

Boost to digital payments

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SUNRISE - 05:34 AM

PRAYER TIMINGS

FAJR - 04:14 AM

DHUHR - 12:09 PM

ASR - 03:35 PM

MAGHRIB - 06:39 PM

ISHA - 07:54 PM



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OMAN OBSERVER

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OMAN CEMENT
TO INVEST IN
CAPTIVE WASTE-
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A YOUNG
OMANI'S ACADEMIC
ODYSSEY IN
AUSTRALIA



MUSCAT

400 KV MANAH GRID STATION READY

Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) successfully completed all construction works, and energisation process at the 400 kV Manah Grid Station, worth RO 11 million. This encompassed the 400 kV overhead lines connecting Manah Grid Station to 400/132 kV Naheda Grid Station and from Manah Grid Station and New Izki Grid Station. This project was completed in a period of one year and 8 months. The electrical transmission network is with clean and renewable energy units. **DETAILS ON P15**

AFC CUP FINALS SET FOR MAY 5

Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bauschar will host the AFC Cup finals for the 2023/2024 sports season on May 5. The final game will be between Lebanon's Al Ahed and Australia's Central Coast Mariners. Al Ahed club qualified for the finals after winning against Oman's Al Nahda during the home and away matches of the semi-finals with a score of 2-3. Meanwhile, Central Coast Mariners qualified for the finals after beating Abdish-Ata Kant of Kyrgyzstan with a total score of 1-4. Moreover, Sultan Qaboos Sports Centre can accommodate over 28,000 spectators. It is one of the largest sport complexes in Oman.

World has totally failed Gaza

SAYYID THEYAZIN PARTICIPATES IN WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

RIYADH: HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, on Sunday took part in the special meeting of the World Economic Forum. The event is hosted in Riyadh, under the theme 'Global Collaboration, Growth and Energy for Development'.

A number of heads of states, senior international figures, policy makers and experts of various international and academic organisations are participating in the event.

Sessions of the special meeting focused on a set of topics, namely international cooperation, growth and energy for development. They addressed various economic, geopolitical and climate issues and challenges in order to find and innovate sustainable solutions.

During the participation, HH Sayyid Theyazin was accompanied by an official delegation that comprised Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Chairman of Oman Investment



HH Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth, attends the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Riyadh on Sunday.

Authority, Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, HH Sayyid Faisal bin Turki al Said, Ambassador of Oman to Saudi Arabia, and Mohsin bin Hamad al Hadhrami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia on Sunday said the international community has failed Gaza and reiterated

its call for a Palestinian state at the global economic summit.

CATASTROPHE

"The situation in Gaza obviously is a catastrophe by every measure — humanitarian, but also a complete failing of the existing political system to deal with that crisis," Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said during the first day of a Saudi-hosted World Economic

Forum special meeting.

Only "a credible, irreversible path to a Palestinian state" will prevent the world from confronting "this same situation two, three, four years down the line," he said.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Palestinian leaders and high-ranking officials from other countries trying to broker a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas are attending the summit in Riyadh.

Speaking in Riyadh, Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas said the United States "is the only country capable" of preventing Israel's long-feared invasion of Rafah city in southern Gaza.

"We appeal to the United States of America to ask Israel to stop the Rafah operation," he said, warning it would harm and displace civilians, and be "the biggest disaster in the history of the Palestinian people".

Earlier, Saudi Finance Minister Mohammed al Jadaan called for regional "stability", warning of the effects of the war on global economic sentiment. — **Agencies**

Free medical aid to foreign visitors in emergencies

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, APRIL 28

Sultan bin Salem al Habsi, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Financial Services Authority (FSA), issued a decision regarding treatment of visitors in emergency cases.

The decision states that a special bank account would be opened from which assistance is disbursed to treat visitors (non-Omanis coming to the Sultanate of Oman through land, sea, or air border on a visit).

The FSA has been mandated to set up a fund to provide financial assistance to visitors facing medical emergencies, as per the provisions of Royal Decree No 25/2024 published in the official gazette on Sunday.

The 'Regulatory Bylaws for the Emergency Treatment of Visitors in Urgent Cases' will allow visitors to the country to request for monetary assistance in the case of any urgent medical conditions that require rapid medical intervention. According to Article (6), visitors will qualify for assistance from the fund under three main conditions. First, if the cost of treating their medical emergency exceeds their health insurance's maximum coverage. Second, if their health insurance has expired. And last, in the case of an absence of health insurance or related documentation. **SEE P13**

SOHAR PORT AND FREEZONE HOME TO THE REGION'S FIRST LNG BUNKERING PROJECT

SOHAR Port and Freezone has signed a sub-usufruct agreement with Marsa Liquefied Natural Gas LLC, a joint venture between TotalEnergies EP Oman Development B.V. and OQ, for the development of an LNG liquefaction plant in SOHAR Port. This project is set to significantly reduce the industry's carbon footprint, advance SOHAR as a forerunner in the global green energy revolution and establish SOHAR Port as the first LNG bunkering hub in the region.

The LNG bunkering project boasts a distinct commitment to sustainability as the first of its kind powered by 100% solar electricity, reiterating its status as a beacon of renewable energy innovation. With a total investment of 1.6 billion USD and an expansive land area spanning 44.5 hectares, this transformative project epitomizes the region's bold vision for a greener, more sustainable future.

Commenting on this agreement, Sergio Giorgi, Managing Director and Country Chair, Marsa LNG LLC Interim CEO, stated, "At Marsa, we're dedicated to driving impactful changes and embracing sustainable solutions that deliver both environmental and economic dividends. The LNG bunkering project exemplifies our shared dedication to pioneering innovation and sustainability. We're honored to collaborate with SOHAR Port on this pioneering initiative that promises to shape the future of our industry."

Ahmed Al Azkawi Chief Executive Upstream at OQ Exploration and Production LLC said, "The signing of the sub-usufruct agreement



represents an important milestone for Marsa LNG project, the region's first LNG bunkering hub. This global collaboration is a testament to our consistent steps and unified goals toward supporting economic growth in the Sultanate of Oman in line with Oman Vision 2040 and the national agenda to achieve carbon-neutrality by 2050. We are confident that Marsa LNG bunkering facility will further solidify Sohar Port's position as a key logistic hub in the region by adding a unique yet important service to the Port's world-class services. We take this opportunity to thank the Ministry of Energy and Minerals and the

Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for their unwavering support and wise guidance in making this project a reality."

Emile Hoogsteden, CEO of SOHAR Port, further reiterated, "This agreement signifies a monumental step forward in our commitment to sustainable innovation. This project will undoubtedly increase vessel calls to SOHAR Port for bunkering of traditional and alternative fuels, further solidifying our position as a key player in the maritime industry. By harnessing renewable energy

and cutting-edge technology, we're leading the charge towards greener, more efficient maritime operations that not only benefit our industry, but underscore our commitment to environmental responsibility."

The agreement between SOHAR Port and Marsa Liquefied Natural Gas LLC represents a strategic step towards achieving Oman's Vision 2040, reinforcing the country's commitment to sustainable development and enhancing the maritime sector. This partnership embodies collaborative efforts to promote innovation, sustainability, and economic growth opportunities for Oman.





SAYYID THEYAZIN PARTICIPATES IN WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM

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— ONA



Rains likely till Tuesday

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

Rains from local cloud formations are expected till Tuesday and probably Wednesday, according to Oman Met Office.

The weather forecaster from Oman Met Office said the areas under the influence, impacted by the temperature and humidity, are Al Hajar Mountains, governorates of Al Batinah North, Al Batinah South, Muscat, Al Dakhiliyah and some parts of Al Sharqiyah North.

Speaking to the *Observer*, he said there could be isolated rain, occasionally associated with downdraft and hail. He pointed out that the wadis would flow during this period. A trough could develop over the weekend.

Muscat radar, on Sunday late afternoon, showed the activity of thunder cells over the mountainous areas of the governorates of Al Batinah South, Al Dakhiliyah and Muscat, with chances of rain extending to the coastal areas of the Sea of Oman.

The weather forecast also said the activity of cumulus clouds,



A number of wilayats of the Al Batinah South Governorate on Sunday witnessed rains that ranged between heavy and moderate.

— ONA

accompanied by active descending winds and hailstones falling on parts of the mountainous areas of the governorates of Al Batinah North, Al Batinah South, Muscat and Al Dakhiliyah, with their activity to continue and expand in the coming time.

Rainfall was recorded in Wadi Mastal in Nakhl in Al Batinah South Governorate, as well as in

Al Awabi. Mahdha also enjoyed scenic waterfalls with rain. Suhar also received good amount of rain. Heavy rain was recorded in Wadi Al Rehab, west of Qurayat.

The weather forecast for Monday states that clear to partly cloudy skies over most of the governorates with chances of convective cloud development and isolated rain occasionally with thundershowers

during the afternoon and evening over Al Hajar Mountains and adjoining areas and will also extend to cover Oman sea coasts.

There is also chance of late night to early morning low clouds or fog patches over parts of Al Sharqiyah South, Al Sharqiyah North, Al Dakhiliyah, Al Batinah South and parts of the Sea of Oman coastal areas.



CHAIRMAN OF SUPREME COURT RECEIVES SAUDI DELEGATION

MUSCAT: Sayyid Khalifa bin Said al Busaidy, Chairman of the Supreme Court on Sunday received a delegation from the Board of Grievances of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The meeting aimed to boost judicial cooperation between the two countries. Al' Busaidy underscored the importance of bilateral visits in getting familiarised with modern practices in the judicial process and to exchange expertise in this field. Meanwhile, the Saudi delegation were briefed on the development of administrative judiciary in Oman. They also toured the Supreme Court and viewed its various halls and facilities.

— ONA

Boost to digital payments as banks launch Samsung Wallet

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

In a boost to digital transformation, some banks in the Sultanate of Oman launched the Samsung Wallet service on Sunday, allowing customers to make digital payments using the Samsung Pay app. The banks are the National Bank of Oman (NBO), Sohar International, Bank Dhofar, and Ahli Bank.

In September last year, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) issued guidelines and instructions for banks and payment service providers to provide the card Tokenization Service, which will replace the method of card-based payments.

The decision was to be enforced based on the readiness of banks and payment service providers. According to CBO, the latest decision will encourage innovation in electronic payments and be less cash-dependent.

It will ensure a new seamless payment experience, enhance security in card payment



Samsung Wallet service will now work with National Bank of Oman (NBO), Sohar International, Bank Dhofar, and Ahli Bank

transactions, and support the national digital transformation program and e-commerce strategy.

“Samsung Wallet service will revolutionise electronic payments in Oman, marking a significant

milestone towards a cashless economy. With CBO’s issuance of guidelines for Card Tokenization Service in September, customers have waited for this launch. Samsung Pay is a digital wallet where customers add their credit/

Samsung Wallet service will revolutionise electronic payments in Oman, marking a significant milestone towards a cashless economy. With CBO’s issuance of guidelines for Card Tokenization Service in September, customers have waited for this launch

MOHAMMED AL MANJI
TechOneFive

debit cards and secure it all using a PIN or personal biometric data, allowing the tap to pay with the device only through NFC payments, a common technology used by tap-to-pay terminals. Customers can use the services

locally and internationally without issues. We anticipate that other global payment providers like Apple and Google will introduce their services in Oman in the upcoming months,” said Mohammed bin Saif al Manji, TechOneFive, an initiative group founded by Omani youth to spread technological knowledge and build awareness of new technologies.

In a statement, the National Bank of Oman (NBO) said that Samsung Wallet enables customers to instantly add their debit, credit, and prepaid cards to the Samsung Wallet application by following a few simple steps.

Whether customers are making purchases locally or internationally, they can complete transactions securely with just one click, ensuring a hassle-free payment experience.

Customers can authenticate each transaction using facial or fingerprint recognition, a PIN code, or a One-Time Password. Upon utilising this service, every

user will receive a distinct PIN, encrypted and securely stored in a certified chip that is compliant with industry standards.

This approach ensures the safe storage of payment information on the device, offering users a dependable and secure method to store card numbers.

In the future, Samsung Wallet will be equipped with additional features such as storing sensitive documents such as IDs, electronic keys, and boarding passes — with just one swipe. Samsung Wallet is available only on devices running Android 9 or above.

Sohar International and Sohar Islamic said the Samsung Wallet will allow customers to perform secure and contactless payments using their Samsung phones or watches seamlessly via POS machines as well as use their Samsung Wallet account to conduct online payments.

Ahlibank in a statement said that Samsung Wallet works every where contactless payments are accepted.



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New decision issued to regulate woodcutting, charcoal storage in Oman

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, APRIL 28

The Environment Authority (EA) has issued a decision 70/2024 to regulate the activity of woodcutting and use of charcoal as part of the efforts to enhance environmental protection, and ensure the sustainability of natural resources.

The regulations stipulate a ban on exporting wood and charcoal, except in the case of those products imported from abroad

and re-exported by companies, as well as wood and plant coal extracted from plants, foreign trees, and species designated by the Environmental Authority.

To get permits for wood cutting and storing charcoal, it is mandatory to submit salary or pension certificates (for retirees), and vehicles used in transportation must bear license plates with Omani numbers.

The vehicle load must not exceed one and a half tonnes.

New fees for the sale and



Wood and charcoal are essential in many Omani households, but their use can have negative to environment

transportation of wood and charcoal include personal logging permit of RO 5 per tonne for a day while woodcutting craft permit is RO 2 for seven days and RO 10 for five shipments per tonne for 30 days.

Sale of Wood and charcoal will be RO 10 for 5 shipments per tonne for six months. As for firewood heating, it is RO 5 per year and RO 1 for transportation for two days in one shipment.

Wood and charcoal are essential in many Omani

households, but their use can have negative to environment. This has forced the government to impose some fines on their sale without a license.

Anyone violating the provisions of Article 2 shall be subject to a fine of not less than RO 200 and not more than RO 1,000.

Storing more than three tonnes of wood is prohibited unless there is written approval from the Environmental Authority to store larger quantities.

If any person is found storing

quantities of wood exceeding three tons without a license, a fine of not less than RO 100 and not more than RO 500 shall be imposed.

If any person is found transporting wood and charcoal in a vehicle without Omani number plates, a fine ranging from RO 50 to RO 500 will be imposed.

These amendments aim to achieve several objectives, including preserving forests by limiting unsustainable charcoal production.

MANDATORY MATERNITY LEAVE INSURANCE FROM JULY 19

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The maternity leave insurance for citizens and expatriates working in the Sultanate of Oman will be implemented from July 19, the Social Protection Fund (SPF) said on its official platform.

It will apply to employees of both private and public sectors and includes all types of contracts, including temporary contracts, training contracts, and retired workers. It does not apply to self-employed Omanis, part-time Omanis working in the GCC, and Omanis working abroad. The provisions of this section shall also be mandatory for non-Omani workers working in the Sultanate of Oman, clarified the SPF.

The employer is obligated to pay the monthly contributions for the maternity leave insurance branch to the fund at the rate of one per cent of the wage per month, calculated daily.

The insured is entitled to a maternity leave allowance for a period of 98 days, of which 14 may



be before the date of delivery.

The insured is also entitled to a paternity leave allowance for seven days, provided that the child is born alive and the leave does not exceed the 98th day of the child's life, and these periods are included within the period of actual service.

The employer may not oblige the insured woman to begin work during the leave period, and if the insured woman moves to another employer, the maternity leave allowance will continue to be paid according to the last wage before the move.

For the insured woman or woman entitled to the job security allowance to be entitled to a

maternity leave allowance, the pregnancy must have exceeded the 25th week.

In the event of the death of the child after the twenty-fifth week, the insured woman is entitled to the vacation allowance. In the event of the death of the insured woman during childbirth or during the aforementioned leave, the insured father shall be entitled to the remaining leave allowance for the mother to take care for the child.

The insured father shall also be entitled to the same leave allowance in the event of the death of the uninsured mother during childbirth or during the aforementioned leave.

The insured woman is entitled

to the maternity leave allowance in the event of adopting a child deprived of his natural family if she submits documents supporting this, provided that the age of the child does not exceed three months when submitting the leave request, and the leave shall be for no more than three.

More than 98 days from the date of the child's birth.

The insured is also entitled — in the case of fostering — to the paternity leave allowance stipulated in the same article, provided that the child's age does not exceed three months when submitting the leave request.

The maternity leave allowance will continue to be paid if the insured woman's service ends during the leave period, provided that she is entitled to the job security insurance allowance, and the maternity leave allowance will be of the same value as the job security insurance allowance, provided that the payment of the job security insurance allowance will resume after the end of the maternity leave period.



