup this year.

The clubs were divided into two groups -- Elite Group and Challenge Group -- based on the general classification criteria for the clubs participating in the 2022 competitions, as well as the 2023 General Hockey League, and according to the latest updates in the international

competitions in force in the Asian and international federations. The HM's Cup hockey championship is the oldest tournament of Oman established in 1971.

The champions of the 53rd edition will receive the cup, 30 gold medals, and a financial reward of RO 40,000, while the second-place team will receive 30 silver medals and RO 25,000 and the third-place team gets bronze medals and RO 15,000. The best player, top scorer and best goalkeeper will also receive awards and a cash prize of RO 100.

Oman tent pegging team grabs second gold in Saudi

AL MAAMARI, AL RAISI SHINE IN INDIVIDUAL COMPETITION

WALEED AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, DEC 18

Oman national tent pegging team won their second gold medal for the team sword competition on the second day of AIUla Tent Pegging Championship with traditional dress in Saudi Arabia, during December 17 to19. In the individual sword competitions, Omani competitors Safwan al Maamari won silver and Hamad al Raisi claimed bronze medal.

Eleven teams are taking part in the championship, namely Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, UAE, Iraq, Jordan, Russia, Canada, South Africa, Kuwait and Iran.

The second day witnessed strong competition among the participants, Oman national team dominated gold medal in team category, while Iraqi team won silver medal and the UAE team claimed the bronze.

In the individual category, Oman national team competitors, Safwan bin Zaid al Maamari snatched the silver medal while Hamad bin Saif

al Raisi claimed bronze and Iraq's Osama Liwa took the gold.

Oman team included Hamad bin Nasser al Riyami, Safwan bin Zaid al Maamari, Hamad bin Saif al Raisi, Waleed bin Zahir al Shurairi and Ahed bin Khamis al Balushi. The team was headed by Mohammed bin Salem al Maliki and supervised by Mansour bin Ali al Mahrouqi with his assistant Hilal bin Hassan al Balushi.

The World Cup competition for Horseback Shooting will be held besides AIUla Tent Pegging Championship with traditional dress in Al Forsan Village in AIUla. The events are organised by the Royal Commission for AIUla under the supervision of the Saudi Equestrian Federation, International Tent Pegging Federation and World Horseback Archery Federation.

As many as 11 countries will participate in the Horseback Shooting World Cup namely hosts Saudi Arabia, USA, Turkiye, Iran, Syria, Kuwait, Kazakhstan, Canada, Indonesia, Mongolia and Thailand.



Oman tent pegging team members celebrate with their gold medals in AIUla in Saudi Arabia.



Al Amerat secure maiden beach soccer league title

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 18

Al Amerat club won the title of the 2023-24 beach soccer league with two rounds remaining as they thrashed Salalah 10-2 in the 12th round on Sunday on the sand courts of the Sultan Qaboos Complex Youth Culture & Entertainment in Salalah.

The triumph enabled the Muscat-based team to reach an unassailable 30 points that ensured the championship. Last edition's runners-up Al Shabab are in second position with 21 points. Masirah are in third place with 18 points while Saham are fourth with 14 points.

Al Amerat club is featured with many experienced and youth faces including some players from national beach soccer team namely Khalid al Oraimi, Amjad Abdullah, Mashal Hilal among others.

Seven teams are competing in this season's league including Al Amerat, Al Shabab, Saham, Masirah, Sur, Salalah and Mirbat. This is the second edition of the league after the opening edition in the previous year. Al Musannah

were crowned champions of the first edition after beating Saham in the final rounds. Al Shabab were positioned as runners-up while Seeb club finished in third place. However, the third placed team of the last edition did not take part in the league this year.

Champions Al Amerat dominated in the match as they managed to end the first set at 4-0 while the second set finished at 7-1 before the last and third set completed at 10-2. The goals of Al Amerat were scored by Khalid al Oraimi (3), Amjad Abdullah (1), Mashal Hilal (1), Humaid Juma (2), Ahmed Rabee (2) and Mahmood Salim (1). Salalah's goals were netted by Mahmood Salim and Abubaker Ali.

This was Al Amerat's 11th win in the league during their undefeated campaign. Their strikers managed to score 70 goals while they received 34 goals only.

In another match, Al Shabab secured a 8-5 win over Masirah at the sand court of Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex on Friday. Northern Batinah team Saham recorded a huge win over Mirbat as they won 10-1 in Salalah.



Al Amerat and Salalah players fight for the ball during the Oman beach soccer league match in Salalah.

SEEB BEAT AHLI SIDAB TO GO TOP OF OBL

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, DEC 18

Seeb Club emerged victorious against Ahli Sidab Club 96-41 in the second round of Oman Basketball League 2023-24 at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher.

This triumph propelled the Seeb team to the top of the overall standings in OBL with 20 points.

Seeb excelled in the match, securing the win, especially after dominating in the first three quarters with a significant lead. Despite a draw in the fourth quarter, Ahli Sidab's efforts were not enough to change the outcome, as Seeb maintained their scoring and performance advantage.

The Seeb players, such as the American player Bress, Abdulrahman al Shuaibi, Rashid al Wahibi, Mazen al Hadidi and Hassan al Faraji led Seeb's scoring.

Seeb started the game well, imposing their playing style in both offensive and defensive strategies. They began with a seven-point lead after three successful shots, two from under the basket by Bress and Hassan al Faraji, and a three-pointer by Abdulrahman al Shuaibi. Despite Ahli Sidab attempts to score, with Ahmed al Hassani finally succeeding, Seeb extended their lead to 18-1. Seeb continued their offensive attempts, adding nine more points, while Ahli Sidab managed to score three points through their players Wael Gellati and Khaled al Hashmi. The first quarter ended with Seeb leading Ahli Sidab 27-4.

In the second quarter, Seeb maintained their dominance. Bress scored a three-pointer in the first attack, and the team continued their assault, adding four more points through Rashid al Wahibi and Bress. Ahli Sidab responded with two points from Zakaria al Wahibi, bringing the score to 34-6. Both teams continued their offensive efforts, with Seeb adding 17 points and Ahli Sidab scoring seven, ending the first half with Seeb leading 51-13.

In the third quarter, Seeb continued to score and widen the gap, adding 27 points, while Ahli Sidab scored 10 points. The third quarter ended with Seeb leading 78-21.

As for the fourth quarter, there was equality in performance and scoring, with both teams improving in their offensive and defensive plays. Each team scored 18 points in the quarter, and the match ended with Seeb winning against Ahli Sidab with a score of 96-41.

The match was officiated by internationals Essam al Siyabi as the first referee, Wafa al Sumairi as the second referee and Mazen al Hilali as the third referee. The table officials included Jamal al Hanai, Yaqoub al Nadabi and Majed al Akhزامi.



Man City to play Copenhagen in CL last 16 short on glamour ties

PARIS: Holders Manchester City were handed a tie against FC Copenhagen in Monday's draw for the Champions League last 16, from which the meeting of last season's runners-up Inter Milan and Atletico Madrid appears the standout tie.

Pep Guardiola's City, who are looking to retain the title they won in Istanbul last June, will be expected to comfortably get the better of the Danish side, who qualified from their group at the expense of Manchester United after beating the Red Devils 4-3 at home.

The clubs met in the group stage of last season's Champions League, with City winning 5-0 at home before being held to a 0-0 draw away at the Parken Stadium.

Inter, the Serie A leaders, were one of the teams to avoid after finishing second in their group and their meeting with Atletico will see Diego Simeone, the coach of the Spanish club, come up against a team with whom he spent two years as a player in the late 1990s.

French champions Paris Saint-Germain, who have gone out in the last 16 in each of the last two seasons and in five of the last seven campaigns, were also braced for a tough draw having come second in their group behind Borussia Dortmund. They will therefore be relieved at being handed a tie against Real Sociedad, who

Champions League 2023-2024			
Last 16			
First leg matches Feb 13-14, Feb 20-21, 2nd leg Mar 5-6, Mar 12-13			
FC Porto (POR)		Arsenal (ENG)	
Napoli (ITA)		Barcelona (ESP)	
Paris SG (FRA)		Real Sociedad (ESP)	
Inter Milan (ITA)		Atletico Madrid (ESP)	
PSV Eindhoven (NED)		Borussia Dortmund (GER)	
Lazio (ITA)		Bayern Munich (GER)	
FC Copenhagen (DEN)		Manchester City (ENG)	
RB Leipzig (GER)		Real Madrid (ESP)	



Uefa Champions League ambassador and British former football player, John Terry (R) handles a draw ball alongside Uef Deputy General Secretary, Giorgio Marchetti at the House of European Football in Nyon. — AFP

topped their section above Inter but are appearing in the Champions League last 16 for the first time since 2003/04, when

they were knocked out by Lyon.

