

Artificial coral reef park project launched in Duqm

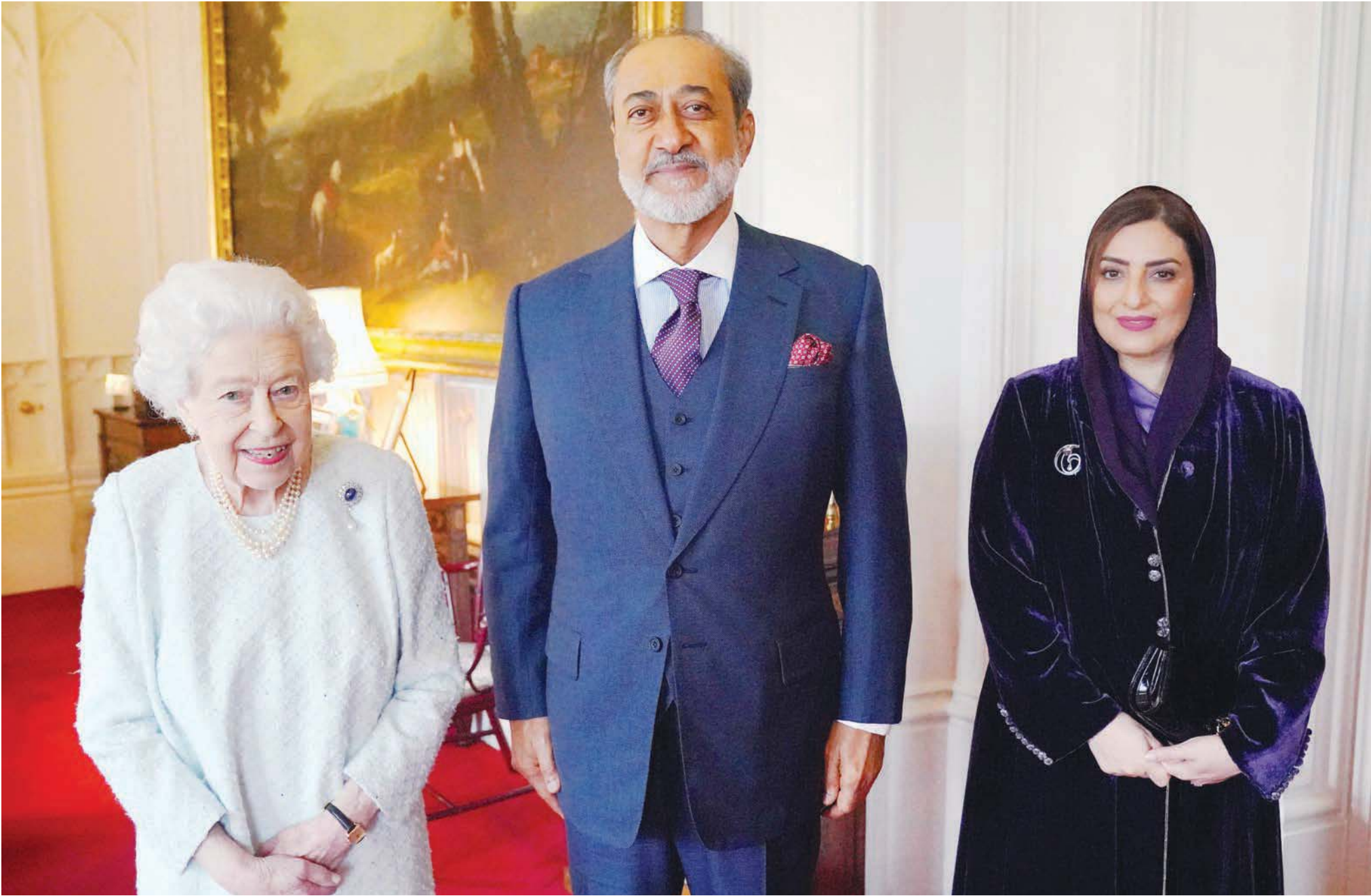
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HM meets Queen Elizabeth II

Social ceremonies in mosques, public places banned



LONDON: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik met Queen Elizabeth II of the Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Head of the Commonwealth, at Windsor Castle in Berkshire county on Wednesday.

The meeting comes within the context of His Majesty's current private visit to the United Kingdom (UK)

His Majesty the Sultan and Queen Elizabeth II exchanged cordial conversations and reviewed the historical relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the UK. They also touched on cooperation between the two sides in various spheres that serve interests of the Omani and British peoples.