The programme was inked by Dr Muna bint Salim al Jardaniyah, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for Vocational Training, and Dr Hamdan bin Suleiman al Fazari, Vice Chancellor of Sohar University. — ONA

MoHERI, Sohar University sign cooperation programme

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) and Sohar University on Sunday signed a cooperation programme to promote and develop the exchange of professional information.

The programme was inked by Dr Muna bint Salim al Jardaniyah, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for Vocational Training, and Dr Hamdan bin Suleiman al Fazari, Vice Chancellor of Sohar University.

Through the programme, the ministry will benefit from Sohar University's experience in the field of listing qualifications in the National Qualifications Framework. The ministry will also take insights from the university's practices in the field of quality assurance, including institutional accreditation, policy reviews and incubators.

The programme also helps in organising events, research and innovation activities, and training operations.

— ONA

Role of AI in preserving national identity explored

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Ways to design for human well-being in future and how well we can make use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in preserving national identity were two subjects in focus at the Design Muscat 2024, an interdisciplinary space for debate and international networking in art and design to preserve national identity through hybrid presentations and interactive workshops, recently.

Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, opened the first day of the Design Muscat 2024, which dedicated a session to explore the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in preserving national identity and how well we can put AI concepts in

to practice.

The absence of experience faced during the pandemic continues to remind people on how valuable human interaction is and how critical spaces are in enriching lives. The Scientific College of Design (SCD) has been a hub for Omani art and design innovation, which provides space, and a platform for the college and its learning programmes.

"Events of this grandeur, enhancing engagement and brainstorming sessions are crucial in supporting the national strategy of a creative world and Design Muscat 2024, which is backed up by the global narratives, case studies, challenges, and policy recommendations through the experiences of practitioners, research of academics and innovations of designers can help



Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, opened the first day of the Design Muscat 2024

in formulating usage of designs for a better world," said Dr Khamis al Balushi, Chairman of Board of Trustees.

The first day focused on the impact of Artificial Intelligence on the creative industries; ethical use of AI in producing artworks, integrating AI in academic programmes and its repercussions, governmental strategies and support for incorporating

technologies, designing Muscat as a smart sustainable city, and case studies from Italy and Egypt. All sessions of the 3-day were dedicated to the productive use of Artificial Intelligence.

"We welcomed over 850 participants out of which 100 were international, such as Italy, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran, Jordan, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to the Design Muscat,"

said Mona Kamal Ismail, Dean of the SCD.

She said there were representatives from the Ministries of Housing, Transportation, Communication and Information Technology, Tourism and Heritage, Culture, Sports, and Youth, as well as the members of the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit.

Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism opened the 2nd day of the symposium which was aimed at those in the creative industries of a variety of roles to share tangible, real-world actions towards preserving national identity. The symposium included an overview of the Oman Society of Engineers; highlights of the Sustainable City Yiti, New perspectives of sustainability in

Italy, The architectural and urban regeneration of Doha. Discussion on cultural heritage as an opportunity for urban regeneration, innovation and design, design solutions incorporating the local identity, also included sustainable materials in the Omani market.

Sayyid Said bin Sultan al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Culture inaugurated the third day, which focused on the practices of the creative industries. The role of the Youth Centre as an incubator for the creative industries, an overview of Oman Design Association, a photography presentation showcasing Oman's deserts; the strategies of Bait Al Zubair in preserving the national identity, and initiation of business ventures in the creative industries were in focus.



DIGITAL DRUGS ARE A HIDDEN DANGER THAT HAS NOT BEEN RECOGNISED IN THE ARAB WORLD

BEWARE OF DIGITAL DRUGS

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
@afrahalbalushia

DIGITAL DRUGS are a hidden danger that has not been recognised in the Arab world. Their effects are psychological, not chemical, and they may become the 'heroin of the future.' Digital drugs can easily reach your son or daughter without having to leave the house through electronic games. Therefore, parents must pay attention. Science has proven that traditional drugs completely affect the body's activities, while digital drugs still need more studies and research in order to convince societies of the extent of their impact on brain health.

Without the presence of a tangible physical entity, there are no drugs that can be taken, inhaled, or injected into the body, but they still mimic the effect of the physical drug. These are digital drugs, a concept that has been associated with contemporary life and the virtual world that has taken over people's lives and linked them to a communication network through which marketing is carried out for digital drugs anywhere in the world.

The user of digital drugs will not need substances such as heroin, cocaine, crystal meth or any other narcotic substance. It is sufficient for him or her to have Internet service and headphones through which he or she can listen to audio files that are sometimes accompanied by visual materials and animated shapes and colours that move and change according to a geometry programmed to deceive the brain.

By broadcasting sound waves of different frequencies into each ear, they reach the listener with a specific feeling that mimics the sensation of a type of traditional drug. Digital drugs manipulate the brain's electricity and leave it in a state of numbness similar to taking real drugs.

It is a special type of music based on the principle of buzzing and clicking to give its user a bit of joy and pleasure. By listening to audio files that are heard through certain electronic sites and are consumed by hearing the tones and placing headphones in both ears, the musical rhythms issued by these files are different between the two ears, and through the auditory nerve the auditory perceived signals are transmitted to the brain to affect the level of the electrochemical reaction for neurotransmitters between the brain and the nervous system.

In this regard, a psychotherapist explains that the sound waves that are listened to as digital drugs are different frequencies. For example, if the right ear is exposed to a wave of 325 Hz and the left ear to a wave of 315, the brain automatically unifies the frequencies between the two ears to reach a single level. Unifying the two frequencies transmitted to both ears to obtain one level of sound leads to disruption of brain functions.

Among the dangers and negatives to the individual user, listening to digital drugs causes a feeling of tremors and spasms in the body, affects the psychological and physical state of the user, and works to distance and isolate the user from social life, a decrease in the individual's productive capacity due to his isolation from external reality, and the development of psychological addiction to such sounds, which the individual pays to spend his money to obtain it. Digital drugs need their own atmosphere to obtain the desired effect, such as seclusion in a single room, relaxation and covering the eyes and their effect mimics traditional drugs that are taken orally, injected or inhaled.



‘Food Safety Week’ to enhance health awareness among consumers

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, APRIL 28

Food Safety Week activities were launched in all the Wilayats of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, under the slogan ‘Risk assessment and food crises management’.

The week-long activities, to be held until May 2, is a joint cooperation between Al Dakhiliyah Governorate Municipality and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources to enhance the health awareness levels of the importance of food safety among consumers in order to help preventing food-borne risks.

An awareness plan was prepared for all municipal departments which includes a number of programmes and activities, including lectures, exhibitions, awareness campaigns and presentations on food safety.

There will also be inspection campaigns, intensifying health control over commercial establishments related to sale and circulation of food, ensuring the extent to which they comply with health requirements, involving various governmental and private institutions related to food safety.

Al Dakhiliyah Governorate Municipality confirms its ongoing efforts to address food establishments that violate health requirements by taking necessary measures. In the past year, the municipality shut down some establishments that were found in violation, showcasing a commitment to food safety.

By raising awareness of various aspects related to food health and the municipal role in this matter, the municipality



There will also be inspection campaigns, intensifying health control over commercial establishments related to sale and circulation of food, ensuring the extent to which they comply with health requirements, involving various governmental and private institutions related to food safety

actively contributes to a healthier community.

Sulaiman bin Hamed al Sunaidi, Director-General of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate Municipality, said: “The Sultanate of Oman has paid great attention to this matter through its various agencies with regard to important matters concerning individuals. We seek to find integration between the courts related to compatibility, definitions of laws, regulations, and systems that guarantee food safety and commercial fraud.”

The food safety week activities include raising awareness of the importance of effective community partnership efforts in everything related to food safety, its suitability, and conformity with recognised health standards. It also draws attention to transmitted risks, detecting and managing them, and mobilising measures to prevent these risks in order to protect human health from dangers.

COMMUNITY WELL-BEING HIGH ON AGENDA IN SUHAR

SIHAM AL SAIDI
SUHAR, APRIL 28



Dr Najah al Zadjali

In a recent achievement in health sector in Al Batinah North Governorate, Suhar gained international recognition from the World Health Organization (WHO) for promoting well-being and sustainable health for citizens.

Suhar is among the first cities in the Eastern Mediterranean Region of the World Health Organisation to adopt the Health Cities programme, established in 2005 and approved in 2007 under the supervision of the Ministry of Health, aiming to provide comprehensive healthcare and promote sustainable well-being practices.

This initiative, a collaborative effort of various governmental and private institutions, is a result to community-driven healthcare advancements.

The initiative’s primary goal is to ensure access to quality healthcare services for citizens, fostering a sustainable health ecosystem.

Dr Najah bint Mohammed al Zadjaliyah, a consultant in family and community medicine and a member of the Health Council for Suhar City, as well as the director of the Executive Office for Suhar Health City said: “The programme is one of the initiatives by the World Health Organization implemented in the Sultanate of Oman under the supervision of the Ministry of Health. It serves as an excellent tool and platform through which all governmental sectors

collaborate with civil society organisations and the private sector to engage with the local community in addressing social determinants of health. This goes beyond providing healthcare services and effectively contributes to making improvements in the local environment and public facilities and enhancing people’s well-being and the quality of their lives.”

The city also initiated the Health-Promoting Schools programme, promoting healthy shopping habits for children, and various sports programs and activities that enhance mental health targeting different segments of society.

Dr Najah said: “A series of studies and research in the health and environmental fields have been initiated, encouraging scientific research through various research contracts within Al Batinah Governorate. These efforts aim to use research outcomes in enhancing lifestyles, ensuring sustainable health and making decisions related to the environment, health, and society.”

District Toastmasters conference comes to Oman

MUSCAT: Toastmasters International, the renowned organisation dedicated to honing public speaking and leadership skills, is celebrating a remarkable milestone — 100 years of empowering individuals to become confident communicators.

As part of its centennial celebrations, Toastmasters worldwide are commemorating the journey of personal growth, professional development, and global camaraderie that the organisation has fostered over the past century.

In Oman, Toastmasters has left an indelible mark on the

landscape of public speaking and leadership. With its presence in various cities across the Sultanate of Oman, Toastmasters has provided a platform for individuals from diverse backgrounds to refine their oratory prowess and cultivate leadership abilities. From Muscat to Salalah, Toastmasters clubs have become hubs of learning, mentorship, and camaraderie, enriching the lives of countless Omanis.

As Toastmasters International enters its second century, Oman is set to host a momentous event that underscores the organisation’s enduring impact — the District Toastmasters Annual

Conference (DTAC) 2024.

Scheduled to take place on May 10 and 11, DTAC 2024 marks a significant occasion as it returns to physical gatherings after a hiatus of four years. The conference promises to be a convergence of talent, inspiration, and learning, bringing together Toastmasters from across the region to celebrate the art of communication and leadership.

DTAC 2024 in Oman will be a melting pot of ideas, experiences, and insights, offering attendees a unique opportunity to engage with like-minded individuals, learn from distinguished speakers, and participate in enriching workshops

and seminars. From keynote speeches by renowned thought leaders to interactive sessions on effective communication techniques, the conference agenda is tailored to cater to the diverse needs and aspirations of Toastmasters members.

Moreover, DTAC 2024 presents a platform for Oman to showcase its cultural heritage, hospitality, and progressive spirit to an international audience. As delegates from different corners of the globe gather in Oman, they will not only witness the country’s scenic beauty but also experience the warmth and hospitality of its people.

Muscat Airport sees steady growth in 2024

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The passenger traffic at Muscat International Airport increased by seven per cent to 1,018,469 in March this year from 954,905 in March 2023. The total number of passengers (international, domestic and transit) using Muscat Airport in the first three months of this year increased by 17.7 per cent to 3,482,325 from 2,959,829 during the same period in 2023. The aircraft movement increased by 10 per cent to 8,653 from 7,879 during the same period.

Muscat Airport handled



25,204 in the first three months of this year compared to 22,145 in 2023, an increase of 13.8 per cent. The freight movement saw a drop of -2 per cent during the same period.

The passenger traffic at Salalah International Airport decreased by 1 per cent to 93,673

in March this year from 92,958 in March 2023. However, the total number of passengers using Salalah International Airport in the first three months of this year increased by 6.7 per cent to 325,035 from 394,538 during the same period in 2023.

The aircraft movement

increased by 5 per cent to 956 from 912 during the same period. The freight movement saw an increase of 26 per cent during the same period.

The passenger traffic at Sohar International Airport increased by 438 per cent to 6,052 in March this year from 1,124 in March 2023. The aircraft movement increased by 18 per cent to 156 from 132 during the same period.

The passenger traffic at Duqm Airport decreased by -11 per cent to 6,759 in March this year from 6,041 in March 2023. The aircraft movement increased by 18 per cent to 100 from 85 during the same period.



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

Tenders Announcement

Tender No.	63/2024/MHT/HQ-15	Tender Name	Restoration and maintenance of (3) towers in Sur Al Lawatiya, Muttrah State		
	64/2024/MHT/HQ-16		Appointing a specialized company to compile the events agenda in the Sultanate of Oman		
Fees of Tender Documents for SME		10 O.R			
Fees of Tender Documents		25 O.R			
Tender Document Sales End Date		14/5/2024			
Last Date for Bid Submission		4/6/2024			
Grade	63/2024/MHT/HQ-15	Second			
	64/2024/MHT/HQ-16	Second, Third			
E-Tendering Portal		https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om			
Interested Companies registered with Tender Board (in the mentioned Grade) may obtain Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om, against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document. The Tenderers must acknowledge commitment to the bid. The Ministry shall not be obligated to accept the lowest or any other bids The bid submission period starts after the end of the inquiry period shown in the e-tendering system, until the last date for submitting bids before (10:00 am, Oman time).					
Support and inquiries	For more information, related to the tender, kindly communicate through the website of the e-tendering system: https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om				
	For inquiries related to the technical support for the e-tendering system, kindly communicate through etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om or 24402200				
For further information	Email : stotic@mht.gov.om Phones : 22088348 - 22088085				



Palestinian students gather in tents as schools remain closed due to Israel's military offensive, in Khan Younis. — Reuters

Saudi warns of economic fallout from Gaza war

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia on Sunday called for regional “stability”, warning of the effects of the ongoing Mideast war on global economic sentiment at the start of a summit attended by a host of Gaza mediators.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Palestinian leaders and high-ranking officials from other countries trying to broker a ceasefire are on the guest list for the summit in Riyadh, capital of the world's biggest crude oil exporter.

The Gaza war along with conflicts in Ukraine and elsewhere put “a lot of pressure”

on the economic “mood”, Saudi Finance Minister Mohammed al Jadaan said at one of the first panel discussions of the two-day World Economic Forum (WEF) special meeting.

“I think cool-headed countries and leaders and people need to prevail,” Al Jadaan said. “The region needs stability.”

The war in Gaza, which has sent regional tensions soaring, began with an unprecedented attack on southern Israel by Palestinian groups on October 7.

Vowing to destroy the groups, Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed at least 34,454 people

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Palestinian leaders and high-ranking officials from other countries trying to broker a ceasefire are on the guest list for the summit in Riyadh

in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry.

Speaking in Riyadh, Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas said the United States “is the only country capable” of preventing Israel's long-feared invasion of Rafah city in southern Gaza.

“We appeal to the United States of America to ask Israel to

stop the Rafah operation,” Abbas said, warning it would harm and displace civilians, and be “the biggest disaster in the history of the Palestinian people”.

Saudi planning minister Faisal al Ibrahim told a press conference on Saturday, previewing the summit, that the world is “walking a tightrope right now, trying to balance security and prosperity”.

“We meet at a moment when one misjudgment or one miscalculation or one miscommunication will further exacerbate our challenges.”

WEF president Borge Brende said there was “some new momentum now in the talks around the hostages, and also for... a possible way out of the impasse we are faced with in Gaza”.

However there will be no Israeli participation at the summit.

“This is more an opportunity to have structured discussions” with “the key players” including

mediators Qatar and Egypt, he said.

“There will be discussions, of course, on the ongoing humanitarian situation in Gaza”, he added.

The US State Department said Blinken will “discuss ongoing efforts to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza that secures the release of captives”.

Palestinian movement Hamas said on Saturday it was studying the latest Israeli counterproposal regarding a potential ceasefire in Gaza, a day after media reports said a delegation from mediator Egypt arrived in Israel. — AFP

Truce ramps up as Israel strikes Gaza

TEL AVIV: Diplomatic efforts increased on Sunday to reach a long sought-after truce and captives-release deal in Gaza, as Israel carried out further air strikes and shelling on the war-battered territory.

A new video of two captives being held by Palestinian groups since the group's October 7 attack prompted fresh outrage in Israel, where protesters have piled pressure on the government to reach a deal.