Barcelona's meeting with Italian champions Napoli is another standout tie, while Premier

League leaders Arsenal will be expected to get the better of Porto and reach the quarterfinals for the first time since 2010.

"We want to try and go as far as possible, but we are very much concentrating on playing well, performing well and playing the best football we can, and then we'll see how far we go," Arsenal's sporting director, Edu, told the club's website. Sergio Conceicao's Porto finished level on points with Barcelona in their group but were ranked in second place after losing both meetings with the Catalans.

Real Madrid will be heavily fancied against RB Leipzig, and Bayern Munich will be strong favourites against Lazio, a team they beat 6-2 on aggregate at the same stage of the competition in 2020/21. "We've had positive experiences with Lazio before," said Bayern captain Manuel Neuer. "We'll go into the games as favourite but we won't allow ourselves to underestimate them."

The other tie sees Dortmund come up against PSV Eindhoven, who are coached by former Borussia manager Peter Bosz and are through to the last 16 for the first time in eight years.

The first legs will take place in mid-February with the return matches in March. This season's Champions League final will be staged at Wembley in London on June 1. — AFP

GOALS COME LATE IN ARSENAL'S WIN BACK TO TOP



Arsenal's Kai Havertz celebrates scoring their second goal. – Reuters

ANDY JALIL
AT EMIRATES STADIUM
LONDON, DEC 18

Despite dominating the first half's play, it wasn't until later in the game that Arsenal were able to ensure full points with a 2-0 win over Brighton. Arsenal went into the attack putting pressure on the opposition from the start but Brighton's stubborn defence held on until a double strike by the Gunners in the second half.

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta, who received a fourth yellow card this season for his rant at the referee in disputing a foul, said: "It was an incredible performance. A joy to watch from start to end – the way we did it against this very good team. Even at half-time the scoreline didn't reflect that. We fully deserved to win the game."

He praised Kai Havertz who scored the winning goal: "The performance, as well as his aggression, he is top. Really good. In terms of performance, it's exactly the same as he was at the start of the season. But you can now see he's confident and enjoying his football. We were outstanding, against a top side we had an incredible performance."

Arsenal missed early chances. Gabriel Martinelli and Havertz could have scored in the opening three minutes and Gabriel Jesus could not connect with a cross by Bukayo Saka across the goal. Saka was excellent on the right wing throughout the game and tormented James Milner whose task was to mark the England player and that proved too much for the 37-year-old former Liverpool player.

Arsenal eventually went ahead eight minutes after the break. It came from a corner taken by Saka which prompted a mistake by Jan Paul van Hecke who flicked back to Jesus, waiting unmarked at the back post to nod into the net. It was only his third goal of the season and he celebrated it wildly in relief. For a striker, he'll have to up his game if his side is to win their first league title in 20 years.

Brighton made three substitutions, among them was Igor Julio who was tasked to mark Saka as Milner had failed to do. Saka then sent a superb pass to Martin Odegaard in a counter attack but his shot went into the side netting.

Brighton improved as the second half went on but with a goal up the Gunners were still in control and confident. They should have scored again midway through the half following a near-post header from Ben White but William Saliba's effort from it was cleared off the line by Lewis Dunk.

There were two more chances for Arsenal, first Bart Verbruggen's finger tips saved from Odegaard and Havertz headed from just six yards in front of goal. Finally, with only three minutes remaining, Havertz ran on to a ball put forward by substitute Eddie Nketiah and drove in his fourth goal in his last seven matches in all competitions.

Disappointed with the defeat, Brighton manager, Roberto De Zerbi simply said: "We are not used to suffering in this way. We cannot forget we are Brighton and they are Arsenal."



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Oman to harness critical minerals
to support energy transition

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, DEC 18

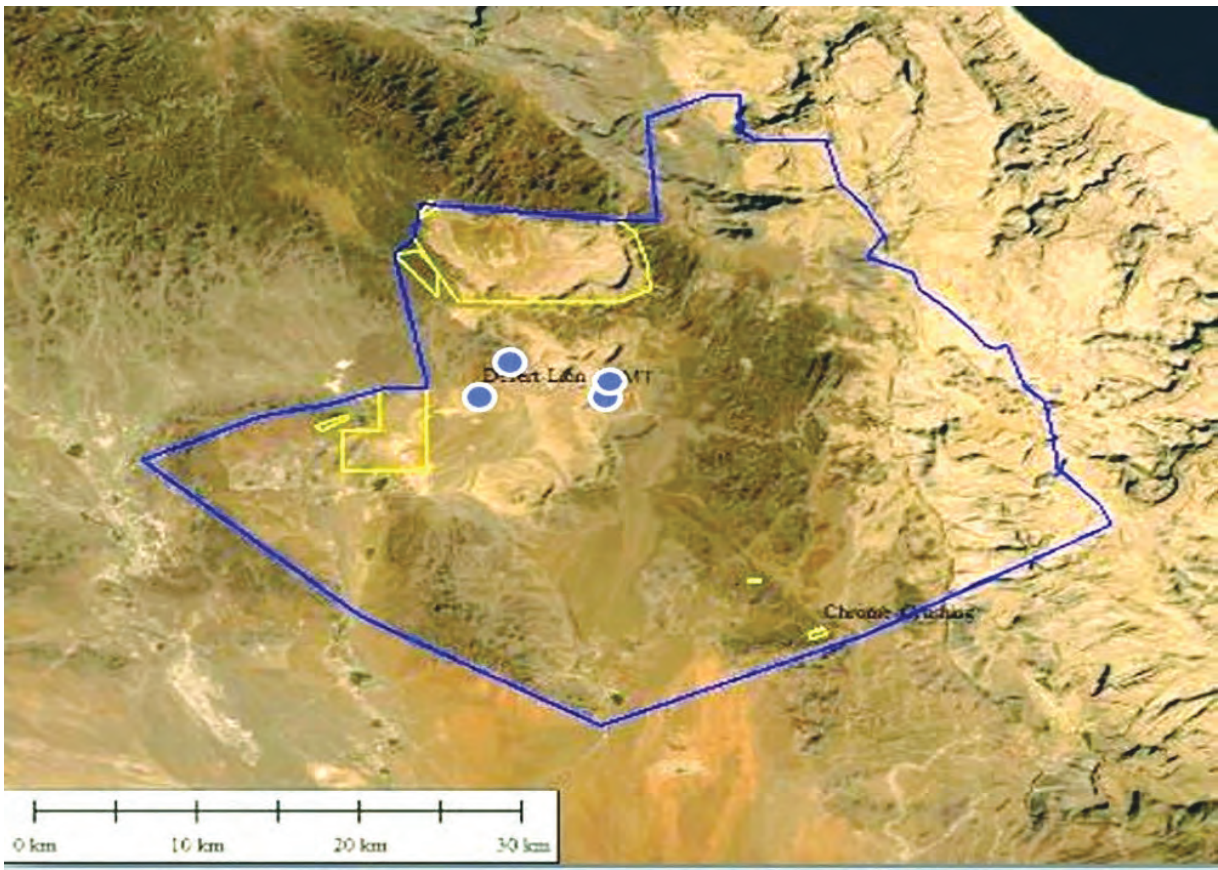
In parallel with its ambitions to jumpstart the growth of a green-hydrogen centric economy, the Sultanate of Oman is also seeking to unlock the potential of its prodigious minerals sector, specifically with the goal of uncovering critical minerals necessary to drive the country's energy transition.

According to Mohsin al Hadhrami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, the quest for critical mineral resources will enable the cost-competitive adoption of technologies necessary to, on the one hand, accelerate the energy transition, and on the other, unlock localisation and value creation opportunities within Oman.

Speaking at the Green Hydrogen Summit Oman (GHSO) 2023 forum, which concluded in Muscat last week, the Under-Secretary said the decarbonisation of certain economic activities will necessitate their electrification.

This energy transition will require the adoption of technologies and hardware that utilise certain critical minerals, he noted. While acknowledging that the campaign to harness the country's critical mineral resources is still in its relative nascent stages, he stressed nevertheless that it is being pursued in a modern and results-driven manner.

Data is being digitalised with the goal of making all such information available to investors for their consideration.



Block 21 which is the subject of exploration activities targeting nickel and cobalt resources.

At the same time, health, safety and environmental standards (HSE) are being embedded in the mining sector, he stated.

A promotional campaign launched by the ministry, of late, seeks to put the spotlight on Oman's wealth of mineral resources that can be commercialised to support, on the one hand, the country's energy transition, and on the other, the growth of the future green hydrogen economy.

The list includes: Laterite — a source of nickel and cobalt, which are useful in the manufacture of lithium-ion batteries and electric vehicle batteries, energy storage, and hydrogen production;

Chromite (with applications in renewable energy technologies, emission reduction, CCUS and electrolyser manufacturing;

Copper (with application in electrical grids, renewable energy systems, energy storage, and electric vehicles);

Silica (with application in PV solar cells, solar panels, energy storage and power electronics); Carbonatite (used in the manufacture of magnets for wind turbines, batteries, energy saving lighting); and Potash: (clean energy technology, renewable energy storage and portable devices).