The meeting was attended by Her Highness the Honourable Lady Assayida Ahd Abdullah Hamed al Busaidi, Spouse of the Sultan of Oman. — ONA

MUSCAT: The Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has issued a decision prohibiting the organisation of the wedding and funeral ceremonies in mosques, halls and other public places.

The decision, the Supreme Committee said in its latest statement, was prompted by the non-abidance of some individuals in society to the previous decisions endorsed by the authorities concerned on organising social ceremonies and the pertinent conditions to be observed, including having two-dose vaccination, wearing face masks, maintaining physical distance and operating within limited capacity.

Today's decision on prohibition of social ceremonies at mosques, halls and other public places takes place until further notice. The decision was taken after reviewing updates on coronavirus, protection from the disease and ways to curb its spread.

The Supreme Committee also studied reports related to the epidemiological situation of the Covid-19 virus locally and internationally, particularly within the context of propagation of the new mutant variant "Omicron".

— ONA

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His Majesty meets Queen Elizabeth II



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cordial conversations and reviewed the historical relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the UK. They also touched on cooperation between the two sides in various spheres that serve interests of the Omani and British peoples. The meeting was attended by Her Highness the Honourable Lady Assayida Ahd Abdullah Hamed al Busaidi, Spouse of the Sultan of Oman. — ONA

SAF Assistant Chief of Staff meets Iranian Armed Forces Dy Minister

TEHRAN: Brigadier Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al Manthari, Assistant Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), for Operations and Planning, on Wednesday met with Brigadier-General Seyyed Mahdi Farahi, Deputy of Iran's Ministry of Defence for Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL). The meeting came within the framework of the 16th meeting of the Omani-Iranian Military Friendship Committee currently held in Tehran. The Iranian Deputy Minister valued the good turnout of the committee's meetings since its establishment in serving the armed forces of both countries. For his part, Brigadier Abdulaziz al Manthari thanked the Iranian side for their efforts in supporting the committee in carrying out its duties. The meeting was attended by a number of members of the Omani-Iranian Military Friendship Committee from both sides. — ONA



Fahd returns home after attending GCC summit, sends thanks cables

MUSCAT: HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmoud al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers, has returned home after leading the Sultanate of Oman's delegation, on behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, in the 42nd Summit of the GCC Leaders. After the conclusion of the Summit's deliberations, HH Sayyid Fahd sent cables of thanks to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), and HRH Prince Mohammed bin Salman al Saud, Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of KSA. In the cables, HH Sayyid Fahd expressed thanks and appreciation for the warm welcome and hospitality extended to him and his accompanying delegation. HH Sayyid Fahd was received upon his arrival by Shaikh Abdullah bin Mohammed al Salmi, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, Shaikh al Fadhil bin Mohammed al Harthy, Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers, Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of State and Governor of Muscat, Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information, and Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism. — ONA



Artificial coral reef park project launched in Duqm

DUQM: The Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) announced the launch of the Artificial Coral Reefs Park project in the Zone, which aims to create an attractive habitat for fish and provide an exciting diving experience for tourists and residents. Commenting on this project, Nasser bin Mohammed al Rahbi, from the Partnership and Development Department at the Special Economic Zone at Duqm, said: "This week, we deployed a 250-metre-long pipe with artificial concrete blocks every other 10 metres near Hamar Rock in the sea of Duqm. Another similar pipe will be deployed as well in the coming days. "This project is managed by

PROJECT AIMS TO CREATE AN ATTRACTIVE HABITAT FOR FISH AND PROVIDE AN UNPARALLELED DIVING EXPERIENCE FOR TOURISTS, RESIDENTS

a group of SEZAD employees in cooperation with a number of government bodies and other companies operating in the Zone. The project aims to sustain the marine environment in the Zone, enhance its biodiversity, increase fish production and create habitats for marine creatures,



including corals and other species. Moreover, the project seeks to activate the diving activities in Duqm", Al Rahbi explained. On the other hand, Mohammed bin Hamad al Mahrouqi, from the Environmental Regulatory Department in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm, confirmed that no marine life was observed during the diving process that preceded the sinking of the pipe. "The concrete blocks and pipe would create a rich environment to attract new marine life. Further, it will bring a unique diving experience for divers and diving enthusiasts as

the location is an extension of the rocks scattered around Hamar Rock." In his statement, Al Mahrouqi commended the role played by Cobra Tadjo Contracting Company to make this project a success through the contribution, and support accorded by Port of Duqm Company by providing a tugboat to transport the pipes to the location, free of charge. Al Mahrouqi urged fishermen to avoid using nets while fishing near Hamar Island to avoid causing any potential impact on the newly-created fishing and diving locations. — ONA



State Council discusses draft budget 2022

MUSCAT: The State Council has discussed the report of its Economic Committee about the draft of the State Budget for fiscal year 2022 in preparation for submitting the same to the Council of Ministers, along with the recommendations of the State Council and the Shura Council and after introducing

amendments based the outcome of the session.