Global opposition to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza has also been growing, with world leaders and aid groups warning that a looming Israeli invasion of the southernmost city of Rafah would lead to massive civilian casualties.

Egypt, Qatar and the United States have been trying to mediate a new truce ever since a one-week halt to the fighting in November saw 80 Israeli hostages exchanged for 240 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons.

Palestinian movement Hamas has previously insisted on a permanent ceasefire — a condition that Israel has rejected.



A Palestinian flag and posters are put up as people protest in support of Palestinians at the University of Southern California (USC), in Los Angeles. — Reuters

However the Axios news website, citing two Israeli officials, reported that Israel's latest proposal includes a willingness to discuss the “restoration of sustainable calm” in Gaza after captives are released. It is the first time in the nearly seven-month war that Israeli leaders have suggested they are open to discussing an end to the war, Axios said.

Israel's retaliatory offensive

has killed at least 34,454 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in the territory.

Israel estimates that 129 captives seized by Palestinian groups on October 7 are still being held in Gaza, including 34 the military says are dead.

The Gaza health ministry on Sunday reported at least 66 deaths in the past 24 hours. Israel carried out air strikes and shelling in Gaza

Global opposition to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza has been growing, with world leaders and aid groups warning that a looming Israeli invasion of Rafah

overnight, hitting three houses in the southern city of Khan Younis, a correspondent said on Sunday, also reporting strikes on Gaza City and Rafah. The Israeli military said its jets struck dozens of terror targets.

Most of Gaza's population has taken refuge in Rafah, according to the UN, many in makeshift shelters after fleeing violence elsewhere.

Despite international outcry, Israel has vowed to invade the city. On the side of a tent in Rafah on Saturday, a Palestinian wrote a message to the thousands of protesters on US university campuses. “Thank you, students in solidarity with Gaza, your message has reached,” it read.

— AFP

France's top diplomat in Lebanon in push for calm

BEIRUT: France's top diplomat on Sunday urged calm in Lebanon during his second visit to the country since cross-border tensions with Israel flared on the back of the war in Gaza.

Israel and Lebanon's groups have exchanged near-daily fire since the unprecedented attack on southern Israel on October 7 sparked the war in Gaza.

Fighting has intensified in recent weeks, with Israel striking deeper into Lebanese territory, while Lebanon's groups have stepped up its missile and drone attacks on military positions in northern Israel.

France has for months sought to de-escalate the cross-border tensions, presenting to both Lebanon and Israel an initiative in January seeking to end hostilities. During a visit to the headquarters of the United Nations' peacekeeping mission in southern Lebanon (UNIFIL), French Foreign Minister Stephane Sejourne reiterated that Paris has been making proposals to “avoid war in Lebanon”.

“I will head to Beirut to meet

political authorities to... make proposals,” he added. “Our responsibility is to mitigate escalation, and that is also our role in UNIFIL. We have 700 soldiers here.”

A French diplomatic source said that the volume of cross-border attacks had doubled since April 13. Sejourne was set to meet Lebanese officials on Sunday afternoon ahead of holding a press conference.

In March, Beirut submitted its response to the French initiative, which was based on a UN resolution barring the presence of any forces other than the Lebanese military and UNIFIL in south Lebanon. — AFP



Lebanon Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri (R) speaks with France's Minister for Foreign Affairs Stephane Sejourne in Beirut. — AFP



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In brief

ROME



ITALIAN MELONI SAYS WILL STAND IN EU PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said on Sunday she would stand in upcoming European Parliament elections, a move apparently calculated to boost her far-right party.

With Meloni heading the list of candidates, Brothers of Italy could exploit its national popularity at the EU level, even though EU rules require that any winner already holding a ministerial position must immediately resign.

"We want to do in Europe exactly what we did in Italy on September 25, 2022 — creating a majority that brings together the forces of the right to finally send the left into opposition, even in Europe!" Meloni said. — AFP

HANOVER



GERMAN VILLAGE EVACUATED AFTER WWII BOMB DISCOVERED

The discovery of a suspected unexploded World War II bomb led authorities in western Germany to evacuate more than 2,000 people from their homes early on Sunday.

The evacuation of the village of Ingeln-Oesselse, south-east of Hanover, was completed on Sunday morning, a local government spokeswoman said.

A helicopter was flying over the restricted area to check if anyone is still in the area before a bomb disposal team begins its work, she said. Residents are being accommodated in a school in a neighbouring village and it remains unclear when they will be able to return to their homes. — dpa

BANGKOK



THAI FOREIGN MINISTER RESIGNS AFTER LOSING DEPUTY PM POST

Thai Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara has resigned, the government said on Sunday, after losing the position of deputy prime minister in a cabinet reshuffle.

Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin has received Parnpree's resignation letter, government spokesperson Chai Wacharonke said. "Parnpree's resignation will not affect government work in foreign affairs as the foreign ministry's permanent secretary and officials can work instead," he added.

Srettha's new cabinet showed Parnpree listed only as foreign minister, no longer as deputy prime minister. — Reuters

Russian forces take over village near Donetsk

MOSCOW: Russian forces have taken over the village of Novobakhmutivka in Ukraine's Donetsk region, close to Ocheretyne, which has become a focal point of fighting in recent days, the Interfax news agency cited Russia's defence ministry as saying.

Russian forces also repelled a series of Ukrainian counter-attacks near Chasiv Yar, the ministry said, another key point in the region where the sides have clashed repeatedly.

Fighting in eastern Ukraine has worsened, with Kyiv's troops falling back to new positions in at least three places along the front, Ukraine's top general said on Sunday.

Oleksandr Syrskyi said on Telegram that his troops had taken up new positions west of the villages of Berdychi, Semenivka and Novomykhailivka in order to conserve their forces.

Meanwhile, Russian officials threatened the West on Sunday with a "severe" response in the event that frozen Russian assets are confiscated, promising "endless" legal challenges and tit-for-tat measures.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Russia would never cede territories seized from Ukraine in exchange for the return of frozen assets.

"Our motherland is not for sale," Zakharova wrote on the Telegram messaging app.

"An Russian assets must remain untouched because otherwise there will be a severe response to Western thievery. Many in the West have already understood this. Alas, not everyone."

In response to Russia's war in Ukraine, the United States and its allies prohibited transactions with Russia's central bank and finance



Members of the company tactical group "Steppe Wolves" disassemble a shell for a BM-21 Grad, in Zaporizhzhia region, Ukraine. — Reuters

Fighting in eastern Ukraine has worsened, with Kyiv's troops falling back to new positions in at least three places along the front

ministry and blocked about \$300 billion of sovereign Russian assets in the West, most of which are in

European not American financial institutions.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in a separate comment that there was still a lot of Western money in Russia which could be targeted by Moscow's counter-measures.

"The prospects for legal challenges (against the confiscation of Russian assets) will be wide open," he said. "Russia

will take advantage of those and will endlessly defend its interests."

Russia's air defence systems destroyed 17 drones launched by Ukraine over its territory, Russia's defence ministry said on Sunday, with a regional official saying the attack targeted an oil storage facility in the Kaluga region.

The defence ministry said on the Telegram messaging app that three of the Ukraine-launched

drones were downed over the Kaluga region, south of Moscow.

Vladislav Shapsha, regional governor of Kaluga, said the drones fell near an oil depot near the town of Lyudinovo.

The Russian defence ministry also said nine of the Ukraine-launched drones were destroyed over the Bryansk region, three over the Kursk region and two over the Belgorod region. — AFP

Warnings issued as Asia swelters in extreme heatwave

MANILA: South and Southeast Asia braced for more extreme heat on Sunday as authorities across the region issued health warnings and residents fled to parks and air-conditioned malls for relief.

A wave of exceptionally hot weather has blasted the region over the past week, sending the mercury as high as 45 degrees Celsius and forcing thousands of schools to tell students to stay home.

The Philippines announced on Sunday the suspension of in-person classes at all public schools for two days after a record-shattering day of heat in the capital Manila.

In Thailand, where at least 30 people have died of heatstroke so far this year, the meteorological department warned of "severe conditions" after temperatures in a northern province exceeded 44.1C on Saturday.

And in Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, India and Bangladesh, forecasters warned that temperatures could exceed 40C in the coming days as people endured searing heat and stifling humidity.

Global temperatures hit record highs last year, and the United Nations weather and climate agency said that Asia was warming at a particularly rapid pace.



A vehicle of the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) sprays water along a busy road to lower the temperature amidst a heatwave in Dhaka. — AFP

Extensive scientific research has found climate change is causing heat waves to become longer, more frequent and more intense.

Myanmar has recorded temperatures that are 3-4C higher than the April average. And on Sunday, the national forecaster predicted temperatures in the central city of Mandalay could rise to 43C.

The ministry of water and meteorology in Cambodia warned that temperatures could also hit 43C in some parts of the country in the week ahead, while the health ministry advised people to monitor their health "during hot weather related to climate change".

Temperatures in Vietnam

were also forecast to remain high during a five-day national holiday, with forecasts as high as 41C in the north.

Forecasters there said it would remain intensely hot until the end of April, with cooler conditions expected in May.

India's weather department said on Saturday that severe heatwave conditions would continue through the weekend in several states, with temperatures soaring to 44C in some locations.

And in Bangladesh, millions of students returned to schools that had been closed due to extreme temperatures, even though its weather bureau said on Sunday the heatwave would continue for at least the next three days. — AFP

Pope holds mass in Venice, first trip in months

VENICE: Pope Francis presided over mass in St. Mark's Square in Venice on Sunday while warning of environmental damage and over-tourism, in a closely watched visit marking the ageing pontiff's first outside Rome since last year.

Fragile health has prevented the 87-year-old leader of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics from travelling in recent months, his last trip being a visit to the French city of Marseille in September.

But under sunny skies on Sunday, the pope appeared in high spirits as he addressed more than 10,000 faithful seated in the vast St. Mark's Square, following an earlier visit to a women's prison, and an address to young Venetians.

Citing the "enchanted beauty" of Venice, Francis listed the many dangers facing it — climate change, mass tourism

and "frayed social relations, individualism and loneliness".

"Venice is one with the waters upon which it sits. Without the care and safeguarding of this natural environment, it might even cease to exist," said the pope in his homily.

Venice, he said, "which has always been a place of encounter and cultural exchange, is called to be a sign of beauty available to all, starting with the last, a sign of fraternity and care for our common home."

The pope's visit came on the same weekend as Venice launched a new five-euro entry fee for day-trippers, aimed at easing the pressure of tourism on the Unesco World Heritage site.

Earlier on Sunday, Francis arrived by helicopter to the island of Giudecca, which houses a women's prison.

— AFP



Pope Francis leaves St. Marks basilica at the end of his visit in Venice. — AFP

Digital learning impacts motivation, knowledge acquisition



Sandhya Rao Mehta

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

While online learning is becoming common practice in education at various levels, its impact on students is only now being studied closely. While teachers are solving issues like how to keep students engaged, students are facing a whole different set of challenges.

Online classes can be productive and fun. They allow students to learn at their own pace, save time travelling to a class and even ensure continuity in spite of outside factors like the weather, traffic or other emergencies that make it difficult to hold a class.

However, it is not such a rosy picture for everyone. Sitting alone in a corner of their room, trying to remember information or understand a theory by themselves is not very promising.

Not everyone learns and processes information on their own.

It is also difficult to stay motivated and turn up, class after class, if there are issues like connectivity or even if the student feels they are not getting enough from the online sessions.

One of the major issues facing learners on digital learning platforms is focus. With a number of distractions in the form of applications, games and social media, and with little accountability to attention, like in a traditional class, staying focused on a lesson is a big challenge.

This leads to a loss of motivation if the focus has already been lost. There is simply no interest in moving on.

Without focus or motivation, it is clear that no meaningful learning is being done. This has many consequences on the student as they are possibly wasting time trying to learn but not succeeding.

It is clear that students are aware of these issues. In a survey done in the United States, 77 per cent of those surveyed said they preferred in-person classes to online ones.

However, this is not the entire picture as 36 per cent of them also said that they preferred a hybrid system of online and physical classes.

There needs to be urgent solutions to these challenges, however, as online classes will soon be a reality across the board.

There are already many institutions which have

WITHOUT FOCUS OR MOTIVATION, IT IS CLEAR THAT NO MEANINGFUL LEARNING IS BEING DONE

implemented hybrid classes and students will need to be able to cope with them.

The common suggestions given to maximise learning through a digital platform are to take notes during a class, participate as much as possible to stay connected and block any other applications during class time.

Students should also adopt some strategies like independent learning by accessing other related platforms to improve their knowledge and use interactive learning tools which are commonly available online.

Parents and teachers could help students to know more about such tools.

They usually consist of pop quizzes or short answer questions to check on knowledge learnt. These can be more fun and easy to complete, making it more motivational to continue with a lesson.

Online learning is an integral part of our present world and will only increase in the future. Students should be equipped with tools to cope with digital leaning whenever the need arises so that they can maximise their use of technology to achieve meaningful learning.

Togo split over reform on eve of election

EMILE KOUTON

Togo on Monday holds legislative elections after a highly divisive constitutional reform that opponents say paves the way for President Faure Gnassingbe to further extend his family's decades-long grip on power.

At the helm of the small West African country for nearly 20 years, Faure Gnassingbe succeeded his father Gnassingbe Eyadema, who ruled for almost four decades.

Critics say the political dynasty's hold on the small West African nation will be extended by the reform. People on the streets of the seaside capital Lome were split over the election, the role of Togo's leader, and who it should be. Building painter Komlan Gato said he hoped the vote could usher in a new leader but was unsure about the fairness of the ballot.

"I am certain that if these elections are transparent, there will be change in this country. We are tired of seeing the same family in power," he said. "I was born in January 1970 and I only know the Gnassingbe family in power."

The reform, adopted by lawmakers on April 19, makes the president's post a largely ceremonial one. The president will now be elected by parliament and not the people for a four-year term. Power will reside with the president of the council of ministers, a sort of super-prime minister who happens to be the leader of the majority party in the new assembly.

If the ruling Union for the Republic (UNIR) party — which has an overwhelming parliamentary majority — wins on Monday, Gnassingbe can assume the new post.

Critics say that will allow him to skip presidential term limits. As president he would have been able only to run for one more five-year term in an election next year.

The opposition boycotted the last elections in 2018, citing irregularities. But they have asked supporters to turn out massively to challenge the UNIR's stranglehold on power.

"The youth are desperate. The country is poorly managed and we are tired of the system in place," said trader Ayaovi Sohoun, 32.

Bernardo Agbve, a baker, 28, called on the Independent National Electoral Commission to "publish results from the polls: good results and not fictitious results".

Gnassingbe has been re-elected four times since being put in power in 2005 by the military to succeed his father after his sudden death. Each of the votes was rejected as a sham by the opposition.

For Elvire Atchou, Gnassingbe should be allowed to continue. — AFP

Why the EU's new migration pact matters



Ana Palacio

The writer is a former minister of foreign affairs of Spain and former senior vice president and general counsel of the World Bank Group

Amid escalating geopolitical tensions, and with European Parliament elections looming, the narrow passage earlier this month of the European Union's Migrant and Asylum Pact has attracted relatively little attention. To be sure, the agreement is more remarkable for the mere fact of its enactment than for any of the provisions it contains. Nonetheless, it marks the culmination of a decade-long effort to reform the EU's "Dublin system" for governing migration-related matters.

The need for change was undoubtedly urgent. In the last year alone, some 380,000 people crossed the EU's borders without authorisation — the highest number since 2016 — and a record 1.14 million sought asylum. The major "arrival countries" — such as Greece, Italy, and Spain — have long advocated for a fairer distribution of asylum-seekers across the EU. But consensus on the topic has been elusive, owing to divergent interests and priorities among EU member states.

That has not changed. The Migrant and Asylum Pact rests on a delicate trade-off: frontline states agreed to establish detention centres to process asylum-seekers' claims and repatriate individuals deemed ineligible, and their EU counterparts would either accept a share of the rest or participate in cost-sharing initiatives. For a large share of Europe's political leaders, however, this is not good enough.

In fact, the Pact barely passed. While it won the support of the three principal parliamentary factions — the centre-right European People's Party (EPP), the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, and the liberal Renew Europe — a significant number of MEPs abstained, effectively expressing their dissent.

The effort to push through the Migrant and Asylum Pact highlighted the complex political dynamics shaping the EU's approach to migration. Both Italy's Socialists and their ideological foils from the Five Star Movement voted against parts of the bill, motivated largely by their interest in opposing Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni — a key proponent of the deal. Similar dynamics played out in France.



In the last year alone, some 380,000 people crossed the EU's borders without authorisation.

The process also exposed new political divisions. Representatives of Germany's Greens, for example, broke ranks with their counterparts at home to vote against the package.