In May, the ministry signed

agreements with local Omani firms for the exploration and development of potash and lithium ores in concessions located in Al Dhahirah and Al Wusta governorates.

In Al Sharqiyah North Governorate, a UK based mining firm is studying the resource potential of a large nickel laterite deposit with cobalt, chrome and iron-ore credits in Block 21 in the Wilayat of Ibra.

The company has pledged to explore opportunities for domestic processing of battery minerals, such as nickel and cobalt, to supply the global Electric Vehicle (EV) manufacturing industry.

Surge in popularity
for Omani products
boosted by initiative
led by government

NASRULAH AL AJMI
MUSCAT, DEC 18

Omani products are experiencing a resurgence in consumer interest, thanks to an ongoing initiative organised by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) in collaboration with the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) and the Joint Committee for External Exhibitions of Omani Products (OPEX).

Spanning commercial centres across various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman, this campaign, set to run until December, aims to propel national products into the spotlight.

The initiative focuses on introducing and promoting local products, unveiling a new national product identity logo, and encouraging industrial establishments to acquire a licence for this identity.

Its broader objectives include boosting local consumer confidence in national products, underlining their quality and competitiveness, and showcasing the diversity of the Omani industry.

The campaign also seeks to foster collaborations between industrial establishments and small to medium-sized enterprises, enhance consumer loyalty to local products, and establish effective communication channels between producers and consumers. Consumer testimonials underscore the belief that Omani products possess the requisite quality and specifications to rival imported counterparts, both domestically and internationally.

Beyond consumer preference, the initiative emphasises the economic impact of supporting local industries, contributing to internal economic circulation and facilitating foreign trade.

A cross-section of Omanis contacted by local media have strongly welcomed the 'Made in Oman' products drive.

Ahmed bin Abdullah al Waeli stressed the campaign's role in consumer education and building awareness about the distinct manufacturing quality of local products.

He emphasised the importance of continuous initiatives for sustained impact, suggesting diverse media strategies, including television and radio advertisements,



Omani products are being appreciated by consumers for their consistent quality and sustainability.

newspapers, social media marketing, and public advertising campaigns.

Elham bint Bader al Balushiyyah highlighted the sustainability and improved competitiveness of local products when chosen by consumers. Her observations point to the affordability of Omani products, especially in comparison to imported alternatives.

The increasing ubiquity of "Made in Oman" labels in various markets signifies heightened consumer awareness, reflecting positively on the national economy.

Suad bint Nasser al Nabhaniyyah sees the initiative as pivotal in guiding consumers, particularly in the food sector, towards choosing a diverse range of Omani products.

She expresses optimism for continuous initiatives throughout the year, anticipating their ability to reinforce consumer preferences, attract new segments, and contribute significantly to the national economy.

Mohammed bin Nasser al Hadidi underscores the initiative's role in highlighting local products, promoting industrial establishments, and encouraging entrepreneurial endeavors in the sector.

He hopes for intensified promotional efforts from both government and private entities to further elevate Omani products across various industries.

With the initiative extending until December 31, 2023, the effort strives to strengthen collaborative efforts between the private and public sectors.

By presenting a diverse array of high-quality national products, the initiative aims to instill trust among local consumers, encouraging them to actively choose Omani products in their purchasing decisions and fostering lasting consumer loyalty.

Bauer Nimr wetland project in
Oman wins plaudits at COP28

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 18

Bauer Resources' subsidiary in Oman, Bauer Nimr, recently made waves at the 28th UN Climate Conference (COP28) in Dubai with the introduction of a groundbreaking wetland project aimed at combating carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions through nature-based solutions. The project was presented by Shahad al Zakwani, senior project engineer at Bauer Nimr, on the final day of the conference, garnering widespread attention and praise.

The wetland project by Bauer Nimr holds a prominent position in the global efforts to address climate change. Operating the world's largest commercial reed bed treatment plant system in Oman, spanning an awe-inspiring 13.5 sq km (equivalent to approximately 1,600 football fields), Bauer Nimr has successfully transformed a once barren desert landscape into a thriving oasis teeming with life.

What sets this green water treatment system apart is not only its massive size and remarkable cleaning capacity but also the new standards of



Bauer Nimr has successfully transformed a once barren desert landscape into a thriving oasis teeming with life.

sustainability it establishes. By utilising a gravity-flown wetland system to treat and reuse water, the need for energy-consuming pumping and injection processes is eliminated.

This groundbreaking approach results in a significant reduction of over 225,000 tonnes of CO2 emissions annually, leading to its registration with the Global Carbon Council.

Furthermore, the Bauer Nimr wetland project has earned the prestigious Diamond Label for its

positive ecological and social impact.

In addition to being a major boon for the environment, the project has become a thriving ecosystem for a diverse range of wetland plants, attracting numerous species of birds and wildlife, restoring and enhancing biodiversity in the region.

Beyond the environmental benefits, the project's economic contributions are equally remarkable. By creating long-term employment opportunities, it is expected to foster economic development in the region for the next two decades.

This dual focus on ecological and socio-economic sustainability has gained recognition and admiration from experts, politicians, journalists, consultants, and climate activists who attended COP28.

Since 2021, the project has been generating verified carbon credits in compliance with Corsia, the aviation industry's carbon offsetting and reduction scheme. This allows the carbon credits to be transacted in the voluntary market, further amplifying its positive impact and providing incentives for continued efforts until 2030.

Fertiliser buyers turn away from China amid growing curbs



A worker transports fertilisers for export at a port in Nantong, China. — Reuters

BEIJING: Asian fertiliser buyers are seeking alternatives to Chinese supplies on concerns the world's top exporter has become an increasingly unreliable supplier after curbs on shipments to protect its domestic market, buyers and analysts said.

China is the world's biggest exporter of phosphate and a major supplier of urea, but since 2021 it has imposed measures including export quotas and lengthy inspection requirements on the fertiliser ingredients to cool domestic prices.

Urea exports plunged 24% to 2.8 million metric tons in 2022 from the year before and though higher this year, remain below the previous years' average level.

Phosphate exports were brisk earlier in the year but have also been throttled back in recent months, leading to a squeeze in global supply that has pushed up prices.

The Chinese government's growing intervention in the exports means the country will be an even less reliable supplier in 2024, said Josh Linville, director of fertiliser at brokerage StoneX Group Inc. "Normally, market factors call the shots on what happens.

Now, we have to try and figure out what the central government is thinking and its reaction can swing heavily from side to side. Buyers will have to diversify," he said.

US prices for di-ammonium phosphate (DAP), a global benchmark for the industry, have risen 26% since mid-July to \$617.30/tonne, according to LSEG data. — Reuters

China banks step up sales of bad loans as consumer defaults rise

SHANGHAI: Chinese banks are putting bad loans up for sale at a record pace, as regulators push for faster disposal of sour debts amid rising consumer defaults during an ailing post-Covid economic recovery.

Issuance this year of securities backed by non-performing loans (NPLs) is set to jump about 40% from a year ago to a record, data from a ratings agency showed, as lenders rush to offload distressed assets linked to mortgage, credit card and consumer borrowings.

This week alone, six banks including China Everbright Bank and Bank of Jiangsu plan to issue 1.5 billion yuan (\$210.49 million) worth of asset-backed securities (ABS) based on bad loans.

Typical buyers include fund managers, wealth management firms, specialist distressed debt investors and some hedge funds. "Securitisation has become a regular tool for Chinese banks to dispose of bad loans.

It's efficient, flexible, and regulators are giving relatively faster approvals for such products," said Kan Zhou, head of structured finance ratings at S&P Global (China) Ratings.

Issuance is climbing "also because in an economic downturn, there's growing supply of non-performing assets," he said, expecting the market to grow further next year.

Chinese authorities have blacklisted 8.57 million people who missed payments on everything from home mortgages to business loans, according to court data. The cumulative figure is up 50% from the 5.7 million defaulters at the beginning of 2020, highlighting the scars from the pandemic and its aftermath.

As of Dec 17, Chinese banks had sold 42.5 billion yuan (\$5.96 billion) of bond-like securities based on bad loans this year, up 37% from 2022's total and the highest since its records began in 2016, according to data from a unit of CCXI, a Chinese ratings agency.

In addition, 60 billion yuan worth of bad loans changed hands on the official marketplace for credit assets during the January to September period, up 61% from last year's total, data from



A customer selects products at a supermarket in Shanghai, China. — Reuters

China's economic conditions to improve in 2024: Officials

BEIJING: China's economy is expected to see more favourable conditions and more opportunities than challenges in 2024, state media said citing officials of the Chinese Communist Party's finance and economy office.