The Pact is now set to be endorsed by the Council of the European Union on April 29. But it still faces opposition from both ends of the political spectrum. Far-right parties

THE EU'S MIGRANT AND ASYLUM PACT, WHICH JUST SQUEAKED THROUGH THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, REMAINS HIGHLY CONTENTIOUS, WITH SOME LEADERS PLEDGING NOT TO IMPLEMENT IT AT ALL

say it is insufficient to deter migrants, whereas left-leaning groups and NGOs worry that it does too little to protect migrants' rights and ensure adequate living conditions. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has announced that Poland will not accept the relocation mechanism, while Slovakia's populist prime minister, Robert Fico, has declared that he will not implement the new rules at all.

Even so, the Migrant and Asylum Pact may hold positive lessons about EU politics and the Union's future. Most notably, the effort to pass it demonstrated the impact a leader like Meloni can have when they bring to bear their coalition-building capabilities.

Contrary to her combative campaigning style, Meloni has adopted a pragmatic and constructive approach to European leadership, particularly when it comes to migration. For

example, she was a principal architect of the Memorandum of Understanding that the European Commission and Tunisia signed last July. Though the MoU has been the target of much-deserved criticism — it is no blueprint for engagement with third countries — it established Meloni as a major voice in Europe's migration debate.

Meloni has also been a driving force behind other bilateral deals, such as a recent aid deal with Egypt aimed at curbing irregular migration to the EU.

In marshaling support for the Migrant and Asylum Pact, Meloni collaborated with the European Commission, and carried out more than 20 high-profile missions in the Mediterranean over an eight-month period.

Ultimately, the Migrant and Asylum Pact hints at an emerging approach to EU-level policymaking: imperfect consensus. Although no one is entirely satisfied, the EU does not remain deadlocked.

Some progress, however limited, is preferable to inaction. In this sense, the fate of the migration agreement will serve as a kind of barometer for the next European Parliament's mandate.

When it comes to migration policy, the EU is at a crossroads. It has largely abandoned the "Wir schaffen das" ("We'll manage this") spirit embodied by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2015, when she decided to allow over a million asylum-seekers to enter Germany.

The idea of forcing asylum-seekers to settle outside the EU's borders is gaining traction, as reflected in the EPP manifesto for the June elections.

Despite the broad appeal of limiting migration, however, the EU also needs migrants to fill crucial low-skill jobs — such as in construction — for which there is an acute shortage of workers.

Finding consensus on the right balance between these two imperatives would be difficult in the best of times; at a moment of deep polarisation, it is practically impossible. But the EU must find a way forward. To that end, the next European Parliament — which is certain to feature more fragmentation — must embrace the Meloni model of creative coalition-building, underpinned by pragmatism and a commitment to shared values.

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People represent a product of their past

Painful experiences like break ups, losing a loved one, or losing a job make us more powerful and strong.

We learn to survive during these hard times. It is when we put our survival instincts into practice then we can truly be strong. Thanks to pain for teaching us to appreciate life and everything around us.

Yes, it is true that pain will leave once it has finished teaching the lesson! American author and journalist, Hal Borland, confirmed this fact, as he said, “No winter lasts forever; no spring skips its turn”.

Pain is unavoidable; we all feel and deal with it. Pain is part of human life and there can be no gain without pain.

Painful experiences like break ups, losing a loved one, or losing a job make us more powerful and strong.

We learn to survive during these hard times. It is when we put our survival instincts into practice then we can truly be strong.

Pain will leave once it has finished teaching the lesson! It has been said, that no winter lasts forever and no spring skips its turn.

Despite the pain, challenges and disappointments experienced in life, we also have dreams to chase and ambitions to fulfil. Sometimes, the most beautiful dreams are born from the most unpleasant nightmares. As it has been said that you will never know the power of yourself until someone hurts you badly.

Therefore, out of all painful experiences that one comes across everyday arises the courage to make dreams come true.

As a matter of fact, people represent a product of their past, but one should not be a prisoner of it and stick to what no longer exists. Probably, it could be hard, but one has to let go all unpleasant experiences, challenges and disappointments or failures.

In fact, every moment gives a new beginning and a new ending, so



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TRIALS AND CHALLENGES ARE PART OF LIFE, SO DO NOT BE DEMOTIVATED; BE COURAGEOUS, FOCUSED AND PERSISTENT

everyone literally gets a second chance everyday!

Similarly, every time it rains, it stops raining and everything that goes up comes down. After darkness, there is always light; we recall this every morning, but somehow we do not see it.

Nobody knows what new challenge or obstacle comes the next day, but we always have two options, either to take control or to fold under pressure.

It is not always about what happens to us, rather how we choose to handle the storms. In fact, the strongest people do not quit, but they simply grab their umbrellas and keep moving forward.

Khalil Gibran, a Lebanese poet and writer, said, “Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.”

In view of that, when challenges bring you down, do not give up; stand strong like the tree, which stays strong no matter how heavy the thunder is or how strong the wind blows.

Trials and challenges are part of life, so do not be demotivated; be courageous, focused and persistent.

Every time you stand stronger, God will uplift you and make you stronger than ever before.

Our spirit, sometimes, gets weak when we act in fear and lose hope while chasing our dreams.

However, we get stronger as we believe in hope and have faith to meet and conquer the challenges we face.

Nobody has not experienced failure in life, but failure offers a natural checkpoint on your journey, so it allows you to evaluate your way and principles of making improvements.

When you fail, you get the chance to evaluate your decisions and behaviours.

Such a review can bring important details, which you possibly missed the first time, so you can take a better approach the next time.

Then, no matter how hard or impossible it is, just take a deep breath, open the door to the future and start a brand-new chapter in your life.

CROSSING THE CORINTH CANAL



The ‘Belem’, a three-masted sailing ship that carries the Olympic Flame from Greece to Marseille in France, crosses the Corinth Canal, following the handover ceremony for the Paris 2024 Olympics, in Corinth, Greece, on Sunday. – Reuters

Fifty years of global immunisation success

There is a good chance that you know one of the 154 million people who over the past 50 years have been saved from a preventable death by routine immunisation. You might even be one. In fact, surveying the past half-century, it is hard to identify a public-health tool that has had a more positive impact than vaccination, or one that has done more to promote global health equity.

Routine immunisation programmes, once the purview of the wealthy world, now exist in every country, owing to the landmark commitment that the World Health Organisation’s member states made in 1974 to establish what is now known as the Essential Programme on Immunisation. Initially, the EPI focused on ensuring universal access to vaccines against tuberculosis, diphtheria, pertussis, tetanus, polio, and measles — all preventable child killers. Today, 84 per cent of children globally are immunised against these six diseases, compared to only 5 per cent in 1974.

But progress has been hard won. After rapid gains in immunisation coverage throughout the 1980s, momentum was lost in the 1990s.

The main issue was that lower-income countries lacked the resources and infrastructure needed to sustain immunisation programmes.

Moreover, vaccine markets were fragmented and dysfunctional: countries depended on a few manufacturers, and uncertain demand deterred new entrants.

That is where Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, came in. The organisation was established in 2000 to harness the



Sania Nishtar
The writer is CEO of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance

ON THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE WHO’S ESSENTIAL PROGRAMME ON IMMUNISATION, IT IS WORTH CELEBRATING THESE REMARKABLE RESULTS AND REFLECTING ON WHAT STILL NEEDS TO BE DONE

strengths of the public and private sectors.

By forging new partnerships, the thinking went, Gavi could improve access to vaccines against a wider range of infectious diseases in lower-income countries and marginalised communities.

In the decades since, Gavi has helped protect more than one billion children and halve childhood mortality in 78 countries, while delivering significant economic benefits.

Meanwhile, most of the countries that Gavi supports have continued to increase funding for vaccination efforts, putting such programmes on a more sustainable footing and creating an entry point for other health services.

The 50th anniversary of EPI is a fitting moment to celebrate the millions of lives saved through routine immunisation, and the health workers who have devoted considerable effort, often in the most demanding environments, to realise the EPI’s goals. But it is also an opportunity to reflect on what still needs to be done.

According to our estimates, around one in ten children in lower-income countries have not received any routine vaccines. These “zero-dose” children are often in poor communities affected by conflict and displacement, in countries with extremely fragile health systems that provide no access to primary care.

Continued progress will depend on our ability to reach these

marginalised communities. That is why, since taking over as CEO in March, my main priority has been ensuring that Gavi’s work is informed by and grounded in the needs and experiences of the communities and countries that we serve.

At a time when violent conflict, geopolitical tensions, and climate change are dominating the headlines, the EPI’s anniversary should also serve as a reminder that we can still achieve world-changing results when we work together.

Every vaccination offers hope for a better, healthier future. And as we stand on the cusp of a new era for immunisation, there is reason for

optimism.

Since 2022, for example, a record number of people are protected by the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine, which protects against the main cause of cervical cancer.

Moreover, we have the ambitious goal of immunising 86 million girls against HPV in Gavi-supported countries by the end of 2025.

And this week, three more African countries will join Burkina Faso and Cameroon in rolling out the world’s first-ever malaria vaccine — a development that would have seemed impossible just a few decades ago.

The future of vaccines appears to be even brighter. It is possible

that, before the end of the decade, there will be a new vaccine against tuberculosis — one of humanity’s oldest scourges. Looking further ahead, we could even see vaccines delivered through dissolvable microarray patches instead of syringes.

In the half-century since the WHO instituted the EPI, the world has shown a remarkable capacity to come together on the crucial issue of vaccination.

At this moment of deepening political polarisation and global fragmentation, we must commit to another 50 years of changing the world for the better.

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Today, 84 per cent of children globally are immunised against six diseases.

sport

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A Seeb player in action against Sohar.

Al Nahda edge Bahla to stay in second spot

SOHAR DELAY SEEB TITLE PARTY

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, APRIL 28

Al Nahda secured a narrow 1-0 victory over Bahla in their Omantel League Round 19 encounter at the Al Buraimi Sports Complex on Saturday.

During the first half, Al Nahda exerted strong pressure on Bahla's goal, creating several scoring opportunities that were not efficiently utilised. The most notable chance came in the fourth minute with a shot from Omar al Malki that hit the crossbar. In the ninth minute, Al Nahda succeeded in breaking the deadlock with a precise pass from midfield to Walter Sabwa, who slotted the ball into the net.

In the second half, Bahla attempted various strategies to equalise but without success. Despite an improved performance from their players, they struggled to effectively penetrate Al Nahda's defences. Despite Bahla's efforts in the dying moments of the game to level the score, Al Nahda's players maintained their superiority and defensive solidity.

The match concluded with Al Nahda winning 1-0, taking their tally to 36 points, and securing the second position in the standings. As for Bahla, they remained at

14 points, languishing in the 11th position, which is the first relegation spot in this season's league.

AL RUSTAQ HOLD OMAN CLUB GOALLESS

Al Rustaq and Oman club played to a goalless draw in a closely contested match at the Al Rustaq Sports Complex.

The first half witnessed intense competition between the two teams, both striving to take the lead in the standings. However, despite several attempts, including a header chance for Rustaq's Musab al Shuqsi hitting the crossbar in the 15th minute, neither side could break the deadlock, and the first half ended goalless.

In the second half, both teams intensified their efforts to score, exchanging relentless attacks. The coaches made tactical changes to motivate their players. Despite numerous opportunities for both teams, neither could find the back of the net, and the match ended in a goalless draw.

With this draw, Rustaq reached 25 points, temporarily occupying fifth position, while Oman Club reached 30 points, securing third in the league standings.

SOHAR DRAW WITH SEEB

In the highlight match of the 19th week, Seeb drew with Sohar with a scoreless result at the

Seeb Sports Stadium, marking a setback for the team for the second consecutive time.

The early minutes of the first half saw slight dominance from Seeb, but the technical performance was average from both sides, with play mostly concentrated in midfield without posing significant threats to the goalkeepers. In the 30th minute, the match witnessed the beginning of missed opportunities, notably for Seeb through a precise pass from Hamad al Habsi to Abdulaziz al Muqbali, which went unutilised. Despite Seeb's possession, clear-cut chances on Sohar's goal were few, and the first half ended in a goalless draw.

In the second half, Sohar initiated a chance to score through Alexander De Stefano and David Ndama, but to no avail. The coach of Al Seeb made changes to the line-up to invigorate the attack, while Sohar's coach also made offensive substitutions. Despite efforts, neither team managed to score, and the match ended in a goalless draw.

With this draw, Seeb's title celebration in the Omantel League is postponed, as they are now 12 points ahead of second-placed Al Nahda, who have two matches remaining. Seeb remain in the first position with 48 points, while Sohar increased their tally to 30 points in third.



Sultanate of Oman

MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH

TENDERS ANNOUNCEMENT

MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH, Muscat, hereby give notice of tenders for the following projects:-

Tender No.	Project Category	Location	Grade in Tender Board Registration	Last Day to Purchase Tender Documents	Last Date of Tender Submission
7/2024	Construction and Maintenance	DESIGN & BUILD OF CAMEL TRACK RACE PLATFORM AT AL MUDHAIBI - NORTH SHARQYAH GOVERNORATE	First Grade	04/05/2024	27/05/2024
8/2024	Construction and Maintenance	DESIGN & BUILD OF CAMEL TRACK RACE PLATFORM AT BIDYHA - NORTH SHARQYAH GOVERNORATE	First Grade	04/05/2024	27/05/2024
9/2024	Construction and Maintenance	DESIGN & BUILD OF CAMEL TRACK RACE ROAD ASPHALT AT SOHAR NORTH BATINAH GOVERNORATE	First Grade	04/05/2024	27/05/2024
10/2024	Supply	SUPPLY AND INSTALLATION OF FLOODLIGHT TO SPORTS CENTER AT DHOFAR GOVERNATE	Excellent, First Grade	04/05/2024	27/05/2024
11/2024	Construction and Maintenance	REHABILITATION OF CHILDREN MUSEUM - MUSCAT GOVERNORATE	Second Grade	04/05/2024	27/05/2024
12/2024	Supply	SUPPLY & ISTULATION FURNITURE AT CHILDREN MUSEUM MUSCAT GOVERNORATE	First, Second Grade	04/05/2024	27/05/2024
13/2024	Consulting Offices	CONSULTANCY SERVICES FOR DESIGN AND SUPERVISION OF SPORTS FACILITIES SULTAN QABOOS SPORTS COMPLEX AT BOUSHAR	First Grade	04/05/2024	27/05/2024
14/2024	Consulting Offices	CONSULTANCY SERVICES (DESIGN AND SUPERVISION) SUR CULTURE AND YOUTH CENTER AT SUR, SOUTH SHARQIYA GOVERNORATE	First Grade	04/05/2024	27/05/2024
15/2024	Consulting Offices	CONSULTANCY SERVICES FOR DESIGN AND SUPERVISION TO MAINTENANCE BUILDING AT RAKHYUT, DHOFAR GOVERNORATE	First Grade	04/05/2024	27/05/2024
Re- tender 6/2024	Consulting Offices	CONSULTANCY SERVICES (DESIGN AND SUPERVISION) TO MAINTENANCE BUILDING AT AHLI SADAB (DARSAIT)	First Grade	04/05/2024	27/05/2024
Re- tender 6/2023	Services	CONSTRUCTION OF GRASSED FOOTBALL PITCH WITH AUTOMATIC IRRIGATION SYSTEM, SUPPLY AND INSULATION OF FLOOD LIGHT AT AL SALAM SPORT CLUB (SHINAS BRANCH)	First, Second Grade	04/05/2024	27/05/2024

Companies, which are registered with the Tender Board and engaged in same category with experience in and same Grade as noted above, can obtain the Tender Documents at the Tender Board E-tendering digital portal link (<http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)

The last date of tender submission on above E-tendering site

INTERNAL TENDER COMMITTEE OF MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH

Any participants have doubt in adopting e-tendering can contact over the phone 24402200 or through email etenderhd@ita.gov.om

Oman add three medals as tally reaches 43

WALEED AL JAHWARI
DUBAI, APRIL 28

Oman golf team grabbed a silver while Omani swimmer Mishal Salim claimed bronze and billiards team won bronze on the day 13th of the first GCC Youth Games on Sunday.

Oman's medal tally rose to 43 medals in the first edition of GCC Youth Games, being held in the UAE from April 16 to May 2. Oman athletes were able to collect 14 gold, 10 silver, and 19 bronze medals from 15 sports, including sailing, football, golf, taekwondo, water sports, athletics, handball, volleyball, basketball, chess, fencing, table tennis, billiards, snooker and equestrian.

Oman billiards team grabbed bronze in nine-ball doubles on Sunday, on the concluding day of the competition held for three days at E Zone in Dubai. The Oman team was represented by Omar bin Khalid al Hamidi and Al Zubair bin Mohammed al Balushi, under coach Mohammed bin Motaz bin Mohammed.

Omani Swimmer Mishal Salim snatched bronze in 100m butterfly on Sunday, while the Qatar's Mohamed Aziz won the gold, and his teammate claimed the bronze. Mohamed Khamis finished fifth in the 50m backstroke, Maath Qasim was ranked fifth in 100m backstroke and Oman team finished fifth in 4x100 medley.

Amer bin Ali, Oman swimming coach, said, "the national team's swimmers performed well in light of the strong competition witnessed



Oman golf team players pose with their silver medals.



Oman billiards team with their bronze medals.

in all races. We hope that will be good improvement and serve to achieve more medals in the coming days."

Oman won a silver in the golf team category at the conclusion of the competition on Sunday, which witnessed the participation of five Gulf teams. Omani players were able to compete well and maintained

second place in the overall standings, by achieving 102 shots above average, while the UAE won the gold medal with 220 shots above average, and the Saudi claimed bronze medal after collecting 157 points above average.

The Oman golf squad include Adam bin Masoud al Barwani, Mahir Sambat, Pransh

Jagwani, Muhib bin Jamil al Kathiri, Masoud bin Abdullah al Barwani, team official and Ahmed bin Faisal al Jahdhami, technical member.

Ahmed al Jahdhami, Secretary-General of Oman Golf Association, said: "The team succeeded in adding a medal to Oman's tally, our players performed well we aspired to win more medals, but the hosts had the advantage."

"We appreciate the Oman Olympic Committee efforts, as well as the efforts of the organising committee in Abu Dhabi in facilitating all the tasks. We promise for more achievements and medals in upcoming participation in age categories," he added.

The Oman fencing team arrived in the UAE on Sunday, to take part in the Games. The fencing competitions will continue for two days, Monday and Tuesday, at Zayed Sports Complex in Fujairah, the technical meeting was held on Saturday to discuss the competition schedules and technical rules.

Oman are participating with eight players led by coached Hisham Karshoud and Haitham Balsaud.

The list of players includes Israa bint Saif al Siyabiyah, Ahmed bin Anwar Kaskas, Saeed bin Khaled al Shuaibi, Ali bin Hamad al Busaidy, Ammar bin Mohammed al Azizi, Jana bint Mohammed al Sharjiyyah, Salma bint Saeed al Daghishiyah and Ghazal bint Youssef al Falitiyah. Omani referee Omar al Harithy is also among the fencing referees.

Jacks smashes century as Bengaluru crush Gujarat



AHMEDABAD, India: England batsman Will Jacks smashed an unbeaten 41-ball 100 as Royal Challengers Bengaluru hammered Gujarat Titans by nine wickets in the Indian Premier League on Sunday.

Jacks chalked up 10 sixes in his blitz as he put on an unbeaten stand of 166 with Virat Kohli, who hit 70 and remained in awe of his younger partner's hitting at the world's biggest cricket stadium in Ahmedabad.

Chasing 201, Bengaluru achieved victory with four overs to spare when Jacks hit the winning six, which also made his century.

It was Bengaluru's third win — and second in a row — in 10 matches so far this season, keeping their slim hopes of

reaching the play-offs alive.

Jacks was on 16 when the in-form Kohli reached his fifty in 32 balls with a four off Rashid Khan, but soon the 25-year-old Englishman exploded with three sixes and two fours in a 29-run 15th over from Mohit Sharma.

"Phenomenal. Initially when he came to bat, he was annoyed that he wasn't able to strike the ball as he wanted to," Kohli said after the win.

"The only talk was for him to stay calm; we know how explosive he can be when he gets going. The over from Mohit was the game changer, I was just happy to stay around and watch him go."

Jacks then took on Rashid with four sixes and a four in the winning over.

The 35-year-old Kohli, who

hit the first ton of this edition, reached 500 runs and was quick to slam critics who said the veteran batsman has struggled to meet modern T20 standards of power hitting.

"There's a reason why you do it for 15 years. For me, it's only about doing the work. People can talk anything they want to, they can talk about me not able to push on, not playing spin well, but you yourself know the game better," Kohli said. On Bengaluru's disappointing showing this season, he added: "We wanted to play more for our self-respect, we want to play for the fans who have backed us. We know we haven't played up to the standards required. We know we can do a lot more better and it's something which we'll try and do."

Kohli — who played the spinners with aplomb, including by using the sweep shot to good effect — and Bengaluru are still waiting for their first IPL title.

Bengaluru, who remain bottom of the 10-team table, elected to field first and Gujarat reached 200-3 in their 20 overs.

Sai Sudarshan hit an unbeaten 84 and put on key partnerships, including putting together 86 runs with Shahrukh Khan, who hit 58, and an unbeaten 69-run stand with David Miller, who made 26.

Glenn Maxwell returned to the Bengaluru XI after a short "mental and physical break" break of three matches, taking a wicket in his first over to return figures of 1-28 with his off-spin.

— AFP

FRASER-MCGURK SHINES AS DELHI BEAT MUMBAI

Samson steers Rajasthan close to play-off spot with eighth win

NEW DELHI: Australia's Jake Fraser-McGurk smashed 84 off 27 deliveries to fire Delhi Capitals to 257-4 and a 10-run win over Mumbai Indians in another IPL high-scorer on Saturday.

In the second match of the day, skipper Sanju Samson hit an unbeaten 71 as Rajasthan Royals all but confirmed their play-off spot with a seven-wicket hammering of Lucknow Super Giants.

Delhi, at their home Arun Jaitley Stadium, posted their best-ever total in the T20 tournament, a day after Punjab Kings chased down a record target of 262.

Delhi's previous best was 231-4 in 2011 against Punjab Kings. This edition, Sunrisers Hyderabad have twice smashed IPL records with totals of 277 and 287.

Bowlers kept five-time champions Mumbai down to 247-9 despite a valiant 32-ball 63 by Tilak Varma as Delhi boosted their play-off hopes with five wins in 10 matches.

Fraser-McGurk, a 22-year-old Australian batsman who has taken his IPL debut season by storm with three half-centuries in five matches, started with two fours and a six off England pace bowler Luke Wood in a 19-run first over.

"That's my role, go out there and score as many as I can and get the team off to a nice start," Fraser-McGurk, who has a strike-rate of 237.50, said after his blitz.

The Australian kept up the charge to reach his fifty in 15 balls with a hit over the fence and put on 114 runs with opening partner Abishek Porel, who hit 36.

Leg-spinner Piyush Chawla finally denied Fraser-McGurk, who went unsold in the auction

before Delhi signed him as injury replacement, his century.

SAMSON POWER

There was no stopping Delhi as Shai Hope hit a 17-ball 41, skipper Rishabh Pant made 29 off 19 deliveries and Tristan Stubbs smashed an unbeaten 48 to pummel the opposition attack.

Mumbai, who have endured a tough season after Hardik Pandya replaced veteran Rohit Sharma as captain and has been booed across a number of venues, lost regular wickets.

Pandya hit 46 off 16 balls but it was a 70-run partnership between Varma and Tim David, who hit 37 off 17 balls that raised Mumbai's hopes, but Delhi kept calm.

David fell lbw to Mukesh Kumar after a four and a six and Varma was run out at the start of the final over as Mumbai remained ninth.

Kumar and fellow medium-pace bowler and impact substitute Rasikh Salam took three wickets each.

In the evening match in Lucknow, the hosts posted 196-5 courtesy a 76 by skipper KL Rahul and his 115 run stand with Deepak Hooda, who made 50.

Lucknow lost two early wickets after New Zealand's left-arm quick Trent Boult bowled Quinton de Kock for eight and Sandeep Sharma bowled Marcus Stoinis for a duck.

Rahul and Hooda steadied the innings and then hit back but the effort was not enough as Dhruv Jurel, who hit 52, and Samson steered table-toppers Rajasthan home with one over to spare for their eighth win in nine matches.

Top four teams will qualify for the play-offs. — AFP



Pakistan name Kirsten, Gillespie as coaches

LAHORE: Pakistan on Sunday announced former South African opener Gary Kirsten and ex-Australian paceman Jason Gillespie as head coaches for different formats ahead of the T20 World Cup in June this year.

World Cup-winning coach Kirsten will take over the white-ball teams while Gillespie will look after the Test side on a two-year contract — the first time Pakistan has employed separate coaches for different formats.

"Both Kirsten and Gillespie are famous and experienced coaches and their appointment confirms the trust the international community has in our team," Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Mohsin Naqvi told reporters in Lahore.

Kirsten played 101 Tests and 185 one-day internationals for South Africa between 1993 to 2004 before coaching India to win the 50-over World Cup in 2011.

The 56-year-old is currently coaching Gujarat Titans in the Indian Premier League.

He will join the team on the England tour next month where Pakistan will play four Twenty20



Kirsten will coach the white-ball teams while Gillespie is the Test coach.

internationals.

"Understanding the current state of the team and charting a path towards our desired goals is paramount," said Kirsten.

"Winning global events, while challenging, remains a significant objective.

"Whether it's the upcoming tournament in June or events in the future, achieving success in these competitions would be a remarkable feat."

Gillespie, 49, played 71 Tests and 97 one-day internationals in a glorious career for Australia.

He coached Yorkshire to win the English County Championship in 2014 and 2015.

"Leading the Pakistan cricket team is a big achievement for any coach, given its rich legacy and passionate fan base," said Gillespie.

"I understand there will be expectation and that comes with the role. All I can do is to take it in my stride and I would not have taken on the job if I did not think I could deal with it."

Former Pakistan all-rounder Azhar Mahmood will serve as assistant coach to both Kirsten and Gillespie.

Mahmood was interim head coach of Pakistan for the New Zealand Twenty20 international series which ended 2-2 on Saturday in Lahore. — AFP

International karate open championship concludes

MUSCAT: The competitions of the second Muscat International Karate Do Academy Open Championship concluded at the Al Amal Sports Club Hall here on Friday.

The event was organised by Muscat International Karate Do Academy and members of the administration of the Shotokan Karate Centre under the auspices of His Highness Sayyid Nawaf bin Barghash bin Said al Said. Also present were Secretary-General of the Omani Karate Committee, Hamoud bin Salem al Touqi and Shaikh Abdullah bin Salem al Mahdali, Head of the Al Maabala region in the Wilayat of Al Seeb.

A large number of players representing 19 clubs, academies, and private karate centres from 7 Arab and foreign countries participated, including Oman, UAE, Kuwait, Egypt, Algeria, Iran and India, in both kata and kumite competitions, according to predefined age groups and weight categories. The championship followed the rules of the International Karate Federation.

The competition was officiated by a selection of international Omani, resident, continental, and national referees. The overall standings were as follows: Muscat international Karate Do Academy secured first place with 9 gold, 17 silver and 22 bronze medals, followed by the Shotokan Karate Centre with 9 gold, 4 silver and 11 bronze medals. Al Qudrah Karate Club claimed third place with 9 gold, 4 silver and 3 bronze medals, while Al Buraimi Karate Academy attained fourth place with 6 gold, 13 silver and 26 bronze medals.

During the closing ceremony, Shaikh Abdullah al Mahdali

delivered a welcoming speech to HH Sayyid Nawaf bin Barghash al Said and expressed gratitude and appreciation to Muscat International Karate do Academy, Shotokan Karate Centre, the organising committees, the referees team, the coaches of clubs, academies, and participating centres as well as the management of Al Amal Sports Club, for their constructive collaboration towards the success of the championship.

Shihan bin Ali bin Mohammed al Raisi, Chairman of Muscat International Karate Do Academy, tournament director, also thanked the chief guest and organisers.



ARSENAL HANG ON TO BEAT SPURS, STRETCH LEAD AT TOP

LONDON: Arsenal held on to beat battling local rivals Tottenham Hotspur 3-2 away and move four points clear at the top of the Premier League after an emphatic first-half display and a nervous second period in an electric derby atmosphere on Sunday.

An own goal by Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg and efforts from Bukayo Saka and Kai Havertz put the Gunners in control at halftime and although Spurs fought back through Cristian Romero's strike and a Son Heung-min penalty, the visitors claimed the three points.

Victory moved Mikel Arteta's Gunners further ahead of second-placed champions Manchester City, who have two games in hand and visit struggling Nottingham Forest later on Sunday.

Liverpool are in third spot a point behind City but like Arsenal having played 35 matches with three games left.

Tottenham's defeat hit their hopes of playing Champions League football next season as they stand seven points off fourth-placed Aston Villa, albeit still with two games in hand.

Having built such a commanding lead it looked as though Arsenal could inflict humiliation on their arch-rivals but in the end they were happy to hear the final whistle — the players celebrating in the corner with their fans.

"I was praying at the end. It was a really emotional game. This is a tough place to come and a great team to play against. We had to dig in and suffer," Arteta, who reached 100 Premier League wins as Arsenal manager, told Sky Sports.

Arsenal arrived at the home of their neighbours desperate for a win to boost their title challenge and got the perfect start after 15 minutes when midfielder Hojbjerg headed the ball back into his own net from a corner.

Tottenham reacted to going behind and defender Romero hit the outside of the post from a James Maddison cross.

The hosts thought they had equalised when Micky van de Ven placed the ball past keeper David Raya after Pedro Porro's strike deflected to him and the stadium erupted but after a long delay the goal was ruled out by VAR for offside.

SAKA STRIKE

The Gunners extended their lead just before the half hour mark, though, when a counter-attack was calmly finished by Saka after Spurs' Dejan Kulusevski slipped in the Arsenal area.

Havertz added the third with a simple header from a corner that eluded the home defence and the visitors were flying.

It was the first time shell-shocked Tottenham had fallen 3-0 behind at home to bitter rivals Arsenal since 1959.

Spurs replaced Rodrigo Bentancur with Pape Matar Sarr at half-time and they pulled a goal back through Romero just past the hour after Raya played the ball straight to him and the Argentine found the bottom corner to lift the home fans.

Tottenham were awarded a penalty after a VAR check in the 87th minute after Declan Rice kicked Ben Davies just inside the area when the Arsenal midfielder tried to clear the ball and Son stepped up to convert the spot-kick as the noise level rose.

Spurs piled on the pressure but could not breach the Arsenal defence again and the visitors were left to celebrate the win and a healthy lead in the thrilling title race.

Tottenham manger Ange Postecoglou was left to rue the mistakes that have dogged his side all season.

"They're (Arsenal) a team that deals with the details well and we aren't," the Australian said. — **Reuters**



Arsenal's Bukayo Saka celebrates scoring their second goal during the Premier League match against Tottenham Hotspur at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, London. — **Reuters**

Photo exhibition on Italian football team thrills fans

KHALID AL BALUSHI

@khalid_albalushi94

In a vibrant atmosphere with lovers of Italian football, the Italian Embassy in Muscat launched the photo exhibition 'Welcome Azzurri: An Italian Football Journey' dedicated to historical football moments, at Bait Al Zubair in collaboration with del calcio museum and Italian football federation FIGC.

The event was attended by Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Sports and Youth and the Italian legend Giuseppe Dossena, who represented the Italian national football team and was a member of the Azzurri team that won the 1982 Fifa World Cup.

Several young football enthusiasts dressed in sportswear representing various players who have played for the Italian national team, showed their love and solidarity for this event, which delighted the audience. Attendees also had the opportunity to capture photographs of the exhibits that explained sporting events with

achievement dates.

The exhibition featured 34 images of the best matches played by the Italian national football and beach soccer teams against regional teams since June 9, 1928.

The exhibition will remain open until May 15, 2024, allowing a wide audience to attend and learn about this achievement.

Al Rawas praised the exhibition and expressed his joy at Italy's successes, noting that it will inspire the public with stories of success and sacrifices experienced by the Italian team in sports. He also thanked the embassy, the Italian football federation, Bait Al Zubair, and the Oman Football Association for organising the event.

Al Rawas emphasised the importance of documenting the achievements of ministries, federations and clubs in Oman to inspire youth, stating that honouring and recognising achievements enriches memory and encourages youth participation in activities.

Pierluigi D'Elia, Ambassador of Italy accredited to the Sultanate of Oman, commented, "We are very proud to organise this exhibition,



Basil bin Ahmed al Rawas (centre) and other officials at the photo exhibition.



Welcome to the Azzurri A Journey through Italian Football' in Oman, specifically at Bait Al Zubair. It is a commitment to bring more Italian players and football teams to enhance our cooperation in football."

The ambassador added, "this exhibition reflects the harmony and friendship and how sports can bring nations and people together. We are also committed to supporting all efforts made by Oman in developing the sports sector, and we look forward to enhancing our cooperation in football between our federations, ministries, football players and coaches."