Macroeconomic policies will continue to provide support for economic recovery, the official Xinhua said in a detailed readout of the annual Central Economic Work Conference held from Dec 11-12, during which top leaders set economic targets for the following year.

"China's prices are low, central government debt levels are not high, and conditions are in place to strengthen implementation of monetary and fiscal policies," Xinhua said, quoting the office of the Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission late on Sunday.

Still, blockages persist in the domestic economic cycle as demand, consumption and enterprise investment remain weak. Next year, the party officials said

China will look to shift from a post-pandemic recovery to sustained consumption growth.

The International Monetary Fund last month revised upward its growth forecast for China to 5.4% this year, attributing the revision to a "strong" post-Covid recovery. The government has set a target of around 5%.

The world's second-largest economy will also cultivate new consumption growth areas such as smart homes, recreation and tourism and sports events.

The effects of this year's treasury bond issuance, cuts in interest rates, tax and fee cuts and other policies will continue into next year, the report said. China would also continue to monitor its battered real estate market and meet the reasonable financing needs of real estate companies.

"With the concerted efforts of all parties, the policy objectives of real estate risk prevention and market stabilisation can be fully achieved," the Xinhua report said.

an agency affiliated with China's banking regulator showed.

The booming market for bad loans underscores the challenges facing a banking sector grappling with a real estate crisis, local government debt woes and rising individual delinquencies as China's post-Covid recovery fades.

Outstanding bad loans at Chinese banks hit 3.2 trillion yuan at the end of September, up one-third from 2.4 trillion yuan at end-2019, according to the country's banking regulator.

To fend off systemic financial risks, Beijing is urging banks to accelerate their disposal of non-performing assets. "Packaging bad loans into a security product to be sold to investors help reduce NPLs on banks' books, and revitalise dormant assets," S&P's Zhou said.

Compared with other means of disposal, such as outright write-offs or selling to asset management companies set up specifically to deal with bad loans, issuing ABS is used more for soured personal loans.

Senior ABS based on bad loans yielding 2% to 3.5% are attractive in China's low-interest rate environment, but investors risk a lower recovery rate if the economic situation worsens, Zhou said.

China Citic Bank, was on Monday selling securities backed by consumer loans. — Reuters

EU opens proceedings against X in first probe under new rules

STOCKHOLM: The European Union on Monday said it would launch an investigation of social media company X, formerly known as Twitter, over a suspected breach of obligations in its first such probe under the Digital Services Act (DSA).

The DSA, which entered into force in November last year, requires very large online platforms and search engines to do more to tackle illegal content and risks to public security, and to protect their services against manipulative techniques.

The proceedings will focus on countering the dissemination of illegal content in the EU, and the effectiveness of measures taken to combat information manipulation, notably of the "community notes" system, the Commission said.

It will also focus on the measures taken by X to increase the transparency of its platform and a suspected deceptive design of the user interface such as checkmarks linked to subscription products, the so-called Blue checks.

The Commission said it will now carry out an in-depth investigation as a matter of priority and continue to gather evidence by sending additional requests for information, conducting interviews and inspections.

X, owned by Elon Musk, is part of a group of large tech companies facing increased scrutiny under the DSA.

Following Hamas' attacks on Israel on Oct 7, EU industry chief Thierry Breton sent letters to X, Meta, TikTok and Alphabet reminding them of their obligations under the DSA to tackle harmful and illegal content.

The platforms responded promptly, highlighting steps they have taken to stop disinformation on their platforms but Musk challenged Breton over the disinformation charge. — Reuters

Shipping stocks extend rally as Red Sea traffic paused

MILAN: Shipping stocks kept rising across Europe on Monday after AP Moller-Maersk and other top freight firms paused journeys through the Suez Canal following attacks on vessels in the Red Sea by militants in Yemen.

Traders bet a prolonged disruption to the key route, which allows East-West trade without the time and expense of circumnavigating Africa, could boost rates.

Maersk shares rose as much as 4.7% in Copenhagen, before paring some of those gains, and following an almost 8% surge on Friday. By 1137 GMT, Italian shipper D'Amico, Germany's Hapag Lloyd and Norwegian oil tanker Hafnia gained between 4% and 7%, also extending last week's surge.

On Monday, oil major BP temporarily paused all transits



A ship is docked at the Red Sea port of Hodeidah, Yemen. — Reuters

through the Red Sea citing security concerns.

"We believe that the decision to avoid the Red Sea route for crude/

product cargoes will increase transport time and may put

TRADERS BET A PROLONGED DISRUPTION TO THE KEY ROUTE, WHICH ALLOWS EAST-WEST TRADE WITHOUT THE TIME AND EXPENSE OF CIRCUMNAVIGATING AFRICA, COULD BOOST RATES.

further upward pressure on freight rates if this condition persist," Massimo Bonisoli, an oil analyst at Equita, said.

The crude price was last up 0.7% at \$77.11 a barrel, having touched an earlier session low of \$75.76. Jefferies said should ships avoid the Red Sea and sail around the Cape of Good Hope, the utilisation impact would be significant, with

containers and tankers the most affected.

"The Suez Canal is a vital link in seaborne trade and the global merchant fleet is being stretched as ships change trade patterns. All segments are active in the region and likely will see stronger rates in the near-term," Jefferies analysts said.

A tanker from the Middle East would take 17 days to get to Europe via Suez and 41 days if going around Africa, it noted, adding that military-supported convoys may be a better alternative than going around the Cape of Good Hope. Maersk on Friday paused all its container shipments through the Red Sea until further notice, and was joined on Saturday by the Swiss-based MSC and French shipping group CMA CGM.

— Reuters



Workers are seen at US Steel Granite City Works in Illinois. – Reuters

Japan's Nippon Steel to buy US Steel in \$14.9 billion deal

TOKYO: Japan's Nippon Steel said on Monday it would buy US Steel in a deal valued at \$14.9 billion including debt, months after the steelmaker put itself up for sale. The per-share offer of \$55 represents a premium of about 40 per cent to US Steel's Friday's close and 142 per cent compared to the stock's closing price before the company announced a strategic review process on August 11.

US Steel's shares rose about 27 per cent in premarket trading. Nippon, the world's No.4 steelmaker, sees the US as a growth market that can help to offset declining demand in Japan, the Nikkei daily, which earlier reported the deal, said. Nippon has secured financing commitments for the deal and expects it will enable the company to move toward 100 million tonnes of global crude steel capacity.

All of US Steel's commitments with its employees, including all collective bargaining agreements in place with its unions, will be honoured, Nippon said. In the middle of August, US Steel launched a formal review process, after rebuffing a \$7.3 billion offer from rival Cleveland-Cliffs Inc.

While Cliffs continued to participate in the sale process, steelmaking giant ArcelorMittal SA was also considering an offer, media reported in August.

Pittsburgh-based US Steel's shares had suffered after several quarters of falling revenue and profit, making it an attractive takeover target for rivals looking to add a maker of steel used by the automobile industry.

US Steel also supplies to the renewable energy industry and stands to benefit from the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which provides tax credits and other incentives for such projects, something that attracted suitors.

Companies including US Steel are also set for a strong start to 2024 as steel prices spike following a resolution of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union strike against the Detroit Three automakers. Citi is the financial adviser to NSC while Barclays Capital, Goldman Sachs and Evercore are the financial advisers to US Steel. — **Reuters**

Turkiye saves \$2 billion on Russian oil as imports soar despite sanctions

MOSCOW: Turkiye and Turkish companies have saved around \$2 billion on energy bills in 2023 by raising imports of discounted Russian oil and refined products, Reuters calculation based on LSEG data and traders' estimates showed, and Ankara wants to buy more from its neighbour despite Western sanctions.

Turkiye became the biggest importer of Russian energy in the Western hemisphere after Russia's invasion of Ukraine triggered European countries to halt most imports of Russian oil and gas. China and India have imported larger volumes from Russia than Turkiye, but Ankara's proximity to Russian ports, however, means it is saving more than other buyers thanks to cheaper freight.

Russian Urals crude oil shipments to Turkiye rose to an all-time high of 400,000 barrels per day (bpd) in November 2023, accounting for some 14 per cent of Russia's overall seaborne oil exports last month, LSEG data showed.

Russia's energy ministry declined to comment. Turkiye's energy ministry, Turpas and STAR refinery didn't respond to requests for comments. Supplies to Turkiye are expected to rise further in the coming months after private Russian oil producer Lukoil signed a deal with Azeri firm SOCAR to refine up to 200,000-barrel-per-day of its oil at Socar's Turkish STAR refinery, trading sources said.

On top of rising crude supplies, Turkiye's imports of Russian diesel, heating oil, jet and marine fuel jumped 200 per cent in January-November 2023 to some 0.29 million barrels per day.