Fahad al Hasni, Exhibitions Director at Bait Al Zubair, stated, "this captivating exhibition is evidence of the role of sports in promoting cultural exchange and understanding between peoples. Football is not just a sport; it is a bridge that connects people around the world. Through this exhibition, we hope to strengthen the cultural ties between Oman and Italy and activate possible areas of cooperation in the future."

Former Italian player Giuseppe Dossena shared his fondest

memories with the Italian national team, saying, "the first thing that comes to my mind in the tapestry of memories is when we won the World Cup in 1992. In Italy, every Italian child's dream is to win the World Cup, and my dream came true."

He added, "It's hard for me to describe my feelings, but bringing joy to the people was the most important goal I wanted to achieve."

Mohammed al Wahibi, a visitor to the exhibition, said, "personally, when I saw the photos, I felt a beautiful feeling with what the Italian Embassy has done. We should learn from this experience. When passersby are asked about the oldest Omani national team players, they are unknown to many people. Holding such exhibitions is an opportunity to learn about the sports history, achievements and players who laid the foundation for Omani football."

He added, "such exhibitions also boost the morale of players, ensuring that they will not be just a passing story in Omani football history, but will be celebrated like others someday."





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FSA to implement fund for emergency medical treatment of visitors



HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, APRIL 28

The Financial Services Authority (FSA) has been mandated to set up a fund to provide financial assistance to visitors facing medical emergencies, per the provisions of Decree No. 25/2024 published in the official gazette on Sunday.

The "Regulatory Bylaws for the Emergency Treatment of Visitors in Urgent Cases" will allow visitors to the country to request for monetary assistance in the case of any urgent medical conditions that require rapid medical intervention.

According to Article (6), visitors will qualify for assistance from the fund under three main conditions. First, if the cost of treating their medical emergency exceeds their health insurance's maximum coverage. Second, if their health insurance has expired. And last, in the case of an absence of health insurance or related documentation.

Eligible individuals will be able to seek assistance by submitting a request to a designated committee. According to Article (8) they must provide documents of their visit visas, proof of the emergency nature of their medical condition, and evidence of their inability to afford treatment expenses.

According to the bylaws, the evidence must be authenticated by the visitor's embassy within Oman or any relevant government authorities. It is worth noting that the bylaws do not apply to GCC citizens residing in Oman for a period of less than three months, and members of visiting delegations according to Article (7).

Furthermore, the bylaws also stipulated the formation of a committee at the Authority that will be responsible of reviewing submitted reviews and verifying the medical conditions of applicants.

Additionally, the committee will also be required to engage with a health insurance claims management company to review and verify assistance requests. According to Article (13) of the Bylaws, the fund will be financed through a levy of 0.5 per cent on the fees collected against the issuance of each health insurance document and travel insurance document.

These levies will be collected from the policyholders through the insurance companies. This is in addition to any grants, donations and other contributions or resources deemed acceptable by the committee.

Also accruing to the fund are the returns on any investments made by the fund, subject to the approval of the FSA's Executive President. According to Article (14), the fund will be invested in bank deposits, any type of fixed income bonds including government and commercial, and any investment instruments which do not exceed 30 per cent of the total fund.

The bylaws will be effective after a period of 90 days from the date of publication of the gazette.

Sohar Port earmarks 44.5-hectare site for region's first LNG bunkering project

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 28

Sohar Port and Freezone has signed a sub-usufruct agreement with Marsa LNG LLC, a joint venture between TotalEnergies EP Oman Development BV and OQ, for the development of an LNG liquefaction plant in Sohar Port.

This project is set to significantly reduce the industry's carbon footprint, advance Sohar as a forerunner in the global green energy revolution and establish Sohar Port as the first LNG bunkering hub in the region.

The LNG bunkering project boasts a distinct commitment to sustainability as the first of its kind powered by 100 per cent solar electricity, reiterating its status as a beacon of renewable energy innovation.

With a total investment of \$1.6 billion and an expansive land area spanning 44.5 hectares, this transformative project epitomises the region's bold vision for a greener, more sustainable future.

Commenting on this agreement, Sergio Giorgi, Managing Director and Country Chair, Marsa LNG LLC Interim CEO, stated, "At Marsa, we're dedicated to driving impactful changes and embracing sustainable solutions that deliver both environmental and economic dividends.



Officials representing Sohar Port, TotalEnergies and OQ, among other stakeholders, at the sub-usufruct agreement signing.

The LNG bunkering project exemplifies our shared dedication to pioneering innovation and sustainability. We're honoured to collaborate with Sohar Port on this pioneering initiative that promises to shape the future of our industry."

Ahmed al Azkawi, Chief Executive Upstream at OQ Exploration and Production LLC said, "The signing of the sub-usufruct agreement represents an important milestone for Marsa LNG project, the region's first LNG bunkering hub.

This global collaboration is a testament to our consistent

steps and unified goals toward supporting economic growth in the Sultanate of Oman in line with Oman Vision 2040 and the national agenda to achieve carbon-neutrality by 2050.

We are confident that Marsa LNG bunkering facility will further solidify Sohar Port's position as a key logistic hub in the region by adding a unique yet important service to the Port's world-class services.

We take this opportunity to thank the Ministry of Energy and Minerals and the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for their

unwavering support and wise guidance in making this project a reality."

Emile Hoogsteden, CEO of Sohar Port, further reiterated, "This agreement signifies a monumental step forward in our commitment to sustainable innovation.

This project will undoubtedly increase vessel calls to Sohar Port for bunkering of traditional and alternative fuels, further solidifying our position as a key player in the maritime industry.

By harnessing renewable energy and cutting-edge technology, we're leading the

charge towards greener, more efficient maritime operations that not only benefit our industry, but underscore our commitment to environmental responsibility."

The agreement between Sohar Port and Marsa Liquefied Natural Gas LLC represents a strategic step towards achieving Oman's Vision 2040, reinforcing the country's commitment to sustainable development and enhancing the maritime sector.

This partnership embodies collaborative efforts to promote innovation, sustainability, and economic growth opportunities for Oman.

Abraj Energy Services enters African markets in partnership with Sonatrach

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, APRIL 28

Leading Omani oil and gas services company Abraj Energy Services is making waves in the African markets through a strategic partnership with Sonatrach, marking a significant milestone in the hydrocarbon sector.

The collaboration between these two industry giants is set to redefine the landscape of energy exploration and production in the region.

The agreement, sealed through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), represents a bold move by Abraj Energy Services to expand its footprint into African markets, following its successful operations in the Wafra field shared between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. By



Abraj Energy Services and Sonatrach officials and representatives are pictured after the signing ceremony.

joining forces with Sonatrach, the largest oil and gas company in Algeria and Africa, Abraj Energy Services is poised to enhance

its service portfolio and deliver cutting-edge solutions to meet the evolving needs of the energy sector.

The signing ceremony, held in Muscat, brought together key executives including Eng Saif al Hamhami, CEO of Abraj Energy Services, and Farhat Aounougui, Vice President of Business Development and Marketing at Sonatrach. With the presence of industry leaders and dignitaries, the event marked the beginning of a new chapter in energy cooperation between Oman and Algeria.

Eng Saif al Hamhami expressed enthusiasm about the partnership, emphasising the strategic importance of expanding into African markets and leveraging the expertise of both companies to drive innovation and excellence in the oil and gas industry.

The collaboration aims to unlock new business opportunities, facilitate

knowledge exchange, and propel sustainable development in the region.

Rachid Hachichi, CEO and Chairman of Sonatrach, echoed these sentiments, highlighting the transformative impact of the partnership on the energy supply chain in Africa. He expressed confidence in the synergies that would emerge from the collaboration, paving the way for economic growth and prosperity for both countries.

As Abraj Energy Services embarks on its journey to establish a strong presence in African markets, in alignment with its strategic expansion plans, the partnership with Sonatrach stands as a testament to the companies' shared commitment to driving growth and innovation in the oil and gas sector.

More digital, more luxurious and more efficient: The new Panamera now in Oman

MUSCAT: The Porsche Panamera is entering its third model generation. The sports car manufacturer's luxury sedan emphasises its sporting character with even more powerful drive systems.

The profile is enhanced by a fundamentally modernised operating concept and plenty of innovative technology. These include the new Porsche Active Ride suspension system, which combines a significantly higher level of comfort with the sporting driving characteristics for which Porsche is famous.

The technical yet elegant, dynamic design of the new Panamera gives the model line's attractive proportions a fresh update. A fundamentally redesigned, driver-centred interior enhance the driving experience.

Superior feel with state-of-the-art suspension systems

The new Panamera already comes with dual-chamber two-valve air suspension with Porsche



Active Suspension Management (PASM) as standard.

The two-valve technology separates the rebound and compression stages of the damper control and therefore offers an even wider range between comfort and sportiness: the system noticeably dampens impacts from transverse joints and road damage while at the same time ensuring more body stability in dynamic driving situations.

The car's handling can be

further improved thanks to optional all-wheel steering.

In addition, the innovative Porsche Active Ride active suspension system is available as an option for the E-Hybrid models of the new Panamera.

This system surpasses other suspension concepts in all relevant parameters and offers an unprecedented range between driving comfort and driving dynamics. The basis for this is newly developed active shock

absorbers — also with two-valve technology — each connected to an electrically operated hydraulic pump.

This generates a volume flow in the damper according to demand and can therefore build up forces between the body and wheels in a lightning-fast, highly precise and targeted manner, which counteract and almost completely compensate for the forces resulting from the road excitation.

Infoline empowers businesses to thrive in a digital world

MUSCAT: In today's fast-paced and digitally driven business environment, Infoline continues to lead the way in providing exceptional customer experience services, professional services and IT enabled services.

Dedicated to enhancing operational efficiency and customer satisfaction, Infoline's suite of services is perfectly aligned with the needs of modern enterprises seeking reliable, innovative solutions. Infoline's customer experience services are a cornerstone of its offerings, ensuring that every customer interaction is handled with precision and care. From multichannel customer support to sophisticated technical assistance and comprehensive social media management, Infoline is equipped to elevate the customer experience to new heights.

The seamless integration of services like real-time chat support, customer relationship management, and feedback analysis allows businesses to stay ahead in a customer-centric world. Parallel to its customer experience services, Infoline's professional services streamline core business processes, enabling companies to focus on growth while minimising operational complexities.

With expert solutions in human resources, including recruitment and payroll processing, and financial management, such as accounts payable and receivable, Infoline ensures that businesses operate smoothly and efficiently.

On the technological front, Infoline's IT enabled services are cutting-edge.

Whether it's custom software development tailored to unique business needs, smart automation to reduce manual workload, or robust business intelligence tools that offer critical insights, Infoline's technology solutions are designed to propel businesses forward in the digital age.

"Infoline is committed to delivering solutions that not only meet but exceed the evolving expectations of businesses across various sectors," said Mohammed al Maskari, CEO of Infoline.

BankDhofar launches the innovative Samsung Pay

MUSCAT: BankDhofar is proud to announce the launch of Samsung Wallet, an innovative digital mobile payment solution designed to make shopping more convenient and seamless. With Samsung Wallet, customers can now effortlessly use their Samsung device to complete transactions, offering a convenient and secure shopping experience.

Bilal al Raisi, Assistant General Manager of Cards and Bancassurance, expressed the bank's commitment to delivering innovative and user-friendly banking services to meet the evolving needs of customers.

He stated, "At BankDhofar, we are dedicated to leveraging technology to enhance the banking experience for our customers.

The launch of Samsung Pay underscores our commitment to leverage technology and enhance customers day to day banking experience that is simple, convenient and secure."

Mandar Karkhanis, Head of Mobile Devices Sales at Samsung Gulf Electronics, highlighted the significance of the partnership with BankDhofar in expanding Samsung's reach in the Middle East region.



He emphasised, "BankDhofar is one of the leading banks in the Sultanate of Oman, with a rich legacy of 35 years in the banking sector.

This partnership marks a significant milestone in Samsung's journey to offer optimal and secure digital solutions to customers in the region. BankDhofar shares our vision of providing customers with innovative and secure digital payment solutions.

With Samsung Pay, customers can enjoy a seamless and secure payment experience, whether they are shopping online or at their favourite stores."

Samsung Pay offers customers a wide range of features and benefits, including secure transactions, compatibility with a variety of Samsung devices, and the ability to store loyalty cards and reward points for added convenience.

Vodafone Oman's 'Steps for Goodness' campaign collects more than 1 billion points

MUSCAT: Vodafone Oman has set a new record with more than 40,000 people joining its innovative "Steps for Goodness" Ramadhan campaign and collecting more than one billion points for a cause.

The annual initiative, now in its second year, successfully marries technology with philanthropy, illustrating how everyday activities can be transformed into acts of kindness and community benefit.

At the heart of the initiative is the My Vodafone App, a digital conduit through which Vodafone Oman invited the entire nation to participate. By simply downloading the app and walking, users converted their steps into points, which then translated into donations for various causes in partnership with Al Rahma Association.

This simple act of walking, often overlooked as a mundane part of daily life, was reimaged as a powerful tool for change.

The initiative was not just about promoting health and fitness but also about building a community of conscious individuals committed to making a difference. Each week of Ramadhan brought a new focus for the campaign's



charitable efforts, demonstrating Vodafone Oman's commitment to addressing diverse social and community needs. The first week resulted in supporting over 230 individuals with special needs, while week two raised relief aid for Gaza.

In week three, participants were able to help support 167 underprivileged families with donations for their Eid preparations, and in the final week, emergency support was provided to five families in financial crises through the Fak

Kurba programme.

"Steps for Goodness is not just a campaign, it's a testament to the power of collective action and the impactful synergy between technology and the spirit of giving in Ramadhan.

It has set a high bar for how technology can be harnessed for social good," expressed Usama Abdullah al Saifi, Vodafone Oman's Brand Manager. "Our heartfelt gratitude and appreciation go out to each and every one who participated in making a difference.

Bank Muscat listed amongst 30 most valuable banks in ME

MUSCAT: In recognition of its exceptional achievements and pioneering roles in delivering the best banking services and facilities to customers from individuals and corporates, Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the Sultanate of Oman, has been listed within Forbes' 30 most valuable banks in the Middle East for 2024 based on the market value.

This achievement represents a milestone of success added to the bank's track record of achievements throughout

its journey of over 40 years, emphasising the bank's pioneering position and stance of excellence in customer service in the country.

The selection of Bank Muscat as one of the valuable banks in the GCC within Forbes' rating came according to the criteria set by the institution, including the financial performance of the previous year, market value, the size of sales, assets, and profits, in addition to the prominent role the rated institution plays in service delivery and product development.

Bank Muscat takes pride in

being one of the best banks in the Middle East and the leading banking institution in the Sultanate of Oman.

This recognition puts an emphasis on the bank's excellence in the banking sector across different levels including the delivery of the best services and facilities to customers, aiming to enhance customer base and fostering customers' banking experience.

The bank also plays a vital role in launching initiatives around the Corporate and Sustainable

Responsibility (CSR) field, underscoring its commitment to serving the community and strengthening cooperation with different private and public entities in the country, which collectively contribute to the support of the economic trends and Oman Vision 2040.

Bank Muscat's presence as a valuable bank in the region and the best bank in the Sultanate of Oman stems from its dedication throughout its path to offering excellent services and products that cater to the current and



future aspirations and needs of customers. Underscoring its dedication to human resources development, the bank offers

various training opportunities and development courses that aim to enable its staff and elevate their professional competency.



Oman Cement to invest in captive waste-to-energy unit

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 28

Oman Cement, the country's leading cement manufacturer, says it has approved a decision to set up a facility at its Misfah complex that will harness energy from municipal solid waste to meet its expanding energy requirements.

The waste-to-energy plant will utilise Refuse Derived Fuel (RDF) — a form of processed municipal solid waste — as an alternative source of energy supply to power its 3.6 million tonnes per annum capacity cement complex, located on the outskirts of the capital city.

"The company has decided to install a new Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) — a Refuse Derived Fuel (RDF) plant — to reduce natural gas consumption towards its initiative on decarbonisation and in line with the country's Vision 2040, and (this is) being followed up with the respective authorities," Li Yeqing, Chairman of the Board of Directors, stated in

Oman Cement's financial results for Q1 2024.

RDF derived from municipal solid waste typically consists of different types of municipal waste, such as non-recyclable plastic and paper waste, wood chips and sawdust, and other mixed and combustible processed waste according to the required specifications.

Just over a year ago, Oman Environment Services Holding Company (be'ah) — the public sector entity overseeing the management of the solid waste sector including municipal waste — signed an MoU with Oman Cement to support the latter's use of RDF as an alternative fuel for cement manufacturing.

Earlier in February 2020, be'ah had also formalised a deal to supply Oman Cement with processed scrap tyres as a fuel resource for use in the latter's cement kilns.

Under the agreement, be'ah had committed to supplying around



Refuse Derived Fuel from municipal solid waste (Credit: EWB)

30,000 tonnes per annum of Tyre Derived Fuel (TDF) processed from scrap tyres.

Waste tyres are widely used as a fuel resource in cement kilns in a number of countries around the world, either as the primary fuel

or in combination with natural gas and coal. Once stripped of their metal reinforcements, such as wires, the waste tyres are then shredded into chips, known as 'Tyre Derived Fuel' (TDF).

These chips are typically used

in high heat operations, such as cement kilns, waste-to-energy schemes, and power plants.

Publicly-traded Oman Cement is also pressing ahead with a number of initiatives to modernise its Misfah complex.

According to Chairman Li Yeqing, the company is proceeding with the upgrade of plant capacity by debottlenecking and enhancing its existing Line-3 Cooler from 4,000 to 6,500 tonnes per day (TPD), leading to improvements in clinker quality and output.

Furthermore, a contractor has been tapped to install a Fly-Ash storage and handling system to support the production of Fly Ash-Oil Well Cement.

Separately, an additionally packing and truck-loading unit will be installed to cater to the increased demand for cement, he said.

Oman Cement recorded a net profit after tax of RO 3.368 million during Q1 2024, which was up 40 per cent from the corresponding Q1 2023 net of RO 2.391 million.

The company is majority-owned by Hong Kong-based Huaxin International Holdings Limited through its wholly-owned subsidiary, the Mauritius-based Abra Holdings Limited.

Al Murshidi launches first Middle East branch of Insparya at Oman International Hospital

MUSCAT: Under the distinguished auspices of Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Chairman of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), the Insparya Hair Transplant Clinical Group, co-founded by renowned footballer Cristiano Ronaldo, has officially launched its first Middle Eastern branch at Oman International Hospital in Muscat.

This groundbreaking facility marks the 13th global location for Insparya and signifies its debut in the Middle East, following successful establishments in Portugal, Spain and Italy.

The inauguration ceremony was graced by esteemed guests, including Amal bint Suhail Bahwan, Chairperson of Al Afia Healthcare Development and Investment Company, and Vice Chairperson of Suhail Bahwan Group Holding, as well as other dignitaries and experts from the health sector.

Al Murshidi highlighted the strategic choice of Oman as the first country in the Middle East to host an Insparya branch, underscoring the Sultanate



Abdulsalam bin Mohammed al Murshidi, Chairman of Oman Investment Authority (OIA) officially launched the first Middle East branch of Insparya at Oman International Hospital in Muscat.

of Oman's commitment to improving its healthcare sector in line with the Oman Vision 2040. He emphasised the project's significance in attracting private investment and promoting technological advancements in healthcare services.

Amal bint Suhail Bahwan conveyed her excitement about the collaboration with Insparya Group, acknowledging the considerable enhancement it brings to Oman's healthcare offerings. The new centre not

only elevates local healthcare services to international standards but also boosts the Sultanate of Oman's medical tourism sector.

Sandro Cardoso, Global Executive Board Member of Marketing and Commerce at Insparya Group, shared the Group's ambitious goal of redefining industry standards on a global scale. The Insparya branch in Oman is outfitted with cutting-edge hair transplant technology, including the

BotHair UltraPlus Insparya, showcasing the Group's dedication to innovation and excellence.

Dr Carlos Portinha, Chief Clinical Officer of Insparya Group, outlined the group's integration of AI, advanced biomedical research, and robotics to enhance hair transplant effectiveness and patient outcomes. He reiterated Insparya's commitment to establishing a new benchmark in hair care innovation.

Additionally, Marcelo Pereira, CEO of Oman International Hospital, commended the facility for its contribution to national healthcare by alleviating the strain on public services, offering world-class treatments, and facilities.

The expansion of the Insparya Group into the Middle East through Oman International Hospital represents a significant milestone in global healthcare innovation, promising improved access to top-quality hair transplant services for residents across the GCC and Arab nations.

OETC completes 400kV Manah grid station

MUSCAT: With a total cost exceeding RO 11 million and achieving over one million safe man-hours, the Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC) successfully completed all construction works, and energisation process at the 400 kV Manah Grid Station.

This encompassed the 400 kV overhead lines connecting Manah Grid Station to 400/132 kV Naheda Grid Station and from Manah Grid Station and New Izki Grid Station. This project was completed in a period of 1 year and 8 months.

The grid station includes (10) 400 kV GIS bays, 11 kV switchgear, and (2) 750 kVA transformers.

This project aims to evacuate power from the Manah solar plants through the main transmission network, bolstering the electrical transmission network with clean and renewable energy units.

This is to ensure the achievement of sustainable environmental targets in line with Oman Vision 2040 and reducing carbon emissions to contribute to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. Additionally, it aims to enhance the efficiency, reliability, and safety of OETC network.

Engineer Masoud al Riyami, Chief Operational Officer at OETC, emphasised the company's efforts in supporting clean and renewable energy projects by establishing various projects and enhancing electricity supply to major projects operating in this sector. OETC also prioritises environmental



conservation in Oman and achieving environmental goals at both national and global levels.

Al Riyami added: "OETC has always provided significant support for clean and renewable energy projects, thus contributing to the enhancement of infrastructure in this sector. It takes upon itself the responsibility of supporting growth in this field and keeping pace with the increasing demands.

OETC is keen on establishing various projects to develop the electricity transmission network, ensuring reliable and sustainable electricity supply to advance Oman's developmental journey".

OETC, a member of Nama Group, is the only company responsible for the transmission and control of electricity across the Sultanate of Oman's network.

The electricity is transmitted from production stations to distributed load centres in the governorates. The transmission network operates at a voltage of 132kV and above to cover most of the governorates in the Sultanate of Oman, whether in the north or the south.

Shura panel moots steps to boost youth entrepreneurship

MOHAMMED AL DIGHAISHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 28

The Youth and Human Resources Committee of the Majlis Ash-Shura, led by Chairman Younis al Mantheri, convened recently to deliberate on empowering Omani youth through enhanced support facilities and funding assistance.

Article 67 of the Committee outlines its mandate to examine and offer insights on policies, plans, and programs concerning youth, human resources, legal frameworks, draft laws, proposals, and agreements.

The committee engaged in discussions with specialists from the Small and Medium Enterprises

Development Authority, assessing the Authority's endeavours and its role in facilitating support for small and medium enterprise (SME) owners.

Focus was given to the Authority's plan, which aims to bolster the e-commerce sector, foster creative industries, and drive comprehensive electronic transformation in its service offerings.

Queries were raised by committee members regarding incentives and exemptions available to SME owners, with a focus on generating employment opportunities for job-seekers within these enterprises.

Additionally, there was also



Chairman Younis al Mantheri.

a call to establish a centre for talented Omanis, while identifying avenues for career opportunities within the security and safety

sector.

Al Mantheri underscored the core values upheld by the Small and Medium Enterprises

Authority, including innovation, integration, growth, and integrity.

Innovation entails fostering an inventive and efficient work environment to ensure high-quality services, while integration emphasises collaboration and synergy to achieve collective objectives.

Growth signifies a commitment to continuous positive change, expansion, and progress, while integrity underscores the importance of transparency and credibility in service delivery.

Al Mantheri further outlined key priorities aligned with overarching goals.

These include enhancing support for the private sector,

investment, and international cooperation to diversify financing sources for SMEs and increase their access to commercial loans.

Governance of the state's administrative apparatus, resources, and projects aims to elevate entrepreneurs' satisfaction with the authority's services and boost the digitisation of services provided to beneficiaries.

Priorities also encompass strengthening the labour market, aiming to foster the growth of self-employed Omanis, and driving economic diversification and financial sustainability by augmenting annual revenues and job opportunities within incubated institutions.

Gold’s aggressive rally being challenged



OLE HANSEN

The author is the Head of Commodities Strategy at Saxo Bank.

The commodity sector trades higher for a fifth week, with the Bloomberg Commodity Total Return index heading for its highest weekly close in seven months. While precious metals and soft commodities paused following weeks of solid gains, the grain sector took over, led by wheat, as it headed for its best week since last June amid adverse weather conditions in key growing regions across the Northern Hemisphere.

In metals, gold suffered a long overdue but so far modest setback, with momentum traders instead switching their attention to copper, which reached a fresh cycle high. This week was dominated by BBHP’s attempted

takeover of Anglo American to get their hands on the smaller rival’s stable of copper assets in South America, a move highlighting the importance of copper in the coming years as the electrification of the world gathers momentum.

Gold’s aggressive rally since the mid-February low has been challenged, with bullion suffering a long overdue and relatively aggressive but healthy correction. This correction will help determine the actual level of underlying demand besides momentum and managed money accounts, which generally trade with a short-term focus. It will also reduce longs should the technical and/or fundamental picture change.

Having rallied by almost USD 450 from the mid-February low, the correction currently unfolding has yet to be strong enough to challenge the traders’ overall belief in higher prices.

From a technical standpoint, the critical area of support using Fibonacci retracement levels can be found in the USD 2,255-60 area, where we find 61.8% of the March to April extension and 38.2% of the whole move from the mid-February low. Holding above this level will signal the market that the retracement is a



Gold’s aggressive rally since the mid-February low has been challenged, with bullion suffering a long overdue and relatively aggressive but healthy correction.

weak correction within a strong uptrend.

We maintain our positive outlook for investment metals with the below drivers still the focus once the correction dust settles:

- Geopolitical risks related to an increasingly fragmented world with particular focus on Russia/Ukraine and the Middle East
- Strong retail demand in China reflects the desire to park money in a sector seen as relatively immune to a struggling economy, deepening property woes, and the risk of the Yuan

devaluation.

- Continued central bank demand amid geopolitical uncertainty and de-dollarisation and the ability to offer security and stability that other assets may not provide.
- Rising debt-to-GDP ratios among major economies, not least in the US, raise some concerns about the quality of debt. In other words, rising Treasury yields are not necessarily negative for gold as they raise the focus on overall debt levels and their sustainability.
- In addition, the focus is changing from the negative

impact of lower rate cut expectations towards support from a reaccelerating inflation outlook.

Just like gold, silver also went through a relatively aggressive correction, with the selling being amplified by its recent failure to break above USD 30 per ounce, the 2020 and 2021 high.

Having outperformed gold during the recent run-up, silver initially dropped faster than gold before the continued rally in copper helped cushion the slide, leading to support being found in the USD 27 area.

The gold-silver ratio which at one point hit 86 ounces of silver to one ounce of gold, from an 81.3 low last month, has since drifted lower to the current 85, still well above its long-term average around 79.

Copper and copper mining stocks continue to push higher with the futures prices in New York and London reaching levels last traded in April 2022.

For the past two years, Dr Copper, aka the King of Green Metals, has traded mostly sideways, navigating relatively unscathed through rough seas created by sharply higher funding costs as central banks around the world hiked interest rates to combat inflation, and not least

a slowdown in China, the world stop consumer of copper.

During the past couple of months, the metal has steadily climbed, buoyed by global growth and demand optimism, and material downgrades to 2024 mine supply increasingly tightening market conditions. Several mining companies have announced production downgrades due to factors like increased input costs, declining ore grades, rising regulatory expenses, and weather-related disruptions.

Furthermore, the ongoing green transformation and increased use of AI applications are augmenting demand from traditional sectors like housing and construction, and together with the green transformation, we maintain our long-standing bullish stance on copper and copper miners.

However, while we have and continue to highlight a supportive medium to long-term outlook for copper demand leading to higher prices, there are some concerns traders have jumped the gun at a time where underlying fundamentals are not yet strong enough to support a rally towards to March 2022 record, a level we see being reached, but potentially not until later this year.

Stubborn inflation could prod Fed to keep rates high for longer

Investors are giving up on dreams of imminent rate cuts as inflation remains stubborn, a problem that could prod Federal Reserve policymakers to keep borrowing costs high for a longer period. The latest reading of the Fed’s most closely watched inflation measure, released Friday, showed that price increases remain notably faster than the Fed’s 2% goal.

The personal consumption expenditures index rose 2.7% in March from a year earlier, up from 2.5% in February. And after stripping out volatile food and fuel prices for a clearer reading of price trends, inflation remained steady at 2.8% on an annual basis.

The report was just the latest sign that, after months of steady improvement in 2023, progress on cooling inflation is stalling out in 2024. And that unexpected roadblock has caused policymakers, economists and investors to question how soon and how much the Fed might be able to cut borrowing costs.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell signalled last week that central bankers were not seeing the progress that they were hoping to witness before lowering rates.

The Fed meets next week in Washington to discuss its next rate move. While it is widely expected to leave interest rates unchanged in its decision on Wednesday, investors will watch a news conference with Powell closely for hints about how long rates are likely to stay on hold.

If inflation remains sticky in the months to come, it could prod officials to keep interest rates at their relatively high level for an extended time as they try to tap the brakes on the economy and snuff out price increases



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IF INFLATION REMAINS STICKY IN THE MONTHS TO COME, IT COULD PROD OFFICIALS TO KEEP INTEREST RATES AT THEIR RELATIVELY HIGH LEVEL FOR AN EXTENDED TIME AS THEY TRY TO TAP THE BRAKES ON THE ECONOMY AND SNUFF OUT PRICE INCREASES MORE FULLY

more fully.

“There’s a much greater uncertainty about the disinflationary path,” said Matthew Luzzetti, chief US economist at Deutsche Bank, noting that “you’re continuing to see an economy that’s chugging along quite well.”

Policymakers raised interest rates to 5.33% between March 2022 and last summer, and have held them steady since.

They think that is high enough to eventually weigh on the economy — in economics parlance, it is “restrictive.” But some economists have begun to question just how restrictive the Fed’s current rate setting is, because growth has remained solid and hiring rapid even after months of relatively high rates.

Data released on Friday showed that momentum continued in March: Consumer spending rose 0.8% for the second consecutive month, ahead of forecasters’ expectations.

That spending is being supported by a strong market that is pushing up wages: Americans’ after-tax income in March significantly outpaced price increases for the first time since December. Separate data from a University of Michigan survey on Friday showed that consumers had become slightly more pessimistic in April about the outlook for both the economy as a whole and inflation in particular.

Stock indexes rose on Friday, in part because Wall Street had been bracing for a slightly worse inflation report after data released on Thursday suggested that price gains might have been hotter in March than the personal consumption expenditure figures showed.



Jerome Powell, the Federal Reserve chair, testifies before the House Financial Services Committee on Capitol Hill in Washington. — The New York Times

Friday’s figures “could be viewed with a sigh of relief,” Omair Sharif, founder of Inflation Insights, wrote in a note after the report.

Even so, investors see a greater chance of a long period of high rates — which tend to dent stock prices — than they did a month or even just a week ago. Investors are now betting that the Fed might make its first move in September or later, based on market pricing.

A small but growing share think the central bank may not manage to cut rates at all this year. Given the economy’s momentum, some economists are even wondering if Fed officials could begin to contemplate raising rates again.

Michelle Bowman, a Fed’s governor, has already said that while it was not her “base line outlook,” she saw “the risk that at a future meeting we may need to increase the policy rate further.”

While markets are likely to fixate on whether rates might increase again, it is more likely that the Fed will simply hold them at a high level for longer, said Blerina Uruci, chief US economist at T. Rowe Price.

It would likely take an outright acceleration in inflation to prod the Fed to lift borrowing costs again, she said, rather than just the stalled progress seen in recent months.

“I don’t think we’re at the point where we need to talk about increasing interest rates this year,” Uruci said. “But we’re certainly at the point where we need to talk about fewer cuts.”

Many economists think that inflation is still likely to slow further, in part because cooler new rent prices are still slowly feeding into official inflation data. But the process is taking longer than many had expected, and with the economy so solid, the risk that inflation could remain firm has grown.

Plus, economists have regularly found their predictions for inflation upended by economic surprises in recent years: It was not expected to climb as quickly as it did in 2021 and 2022, and then it fell slightly faster than many had anticipated late last year. Now, its flatlining has been a surprise.

“After the past several years, you have to be humble,” Luzzetti said. Higher interest rates are meant to rein in inflation by making consumers and businesses more reluctant to spend.

That appears to have happened to some degree: High mortgage rates led to a sharp slowdown in the housing market, and businesses have been pulled back on capital investments and posted fewer job openings.

But the economy as a whole has proved remarkably resilient to the effects of high borrowing costs. Consumers have been particularly undeterred, opting to draw down savings and rack up credit card debt even as they have complained about high prices.