Russia supplied to Turkiye in January-November 13 million tonnes of distillates including 8.6 million tonnes of ultra low sulphur diesel (ULSD 10ppm) compared to 4.3 million tonnes of distillates



A worker turns a valve at UdmurtNef't's Gremikhinskoye oil field east of Izhevsk near the Ural Mountains, Russia. – Reuters

including 3.2 million tonnes of ULSD over the same period of 2022, LSEG data showed and traders said.

Turkiye has been paying between \$25 and \$150 less for a tonne (\$3.3-20 per barrel) of Russia diesel this year compared to prices for similar grades in the Mediterranean, according to traders. For crude, it had discounts of between \$5-20 per barrel.

Cheaper energy imports have helped Ankara narrow its trade deficit and lessen pressure on its currency, which devalued 30 per cent so far this year. Turkiye has also increased exports of diesel over the same period by 120 per cent to 6.03 million tonnes from 2.75 million in January-November 2023, according to LSEG data.

Multiple activists and supporters of Ukraine have accused Turkiye of effectively helping Russia channel its products to Europe bypassing

sanctions.

The country denies the accusations and says it is exporting fuels refined from various types of crude. Turkiye is not unique in enjoying big savings on Russian oil purchases.

India, which also refused to join sanctions against Moscow, has boosted imports of Russian oil by 77 per cent so far this year. It has saved roughly \$2.7 billion on Russian oil imports in the first nine of 2023, according to calculations based on government data.

But India imported much larger volumes of Russian oil to the tune of 1.7 million bpd, meaning per barrel savings for Turkiye were much higher.

Traders said the savings can be made on freight rates as they estimate it currently costs \$6 million to bring a tanker with Russian oil to Turkiye compared to \$9 million to India.

Kpler's analyst Viktor Katona said Turkiye's refiners have become some of the most profitable plants in the Mediterranean since Russian sanctions have been imposed in February 2022.

Katona said Turkiye's largest oil refiner Tupras had a gross profit margin of \$30 per barrel over the past year, \$6 per barrel higher than the average margin for a complex refinery in the Mediterranean.

Tupras said Moscow and Ankara are also discussing setting up a hub for Russian gas in Turkiye after the EU drastically reduced Russian gas purchases.

The plan plays into Ankara's long-held desire to become a major energy distribution hub for southern Europe.

Russia sees the hub as a way to re-route its gas exports from Europe or sell some gas into the EU indirectly. — **Reuters**

Goldman cuts 2024 Brent price forecast on strong supply

WASHINGTON: Goldman Sachs trimmed its price expectation for Brent crude in 2024 by \$10 per barrel to between \$70 and \$90, saying strong production from the United States would moderate any upside in oil prices.

"We still look for range-bound prices and only moderate price volatility in 2024. Elevated spare capacity to handle tightening shocks should limit upside price moves," its analysts said in a note dated Sunday.

The investment bank now expects Brent to recover to a peak of \$85 per barrel in June 2024, and to average at \$81/\$80 in 2024/2025 compared to \$92 previously.

Brent was trading around \$77 as of 05:26 GMT on Monday, down 20 per cent from multi-month highs hit in September. US West Texas Intermediate crude was around \$72 a barrel. Continued supply from non-Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) sources, led by the US shows that several tailwinds to the US production are likely to persist in 2024, Goldman Sachs added.

Analysts said they expect US Lower 48 crude output to reach 11.4 million barrels per day (mb/d) in the fourth quarter of next year,



A 3D-printed oil pump jack is placed on dollar banknotes in this illustration picture. – Reuters

THE INVESTMENT BANK NOW EXPECTS BRENT TO RECOVER TO A PEAK OF \$85 PER BARREL IN JUNE 2024, AND TO AVERAGE AT \$81/\$80 IN 2024/2025 COMPARED TO \$92 PREVIOUSLY.

and hiked US total liquids supply 2024 growth forecast to 0.9 mb/d from 0.5 mb/d earlier.

However, Opec decision to rein in supply, a recovery in China, restocking in the US and modest recession risk should limit downside risk to oil prices, the bank noted.

"Saudi Arabia is unlikely to 'flush' the market in 2024", Goldman analysts said, adding "we expect full extensions of the

Opec+ cuts announced in April 2023 (1.7 mb/d) through 2025, and of the additional 2.2 mb/d package through 2024Q2."

"We adjust our Opec range trade to a short \$70 put, long \$80/90 call spread option on Brent Jun24, and still recommend long summer 2024 gasoline margins," they added. — **Reuters**

Oil prices rise on Red Sea jitters, ample supply weighs

LONDON: Oil rose on Monday as attacks on ships in the Red Sea raised concerns of oil supply disruptions, although scepticism around Russia's plan to cut exports in December limited gains.

BP has temporarily paused all transits through the Red Sea, it said on Monday, following attacks over the weekend by militant forces which control most of Yemen. Other shipping firms said over the weekend that they would avoid the Suez Canal. Brent crude futures were up 62 cents, or 0.8 per cent, to \$77.17 a barrel while US West Texas Intermediate crude rose 47 cents, to \$71.90. Both crude benchmarks posted small gains last week, following seven weeks of decline, after a US Federal Reserve meeting last week raised hopes that interest rate hikes are over and cuts are on their way.

"The rise in geopolitical risk premium, which has come in the form of regular hostilities towards commercial vessels in the Red Sea by Iran-backed Ansar Allah plays its indisputable part in oil's resurrection," said Tamas Varga of



A gas pump is seen hanging from the ceiling at a petrol station in Seoul, South Korea. – Reuters

oil broker PVM.

Also adding support, Russia said on Sunday it would deepen oil export cuts in December by potentially 50,000 barrels per day or more, earlier than promised, as the world's biggest exporters try to support global oil prices.

This comes after Moscow suspended about two-thirds of loadings of its main export grade Urals crude from ports due to a storm and scheduled maintenance on Friday. Still, PVM's Varga was sceptical of the extent to which Russia will make voluntary output cuts. "In reality it is just re-packaging weather-related halts in exports," he said. — **Reuters**

How Putin turned a Western boycott into a bonanza



PAUL SONNE

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Soon after Russian troops attacked his country, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made a plea to Western companies: “Leave Russia,” he said. “Make sure that the Russians do not receive a single penny.”

Hundreds of companies answered the call. Politicians and activists predicted that it would help strangle the Russian economy and undermine the Kremlin’s war effort.

Russian President Vladimir Putin had other plans.

Putin has turned the exits of major Western companies into a windfall for Russia’s loyal elite and the state itself. He has forced companies wishing to sell to do so at fire-sale prices. He has limited sales to buyers anointed by

Moscow. Sometimes he has seized firms outright.

A New York Times investigation traced how Putin has turned an expected misfortune into an enrichment scheme. Western companies that have announced departures have declared more than \$103 billion in losses since the start of the war, according to a Times analysis of financial reports. Putin has squeezed companies for as much of that wealth as possible by dictating the terms of their departure.

He has also subjected those exits to ever-increasing taxes, generating at least \$1.25 billion in the past year for Russia’s war chest.

No private deal is safe. Dutch company Heineken, for example, found a buyer this spring and set a price.

But the Russian government unilaterally rejected the deal, people close to the negotiations said, and put the company’s Russian holdings in the hands of an aerosol-packaging titan married to a former Russian senator.

In all, Putin has overseen one of the biggest transfers of wealth within Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union. Huge swaths of industries — elevators, tires, industrial coatings and more — are now in the hands of increasingly dominant Russian players.

In some cases, that player is the state. Government-owned enterprises have acquired the assets of corporate giants such as Ikea and Toyota. In many cases, Putin personally signs off on sales.

“These are good deals for us, for sure,” said Anton Pinsky, a prominent restaurateur who joined with a pro-Putin rapper and associates of a powerful senator to take over Starbucks.

In an interview in Moscow, he downplayed the significance of his own deal but was clear about the effect of the Western departures.



A customer hands over Russian rouble banknotes and coins to a vendor at a market in Omsk, Russia. – Reuters

“You screwed up, left it,” he said. “We picked it up inexpensively. Thank you.”

Today in Russia, a robust consumer world carries on, helping Putin maintain a sense of normalcy despite a war that has proved longer, deadlier and costlier than he predicted.

Most foreign companies remain in Russia, unwilling to lose the billions they’ve invested there over decades. Other businesses have been sold and now have a through-the-looking-glass feel. Krispy Kreme is now Krunchy Dream. Starbucks has been reborn as Stars Coffee; its mermaid is now a Russian swan princess.

These companies can buy raw materials domestically or import them from friendly countries. And customers can still easily buy products that have supposedly been pulled from shelves.

Putin’s economic counterstrikes have helped to fortify support among the elites profiting from the war and to blunt the effects of

Western isolation. While Ukraine is preoccupied with short-term imperatives such as shoring up international support, the relative resilience of the Russian economy has enabled Putin to play a long game.

Previously undisclosed documents, financial statements and interviews with dozens of deal-makers in Russia and across Europe show that Moscow now micromanages practically every exit. Companies must navigate an opaque system to win approval to sell.