— The New York Times

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FILM

Australian actress Nicole Kidman attends the 49th AFI Life Achievement Award honouring Nicole Kidman at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP

TRAVEL

French National Police drive their buggy vehicles as they patrol the beach to prevent migrants from boarding smugglers' boats on the beach of Gravelines, northern France. — AFP

CELEBRATION

A Sikh youth performs 'Gatka', an ancient form of Sikh martial arts, during a religious procession ahead of the birth anniversary of the ninth Sikh Guru Teg Bahadur at the Golden Temple in Amritsar. — AFP

LIFESTYLE

This multi exposure photograph shows an athlete competing during the Men's Individual Apparatus Finals event at the Artistic Gymnastics European Championships, in Rimini, on the Adriatic coast, northeastern Italy. — AFP

CULTURE

The replica of an ancient Greek Trireme departs along with the sailing ship Belem (not pictured) with the Olympic flame from Greece for the 2024 Paris Games, from the port of Piraeus, Greece. — AFP

art & life

MONDAY | APRIL 29, 2024 | SHAWWAL 20 , 1445 AH | OMAN OBSERVER | www.omanobserver.om | features@omanobserver.om



A YOUNG OMANI'S ACADEMIC ODYSSEY IN AUSTRALIA

Sulaiman al Lamki left Oman four years ago for a transformative academic journey in Australia after receiving a scholarship. Those four years not only trained him to be independent but adjust to a new set of culture very different from his own. His story exemplifies the power of education to broaden horizons and foster personal growth across borders... **P20**

ART

Louvre says Mona Lisa could get a room of her own

THE MONA LISA BY Leonardo da Vinci, the world's most famous portrait, could get a room of its own in the Louvre, the museum's president said on Saturday. Such a move would give visitors, many of whom visit the Louvre for the iconic painting alone, a better experience, Laurence des Cars told the France Inter broadcaster.

"It's always frustrating when you don't give visitors the best possible reception, and that is the case for the Mona Lisa," she said. "A better solution seems necessary to me today," she said, adding that the Louvre was in contact with the culture ministry about potential solutions. The Louvre, the world's most popular museum, welcomed close to nine million visitors in 2023. Des Cars said 80 per cent of them — 20,000 people per day — braved the crowd to catch a glimpse of the Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile, often taking selfies in front of the painting. The Mona Lisa currently hangs in the Louvre's Salle des Etats (State Room), the museum's biggest, in a protective glass case, but Da Vinci's masterwork is not alone there. It is accompanied by works by 16th-century Venetian masters, and across the room hangs the Louvre's biggest painting, The Wedding at Cana by Paolo Veronese.

MONA LISA AT THE LOUVRE

The history of the Mona Lisa, arguably the most famous painting in the world, traces back to the early 16th century when Leonardo da Vinci, a renowned Italian artist and polymath, created it. Commissioned by Florentine merchant Francesco del Giocondo, the paint-



ing depicts Lisa Gherardini, the wife of Francesco, hence its alternative title "La Gioconda." Da Vinci worked on the painting intermittently until his death in 1519, leaving it unfinished. After Leonardo's passing, the Mona Lisa remained in the possession of his assistant and later passed through various hands, including French King Francis I who acquired it in the early 16th century. It became part of the royal collection and later found a permanent home in the Palace of Fontainebleau. However, it eventually made its way to the Louvre Museum in Paris during the French Revolution in the late 18th century. Its journey to the Louvre wasn't without twists and turns. The painting was stolen from the museum in 1911 by an Italian handyman named Vincenzo Peruggia, who believed it rightfully belonged in Italy. After being missing for over two years, the Mona Lisa was recovered and returned to the Louvre, where its popularity soared even higher due to the sensational heist. Since then, the Mona Lisa has become an icon of Western art and a symbol of the Louvre Museum itself. Its enigmatic smile continues to captivate millions of visitors each year, cementing its place as one of the most treasured and iconic artworks in human history. — **AFP**

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MARMALADE
FEST CELEBRATES
QUINTESSENTIAL BRITISH
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THE JAPANESE AMBASSADOR raved about the daffodils and the glorious spring sunshine. The Australian envoy joked about beating the "Poms" at their own game. A life-sized Paddington waved and clapped.

On the steps of a centuries-old country house in northwest England, one of the nation's most eccentric cultural events — the Dalemain World Marmalade Awards —

was in full swing.

Inside, in an oak-panelled room lined with portraits of family ancestors, winning jars of the quintessentially British fruit preserve covered every surface.

"Excellent marmalade, just cloudy," read one judge's report card. "Good colour and set," said another. "Jar should be filled to the top," said a third.

Every January and February, when bit-

ter Seville oranges from Spain are available for a few short weeks, marmalade makers shut themselves away in their kitchens to chop, pulp and boil.

Many of those homemade marmalades — along with other non-Seville marmalades from as far afield as Hawaii, Japan, Taiwan and Australia — wind their way to Dalemain, which this year received just under 3,000 pots of the sweet, sticky

condiment.

The 2024 competition featured 17 categories, including entries from a Taiwanese orphanage in the children's section and a US women's correctional facility in the newly introduced prison's class.

- 'WE GOT SILVER!'

Made by boiling together the juice and peel of citrus fruits, sugar and water, marmalade as we know it now was pioneered commercially in the late 18th century by the Keiller family of Dundee in Scotland.

Spread generously on buttered toast, it is traditionally a staple of British breakfast tables as well the favoured sandwich filling

marmalade.

"You're not allowed glass inside prisons so we had to really fight to get it in and get it done," he said, adding that 12 jars were eventually produced, including one that was sent to the little girl.

Founded by Dalemain chatelaine Jane Hasell-McCosh, the awards are held annually at the family's historic house in the Lake District National Park and have raised more than £250,000 (\$310,000) for charity.

From just 60 jars from the local area in 2005, there are now spin-off events also taking place in Japan and Australia.



- QUEEN AND PADDINGTON -

Atsuko Hayashi, owner of The English Kitchen in Tokyo, said the pastime had changed her life by helping her to "connect with people" globally.

For London-based Danish photographer Henrik Knudsen, marmalade making was "a very English thing" which he had happily adopted since living in the UK.

But he said getting it right was not an exact science and the results could be unpredictable.

The clarity could be wrong, the peel might be a bit tough, the texture could be too runny, he said. "That's the charm of it."

Marmalade received an unexpected boost during the 2022 celebrations for Queen Elizabeth II's Platinum Jubilee, when the late monarch took part in a televised comedy sketch with Paddington.



- 'BROAD CHURCH'

The skit was a welcome reminder of marmalade's qualities at a time when homemade has never been more popular, said Caroline Hodge, winner of the dark and chunky category.

Mass-produced marmalade had "got sugary and that's not flavour", she said, explaining that she had reduced the sugar content of a recipe handed down to her by an aunt and added ginger, turmeric and all spice.

"It's very emotional because my aunt is no longer here and I'm a bit blown away," she said.

"It's not quite Wimbledon but it's definitely the Oscars," she added.

Entries for the 2024 competition included a host of unusual ingredients from chillies and seaweed to caviar and smoked pineapple.

Retiring head judge Dan Lepard said the awards were a "broad church" happy to embrace "all the citrus fruits in the world" — not just Seville oranges — as well as unusual flavourings.

For the overall 2024 winner, Stephen Snead, the honour comes with the added bonus of having his marmalade commercially produced for a year and sold in luxury London department store Fortnum & Mason. The 52-year-old English accountant who won with two jars — orange and lime marmalade with red chillies and a lime marmalade with creme de cacao — said he was overwhelmed to be at Dalemain and see "just how far the marmalade family reaches across the world".

"It's just an absolute thrill," he said. — AFP

ENTERTAINMENT

Music 'haven of freedom' Tangiers hosts global jazz festival

THE MOROCCAN CITY of Tangiers, which has a long history as a haven of inspiration for American jazz musicians, will host UNESCO's International Jazz Day for the first time on Tuesday.

Over the last century, jazz greats such as Randy Weston, Idrees Sulieman and Max Roach all crossed the Atlantic to play and record music in the North African port city, perched on the edge of the Strait of Gibraltar.

"The city has had a fascinating power of attraction on a wave of intellectuals and

musicians," Philippe Lorin, the founder of an annual Tangiers jazz festival, told AFP.

"It's not for nothing that a writer once said there was always a cruise liner in New York preparing to sail for Tangiers."

This year's Jazz Day will be held over four days starting on Saturday, during which talks and open-air performances will be held in Tangiers.

The festivities will culminate in an "All-Star Global Concert" on Tuesday led by jazz icon Herbie Hancock, also featuring bassists Marcus Miller and Richard Bona, as well as guitarist Romero Lubambo.

The city's cosmopolitan artistic reputation stems from its location between Africa and Europe as well as its history, having been administered by several colonial powers from 1923 to 1956, the year Morocco gained independence.

This melting pot of influences prompted visits from international writers and poets, notably from the Beat Generation movement, as well as African American musicians seeking to find "their African roots", Moroccan historian Farid Bahri said.

Lorin said that Tangiers "was a haven of freedom — just like jazz music".

- 'HE GAVE A LOT TO THE CITY'

A pivotal moment in the city's musical history came in 1959, when Tangiers jazz promoter Jacques Muyal — then just a teenager — recorded a session with trumpeter



Idrees Sulieman, pianist Oscar Dennard, bassist Jamil Nasser and drummer Buster Smith at the Radio Tanger International studio.

of children's character Paddington, a small bear from "deepest, darkest Peru".

"We got a silver, which we're delighted about!" said James Stoddart, a prison rehabilitation worker in northeast England, spotting his jail's entry adorned with a silver star.

Two prisoners had lobbied to take part, inspired by one of their daughters who loved Paddington, he said, even though neither of them had a clue how to make

The recording gained renown in jazz circles decades before its distribution as "The 4 American Jazzmen In Tangier" album in 2017.

Bahri, the author of "Tangiers, a world history of Morocco", said "the presence of American musicians in Tangiers was also linked to a very active American diplomacy".

Famous US pianist Randy Weston settled in Tangiers for five years after visiting 14 African countries in 1967 during a tour organised by the US State Department.

The Brooklynite virtuoso would play a key role in building the musical reputation of the city, to which he dedicated his 1973 album "Tanjah".

"Randy was an exceptional, kind and respectful man," said Abdellah El Gourd, a 77-year-old Moroccan legend of gnawa music, a centuries-old style played with a three-stringed lute and steel castanets, rooted in West African rituals and Sufi traditions.

"He gave a lot to the city and its musicians," added the friend and collaborator of Weston, who died in 2018.

- 'OUR LANGUAGE WAS MUSIC'

Together, El Gourd and Weston blurred the lines of their respective genres, creating the beginnings of jazz-gnawa fusion, which remains a key part of Tangiers' musical legacy.

"The language barrier was never a problem because our communication was

through (musical) scales," El Gourd recalled in a rehearsal room lined with old photos and memorabilia from the years he toured with Weston and jazz saxophonist Archie Shepp.

"OUR LANGUAGE WAS MUSIC."

The two men's collaborative work would years later yield the acclaimed 1992 album "The Splendid Master Gnawa Musicians of Morocco".

Two years after settling in the city, Weston opened the African Rhythms jazz club, above the iconic Cinema Mauritania in downtown Tangiers.

"We used to rehearse there," El Gourd recalled. "Randy would invite his musician friends. It was a beautiful time."

With El Gourd's help, Weston launched Tangiers' first-ever jazz festival in 1972, featuring big names such as drummer Max Roach, flautist Hubert Laws, double-bassist Ahmed Abdul-Malik, and saxophonist Dexter Gordon.

"It was quite a unique experience, because it was the first time we played in front of such a large audience," said El Gourd, who was then used to small crowds for gnawa performances.

Weston and El Gourd's festival was only held once.

But three decades later it inspired Lorin to create the Tanjazz festival, which is held in the port city every September. — AFP

A YOUNG OMANI'S ACADEMIC ODYSSEY IN AUSTRALIA



BY KARIM EASTERBROOK

Australian universities are renowned for their exceptional quality of education and globally recognised degrees. Consistently ranking high in international assessments, these institutions offer a diverse array of programmes across various disciplines, providing Omani students with ample opportunities to pursue their academic interests and career aspirations.

As of late, there has been a noticeable trend among Omani students opting for Australian universities as their preferred destination for higher education. This shift reflects several key factors contributing to Australia's growing appeal as a study-abroad option.

Sulaiman bin Barakat al Lamki is among those students who embarked on a transformative journey four years ago leaving the safety and comfort of his home in Oman to the vibrant academic landscape of Australia. Recently returning to Oman, Sulaiman graciously shared his insights and experiences of studying at the prestigious University of Western Australia.

"It's great to be back home. I love being here. I'm enjoying everyday just chilling out with friends and family. I missed Oman," Sulaiman exclaimed, reflecting the warmth of reuniting with his loved ones.

Initially eyeing the UK for his studies due to familial ties, Sulaiman's trajectory shifted when he was awarded a government scholarship to pursue his education in Australia. "The facilities for studying Geology were superb. Australia is renowned for its expertise in Geological Studies. It's one of the world's oldest continents, with rocks dating back over 3 billion years," he explained, shedding light on the academic allure that drew him Down Under.

When he moved to Australia, Sulaiman found himself adjusting to the distinctive Australian way of life, from the accent to the customs. However, with the support of his brother and a keen spirit of adventure, he navigated these initial challenges with enthusiasm.

Choosing independence, Sulaiman opted for a self-catering apartment near the university, sharing space with fellow Muslim students from Sri Lanka and Singapore. This decision not only fostered a sense of camaraderie but also honed his budgeting skills and independence, crucial lessons that transcended the classroom.

"I could have stayed in a university dorm but I wanted to be more independent. I know that staying in a university dorm would have been more convenient but I was keen to experience Australian life outside of the university world. The dorms were also comparatively expensive," he shared.



Throughout his academic journey, Sulaiman encountered a vibrant mosaic of cultures, with students hailing from diverse corners of the globe. Despite initial concerns, he found Australia to be a welcoming and inclusive environment, enriched by the presence of fellow Muslims and supportive communities, especially during Ramadhan.

"It was good to be with fellow Muslims who understood Muslim food requirements and prayer times. Especially during Ramadhan. Living outside of the university precincts made me more independent. I had to organise everything myself. I learnt the importance of budgeting my money. I had to cook my meals," he said.

Comparing schools in Oman and Australia, Sulaiman shared, "School and university are different everywhere. At university, it's mostly up to you to make sure that assignments are completed on time. Being well-organised is key. I'm a bit of a procrastinator. I always managed to get my assignments in on time but often worked under pressure."

"There were lots of different nationalities from all around the world. It was very multicultural. Quite a lot from Southeast Asia, but also students from mainland China and Africa. It was



refreshing to meet students from such diverse backgrounds," he said.

Asked whether he has a brush with racism, he shared, "I suppose racism exists everywhere, but I never came across it. There were lots of Muslims, both at the university and outside. There are plenty of mosques. It made life easier having two roommates who were Muslims. During Ramadhan I got lots of support. There were other Omani students scattered throughout Western Australia and we met regularly. During Ramadhan, all Omani students were given a Consulate Care Package which included different Omani goodies for breaking your fast. I remember only one thing from receiving that Consulate Care Package – Vimto! A lovely surprise."

Beyond academics, Sulaiman indulged in his passion for the outdoors, exploring Australia's breathtaking landscapes through hiking and camping. Despite his mother's apprehensions about wildlife, Sulaiman found solace in the beauty of the land, encountering friendly creatures like Quokkas

and embracing the thrill of adventure.

"My mum was certain I would get bitten by something poisonous. But I never came across anything dangerous apart from kangaroos which are big. I remember small furry animals called Quokkas. Cute and friendly. They look a bit like koala bears. On university field trips we wore boots high enough to protect us from being bitten. The biggest problem was the bush flies which can bite," he shared.

As he looks ahead, Sulaiman plans to leverage his Australian experience in his career, aiming to work in Australia before returning to Oman.

"I will work in Australia for a couple of years to gain experience and then return to Oman to use my experience working for an Omani company," he said.

Despite the allure of life abroad,

Sulaiman remains steadfast in his love for Oman, a sentiment shaped by his transformative journey in Australia.

"I love Oman and it's where I always want to live. Although Australia is friendly, Oman will always be home for me," he added.

Reflecting on his journey, Sulaiman acknowledges the profound impact of his time in Australia, from newfound independence to expanded horizons.

"I had to grow up quickly. I have become more independent. Having to make so many decisions alone has made me more confident," he shared, encapsulating the transformative essence of his Australian odyssey.

In Sulaiman's story, we find a testament to the power of education to transcend borders, enriching lives and broadening perspectives in ways both profound and enduring.

The writer is the former School Principal of Cambridge UK.