The wave of departing companies has stung. It has sent a global signal that Russia is a business pariah. The economy is strained and at risk of overheating. Putin’s handling of Western departures has only reinforced Russia’s image as a dangerous place to do business. Even some top Russian officials admit that decreased competition and foreign investment will hurt everyday Russians and

the economy in the long term. The Kremlin says it prefers that companies remain in Russia. But Putin scoffs at the notion that leaving will hurt. “Did they think everything would collapse here? Well, nothing of the kind happened,” he said this month. “Russian companies took over and moved on.”

Hanging over the exit process for Western firms is the threat of intimidation and force. Last summer, Putin seized the Russian arm of Danish brewer Carlsberg, along with roughly a half-billion dollars in cash, and put them under the temporary control of one of his friends. At least four other companies have similarly lost control of their operations this year to effective state seizures.

Today, Putin is at the helm of a fraught exit process that works to Russia’s advantage. But it began in the early days of the war with the urgent goal of simply keeping the Russian economy alive.

Blocking the Exits

Speaking from the White House two weeks after the February 2022 attack, President Joe Biden boasted that the West was crushing the Russian economy. “The list of businesses and international corporations leaving Russia is growing by the day,” he said.

Things looked bleak for Putin. The stock exchange in Moscow was closed, and the ruble had crashed. If Russia lost all the jobs, production and cash of Western companies, the effects would be devastating.

But Putin was preparing his financial rejoinder. He restricted the movement of money abroad and required that companies from “unfriendly nations” win approval before selling their businesses.

Putin was putting the brakes on just as Western executives faced pressure to accelerate. In the United States, there was perhaps no more vocal figure than Yale University management professor Jeffrey Sonnenfeld. He appeared on cable news programmes, criticising companies that remained in Russia.

Sonnenfeld recalled that it was corporate boycotts — more than sanctions — that helped abolish apartheid in South Africa. He transformed his office into a sort of war room, with a Yale team grading companies on their efforts to sever Russian ties.

The question of who would end up with those companies was of little concern.

“If Putin thinks he can do better at the deep fryer, let him have at it,” he said in an interview. “We really don’t care. The important thing is to not have the endorsement of a renowned global brand.” Sonnenfeld’s list and others like it added to pressure from shareholders, Ukrainian activists and everyday consumers.

— The New York Times

Developing countries’ never-ending debt crisis

The debt crisis in low-income countries continues to fester. Meanwhile, the international policy community seems to be losing traction on the problem. Can it recover its grip, or has a developing-country debt disaster become inevitable?

The number of economies in debt distress had already risen sharply between the global financial crisis in 2008-09 and the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic, as judged by countries receiving an unfavourable grade of B3 or lower from the credit-rating agency Moody’s.

Then, when the pandemic erupted, the number of distressed countries stopped rising, as global leaders resolved to address what was now a humanitarian emergency as well as a financial crisis.

The G20 countries tabled a Debt Service Suspension Initiative, which temporarily relieved troubled countries’ governments of the need to repay.

But once the DSSI expired at the end of 2021, the number of distressed sovereigns began rising again, in part because higher global interest rates made it still harder to service debts.

The number of countries in debt distress, as measured by



BARRY EICHENGREEN

The author, Professor of Economics and Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley, is a former senior policy adviser at the International Monetary Fund.



Women carry sacks on their head in Lusaka, Zambia. – AFP

Moody’s, currently exceeds 40.

At the end of 2020, the DSSI was supplemented by the Common Framework for Debt Treatments. The goal was to facilitate restructuring agreements between countries with unsustainable debts, their advanced-country creditors, and bondholders. Yet these restructuring efforts have dragged on, literally for years, without evident progress.

Last month, an agreement between Zambia and its creditors was hailed as a breakthrough. But the relief offered to Zambia was patently inadequate. And no sooner was the proposed deal announced than it collapsed.

China complained that its state-owned bank creditors were

being treated less favourably than the bondholders. The Common Framework, as two of its critics antiseptically observed, needed “a major reset in the new year.”

Coincidentally, 2024 marks the centennial of the Dawes Plan, under which Germany’s debts to its World War I adversaries were restructured. And therein lies a tale.

The war left a tangled financial web: some \$30 billion of reparations owed by Germany to the victorious European Allies, and \$10 billion of war debts owed by the Allies to the United States. It was clear that these obligations were linked – that the Allies would agree to scale down Germany’s reparations only if the US wrote off their debts.

Yet the US Congress, having taken an isolationist turn, adamantly refused to forgive the Allies’ obligations. America was new to the responsibilities of being a net creditor to the world, having been a net debtor before the war.

In 1923, the US belatedly acknowledged the severity of the post-World War I debt crisis, which the German hyperinflation made impossible to ignore.

It permitted Charles G. Dawes, Chicago banker and future US vice president, to chair an international committee to review the post-war debt problem. Dawes’s involvement was significant in that it signalled US reengagement with global affairs.

But while the Dawes Plan scaled back Germany’s immediate obligations, it provided little long-term debt relief, only pushing the country’s payments into the future. Ongoing German government transfers to the Allies were then financed by a dollar loan floated in the American market by the US investment bank J.P. Morgan & Co.

These patchwork arrangements halted Germany’s hyperinflation and allowed European economic growth to resume. But everything came apart after 1929. As the global economy sank into the

Great Depression, a one-year moratorium on all debt and reparation payments was agreed in 1931.

Only in 1932, when it was too late to prevent Germany’s disastrous political turn, did European governments finally agree to cancel their reparation claims.

They followed up by repudiating their debts to the US, earning the lasting enmity of Congress.

Several lessons for today’s developing-country debt crisis can be gleaned from this tragic history.

First, creditors, even when inexperienced, must acknowledge their role in resolving debt crises.

Today, this means all eyes are on China, which is the single most important creditor to poor countries in debt distress.

Second, simply providing credits to distressed countries, in the manner of J.P. Morgan in 1924, merely kicks the can down the road.

China is currently providing renminbi swaps and credits to governments that previously took on infrastructure loans as part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, enabling them to stay current on their payments to Chinese banks. This expedient solves nothing.

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ACTOR
French actor Timothee Chalamet arrives for the US premiere of “Wonka” at the Regency Village theatre in Westwood, California. — AFP



FASHION
French journalist Pablo Pillaud-Vivien poses during a photo session in Paris. — AFP



FESTIVE TIME
A woman walks in front of Christmas and New Year decorations in downtown Moscow on Monday. — AFP



CULTURE
People visit the Nanyue Hengshan Scenic Area after a snowfall in Hengyang, in China central Hunan province. — AFP



ART
A sculptor works on a statue of mother Mary at his workshop ahead of the Christmas celebrations in Biyagama. — AFP

art & life

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Beyond the sinkhole, Dhabab offers plenty of cultural and natural beauty

It consists of six small, wonderful towns, including Al Deira, Al Ruwaidah, Al Hujra, and Al Ghubrah... P20

Muharraq Nights Festival, a cultural odyssey through Bahrain's pearling capital

BY ATIFA AL SAYED

BAHRAIN'S RICH CULTURAL tapestry comes alive again as the Muharraq Nights Festival returns, promising an immersive celebration of art, design, and heritage. From December 14 to 23, this vibrant event, organised by the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities in collaboration with Shaikh Ebrahim bin Mohammed al Khalid Centre for Culture and Research, will transport visitors through the historic neighbourhoods of Muharraq, one of Bahrain's enchanting islands.

The festival's diverse venues, including the Shaikh Ebrahim Centre, Archaeologies of Green pavilion, Public Squares, Suq al Qaysariyyah, and Amarat Fakhro, showcase Muharraq's architectural and urban herit-

age. This annual extravaganza has become an icon for cultural tourism in the Gulf region, breathing life into the historical legacy of this picturesque city.

At its core lies the Unesco World Heritage Site 'Pearling, Testimony of an Island Economy', a testament to Bahrain's pearling era. The site not only preserves the history, heritage, and economic significance of pearling but also exemplifies culturally-led urban development. Rehabilitating the city's architectural and urban heritage ensures the perpetuation of the pearling narrative for future generations.

A key highlight of the festival is the Pearling Path Tour on December 19, 21 and 22, offering a journey through the old alleyways of Muharraq and providing participants with a deep dive



into the pearling capital's history. For a modern twist, the E-Scooter Pearling Path Tour on December 16 and 23 adds a unique and exhilarating perspective to this historic site.

Photography enthusiasts can join the Muharraq Nights Photography Walk with Fujifilm on December 22 at 3:30 pm. The picturesque journey, starting at the Pearling Path Visitors Centre and concluding at Qal'at Bu Mahir, captures the mesmerising seashore during the enchanting sunset.



Food lovers are in for a treat with the Muharraq Food Walk by The Food Menu on December 17, 22 and 23 from 6 pm to 9 pm. Exploring the Pearling Path, participants will savour the unique flavours of Muharraq, from Bu Khalaf Coffee Shop to Bahraini halwa and 'qahwa' at Sophia Bookstore.

Renowned Bahraini photographer Ishaq Madan led the Muharraq Photo Tour on December 14 from 5 pm to 7:30 pm, offering participants a live learning session on composi-



tion. Children, too, can explore the city's rich history at the Children's Creativity Corner through engaging activities designed for them.

Visitors can also enjoy food vendors and performances by talented Bahraini artists, creating a lively and captivating atmosphere.

The Muharraq Nights Festival beckons all to immerse themselves in Bahrain's rich cultural heritage, showcasing the diversity and creativity of the Gulf region. From art exhibi-

tions to traditional performances, this event is an opportunity to rediscover the historic pearling capital, indulge in delicious cuisine, and capture the enchanting beauty of Muharraq.

Enjoy this unique festival that intertwines history, culture, and art in an unforgettable experience. Grab your cameras, appetite, and curiosity as you embark on a journey through Muharraq's nights and let the vibrant atmosphere of this festival envelop you in the magic of Bahrain's heritage.



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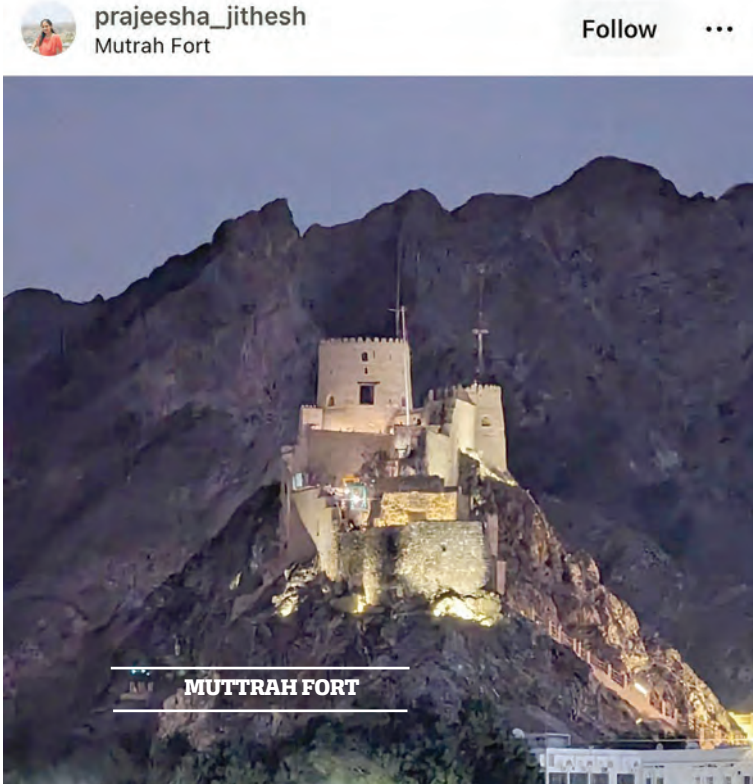
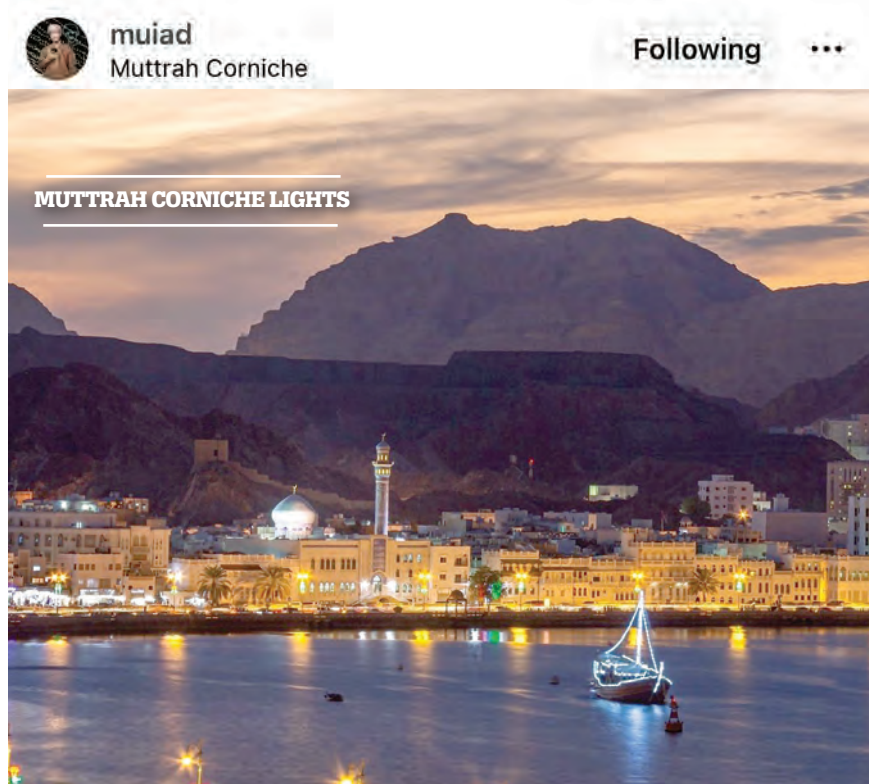
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INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



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How to Actually Work Out With Your Kids

FOR PARENTS OF young kids, it can be hard to prioritise exercise. Children need things — a snack, a ride, a person to explain fractions — and usually just as you're lacing up your running shoes or laying out the yoga mat.

Instead of skipping your workout, consider looping your little ones in. Exercising together will combine family time and fitness, and is a way to model healthy habits. Research suggests that children with active parents are more likely to be active themselves and to grow up to be active adults.

Adding kids means you might need to "let go of the idea that you're going to get a perfect workout," said Kelly Bryant, a coach with fitness app Future, who often exercises with her 5-year-old and toddler. Still, there are plenty of ways to make your workout a decent one.

GIVE KIDS A ROLE IN YOUR WORKOUT. People often think they need to find a child-specific activity, Bryant said, like a dance party or a Disney yoga video. "But really, any body-weight workout is going to be pretty kid-friendly," she said.

Her own children enjoy exercises that involve jumping, like squat jumps, lateral jumps, jump rope, ladder drills and jumping jacks. "Kids love a burpee," Bryant said.

Do the moves together or turn it into a partner workout, suggested Jess Sims, a Peloton instructor who leads family-friendly classes. You might hold a plank while your child does five jumping jacks and five squats, for example. Then you switch, alternating moves for five minutes.

If kids lose interest in participating, reenlist them as trainers. Ask them to count your reps or run a timer on your phone, Bryant said. "Or have them hand you a block every time you finish a set," she suggested. "Anything where you give them responsibility and authority, they're very into it."

TURN EXERCISE INTO A GAME.

Sims, a former elementary school teacher, often uses "listening games" in her adult classes, where participants increase their speed when they hear certain words in a song. With kids, do

jumping jacks to a song your child likes, and choose a move you'll do when you hear a particular phrase. For example, "every time you hear Beyoncé say 'break my soul,' you do a pushup," Sims said. Or march in place together through the verses, then do mountain climbers during the chorus.

Propose a game of "exercise charades," which Marc Santa Maria, a vice president at Crunch Fitness, often plays with his husband and 9-year-old twins. Everyone writes a few strength moves

child returns. Do a few laps of the circuit, and try to beat your best time.

"My kids will do anything if it's a race," she said.

To get some sprints in, head to a public tennis or basketball court with a bag of small, light items, Santa Maria said. Run back-and-forth with your child, moving the items from one end of the court to the other — give yourself twice as many items — and time yourselves to see who can finish first. (If you have a long hallway, you can do this inside.)

Kids on bikes or scooters can also make great pacers while you run alongside them, Bryant said. Or for something a little easier, alternate running and walking intervals together. "That's how kids run anyway," she said. "They sprint for 30 seconds, then they stop to pick some flowers, walk a bit, then sprint again."

Make use of the playground. A playground can be a great place to get in a full-body workout, Santa Maria said. Warm up by doing lateral shuffles around the perimeter in each direction, then use the playground equip-



or yoga poses on scrap paper, then takes turns picking from a bowl.

"You start doing the move, and everyone copies you," he explained. After 30 seconds, people can yell out the name of the exercise.

BE CREATIVE WITH HOW YOU GET A RUN IN.

If it's not too cold out, set up a race circuit in a park or an open area. You might challenge your child to ride a bike around a certain route while you do crunches, Bryant suggested, and then you run that route when your

ment to create several stations for cardio, core and exercises for the upper and lower body.

For example, on a swing, "I'd jump off and land in a wide stance, then do 10 squats," Santa Maria said. Or you could lie across it and hold a Superman extension with cactus arms, working your back, glutes and shoulders.

Do pullups on the monkey bars, triceps dips on a bench and step-ups on the stairs to the slide, he suggested. The key is that while your child is playing, Santa Maria said, "you want to take advantage of the things that are



already there."

EMBRACE SCREEN TIME.

Many streaming fitness platforms, like Peloton and Crunch+, have family classes online, but if you don't subscribe, YouTube can be a gold mine of free workout videos.

Bryant said that "squirmly kids" like her daughter may prefer AcroYoga, which combines yoga and acrobatics, to regular yoga, particularly if they can do it on a trampoline. They also do step aerobics videos together, with her child using the bottom step of a staircase or "the type of stool every parent

has in front of the bathroom sink."

Create a dance routine using moves you can learn by watching the free videos on Hip Hop Public Health, Santa Maria suggested (the stars in some of them). He'll also sometimes stream an exercise video on mute and put on his kids' favourite sound track so they can sing along while he works out.

Whether you stack a few of these ideas or have time for only one, don't beat yourself up if it doesn't feel as gratifying as a workout without kids. "Any movement is great movement," Sims said. — **NYT**

ANIMALS

Once the enemy, majestic condor wins hearts of Colombian farmers

A GROUP OF CONDORS rip into the carcass of a calf at the top of a Colombian mountain which rises 4,200 metres above sea level.

Their meal is a peace offering from local ranchers working to improve their relationship with the world's largest bird of prey, dubbed the King of the Andes.

"It's a bird that, when you see it flying, is so beautiful," said Diana Bautista, of the white-colored creature with a wingspan that can reach up to three

metres, tipped by fingerlike feathers.

In the mountainous north-eastern municipality of Cerrito where she lives, the condor has not always been looked upon fondly.

Up until a few years ago, villagers would leave out poisoned carrion or shoot at them to scare off the scavenger seen as a threat to their livestock.

A group of 19 families living high up in the moorlands of the Andes, a unique mountain ecosystem, in 2019 formed the ACAMCO association to protect and boost appreciation of the bird.

Now, residents have learned to build pens to protect their most vulnerable livestock, and platforms in the mountains where they leave carrion for the winged giants.

The community initiative is aimed at "protecting and learning about" the bird, which



"attracts a lot of people" and could also have an economic benefit for the region, said Andrea Florez, from ACAMCO.

"We must not believe all the bad things that are said about the condor," said Bautista.

"Not everyone is lucky enough to have this bird in their country (...) we must love it."

A GREAT LOSS

Acamco is supported by the Jaime Duque Foundation, a Colombian non-profit organisation, which buys weak or sick animals from breeders to give to the condor, in order to study its eating habits using camera traps.

Condors used to feed on

small animals, but human activity has chased away their usual prey and they have become dependent on livestock, said Francisco Ciri, a biologist and director of the Neotropical conservation foundation.

The Andean Condor is considered vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which lists its population of mature individuals at just over 6,700 and decreasing.

There are only 60 left in Colombia, according to a 2021 national census by the Neotropical Foundation.

Their main threat is deliberate poisonings by humans, says the IUCN.

The death of a single condor is "a great loss" for the species because it reproduces so slowly, said Carlos Grimaldos, an expert with the Jaime Duque Foundation.

The condor reaches sexual maturity at the age of 10 and only gives birth to one chick every two or three years.

Protecting it is essential as the scavenger "cleans" the moorlands by eating dead animals and prevents contamination of water sources, said Grimaldos.

With binoculars in hand, Grimaldos teaches visitors at a reserve run by the foundation to distinguish the condor from other raptors.

The condor finds itself "in an increasingly critical situation" throughout the Andes, said Guillermo Wiemeyer, an Argentine researcher attending a meeting of the South American Condor Network in the province of Santander.

Experts from Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and Venezuela created the network a decade ago to try and protect the condor, already considered extinct in Venezuela.

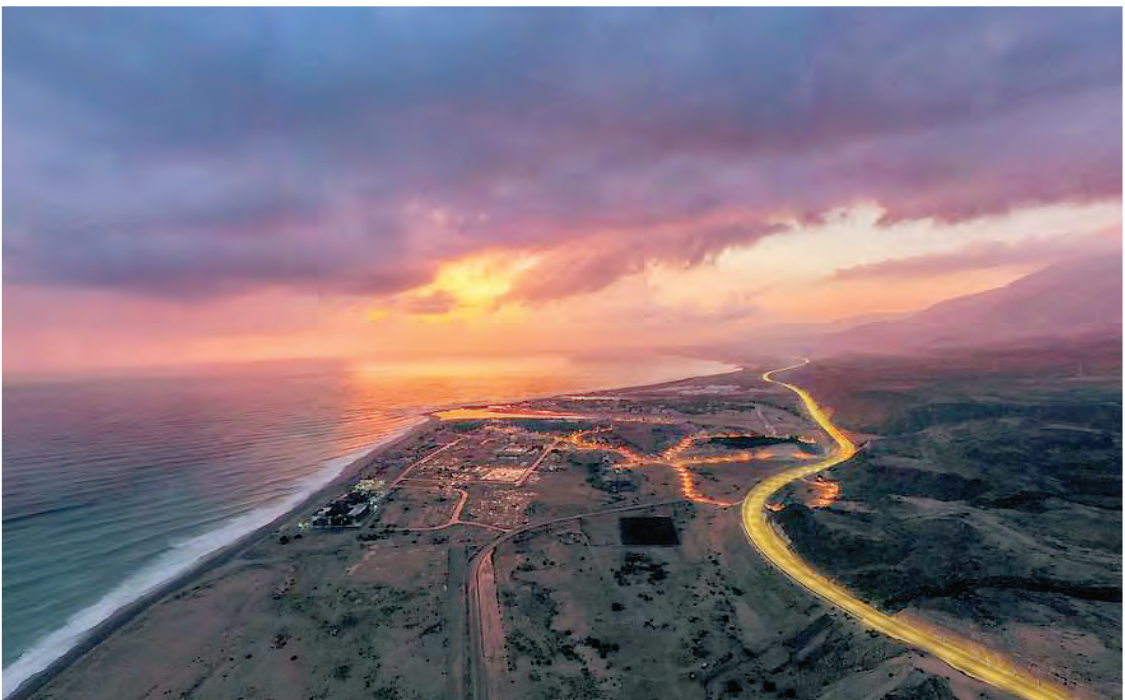
Alexceith Acosta, director of Santander's environmental authority, said it is urgent to hold a census throughout Latin America as "condors know no borders." — **AFP**



Beyond the sinkhole, Dhabab offers plenty of cultural and natural beauty

BY ARWA AL HASHIMI
PHOTOS BY ABDULHALEM AL SAADI

Many people know of Hawiyat Najm Park, also known as Bimmah Sinkhole. As a popular natural attraction, it is a stunning limestone crater that formed naturally due to the collapse of a cavern. The sinkhole is approximately 20 metres deep and has crystal-clear turquoise waters at the bottom. The name “Hawiyat Najm” translates to “The Falling Star,” and this picturesque sinkhole attracts both locals and tourists who are drawn to its unique beauty and the opportunity to swim in its clear waters. Because of the park’s popularity, the village where it is located has also become famous overtime. Dhabab is one of the villages of the coastal Wilayat of Qurayat. It is located to the east on the Sea of Oman, along the Qurayat-Sur road, 15 kilometres away from the centre of the wilayat. It was given this name due to its narrow area between land and sea. It consists of six small, wonderful villages, including Al Deira, Al Ruwaidah, Al Hujra, and Al Ghubrah. Dhabab is one of the most popular villages in the area and is considered a great spot for tourists, as it embraces many natural landscapes, such as its beautiful beach covered with soft sand and the fresh waters of its wadis where various marine trees grow. It also offers a breeding ground for many mollusc marine creatures, in addition to flocks of beautiful seabirds of all kinds. It includes archaeological landmarks such as castles, forts, and towers, the most important of which is Dhabab Tower. It is also known for its wells, including Qammas Well, Al Buhaisah Well, and Al Suwayrija Well. It is also a home for many different wadis that feed most of the wells and springs of the area, namely Main Dhabab Wadi, which



is one of the largest in width and abundance in the rainy season, along with Wadi Al Khab and Wadi Fagan. Dhabab Village is characterised by

the presence of a cave in one of the mountains from which drops of fresh-water fall, and it is called Al Qatar. The people of the village made a basin to col-



lect this water in order to use it for drinking and watering animals. This cave was considered the main source of water in the past for the people of the village, in addition to some water springs, namely: Ain Al Souqma, Ain Al Barada, and Ain Al Hilweh. All of these springs were previously used for drinking. This captivating village is also distinct for the many ancient professions that its villagers still practice because of their importance in their lives as they constitute one of their sources of livelihood, and their awareness of the importance of preserving it from extinction, which are fishing, sheep herding, agriculture, and weaving ceramic tools. However, fishing and agriculture are among the professions most practiced by the majority of people.