This was stated during the second session of the Third Annual Sitting of the State Council's 7th Term. The session was chaired by Shaikh Abdulmalik Abdullah al Khalili, Chairman of the State Council. — ONA

Health minister urges precautions against Omicron variant

ZAINAB AL NASSRI

@zainabalnasseri

The technical team at the Ministry of Health is following up on 12 suspected cases of the mutated omicron in the Sultanate of Oman, Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, said.

The minister valued continuous support of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and His wise directives to the Supreme Committee tasked with tackling developments resulting from the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic.

During an interview with Oman TV on Tuesday, Dr Al Saeedi indicated that the number cases in intensive care units has increased from 3 to 5, calling on citizens and residents to adhere to the precautionary measures and to go for the vaccination available in all health institutions. "There is no excuse for anyone who did not receive the vaccine in the country," he stressed.

The minister pointed out that the third dose is given to people who have autoimmune diseases as it gives them more protection from the virus.

He added "the increase in cases recorded in intensive care is not due to Omicron, but rather due to lax commitment to precautionary measures" pointing out that reports from South Africa indicate that the Omicron mutated is less virulent than others, yet the concern about this virus is the speed of its spread.

Dr Al Saeedi mentioned that the percentage of vaccinated Omanis in the target group of 12 years and over is 92 per cent, and the percentage of those who received the second dose is 86 per cent.

In his talk, he praised the effective and important role of the media in refuting rumours and conveying the correct information since the start of the pandemic until now, expressing his thanks and appreciation to all citizens and residents for their cooperation in protecting society and their commitment to precautionary measures.

On Wednesday, the Ministry of Health reported 20 new cases of Covid-19 and three recoveries. The total number of those admitted to health institutions stood at 10 while Covid patients in ICUs stood at three.

Oman Airports welcomes two subsidiaries

STAFF REPORTER

MUSCAT, DEC 15

Oman Airports reviewed its performances during the last year as well as the new strategic plans at the annual CEO Talk, which was held on Wednesday.

Aimen bin Ahmed al Hosni, Oman Airports CEO said that with all countries worldwide closing their borders, the crisis form a pivotal turn in the history of the aviation and travel industry that has been impacted the most.

He welcomed the Transom Ground Handling and Transom Sats Cargo as two subsidiaries of Oman Airports.

The CEO said, "We have

shown a substantial resilience during the unexpected crisis and it is the time to recognise the roles of all employees — Oman Airports, Transom Ground Handling and Transom Sats Cargo working in the frontlines who kept our operations running with same or better efficiency level and made a lot of the sacrifices.

The CEO reviewed the highlights of the new five-year strategy which is in full alignment with Oman Vision 2040, elaborating on its implementation and KPIs which have been approved to achieve the Company's desired goals in the coming five years.

Winners of National Research Award, Upgrade programme announced

MUSCAT: The 8th edition of the Annual Research Forum, organised by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, was held on Wednesday at the Kempinski Hotel Muscat.

The event was held under the auspices of Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, in the presence of Dr Rahma bint Ibrahim al Mahrouqiyah, Minister of Higher Education, Research and Innovation.

During the event, winners of the 8th National Research Award and the 5th Upgrade programme were announced.

The forum began with a welcoming speech by Dr Al Mahrouqiyah, who stressed the importance of the National Research Award which comes in alignment with the goals of Oman Vision 2040 as it seeks to raise the quality of research and knowledge output at the national level.

Thirteen winning research projects out of the 243 projects submitted this year for the National Research Award (NRA) were announced.

The winner projects divided in the best published research led by a PhD holder or equivalent (senior specialist or higher in the medical field) category and the best published research led by a young researcher (non-PhD holder) category.

Under the PhD category, (A Centralised Cloud Services Repository (CCSR) Framework for Optimal Cloud Service Advertisement Discovery from Heterogenous Web Portals) by Dr Asma al Kalbani from the University of Technology and Applied Sciences Ibri won in the information and communication technologies sector.

In the energy and industry sector, the award went to (exploring the potential of solar, tidal and wind energy resources in the Sultanate of Oman



using an integrated climatic-socioeconomic approach) by Dr Mohamed Hereher from the Sultan Qaboos University (SQU).

Two teams won in the Cultural, Social and Basic Sciences sector; (management strategies for supply risk dependencies: empirical evidence from the gulf region) by Dr Zainab al Balushi from the SQU) and (mapping road traffic crash hotspots using GIS-based methods: A case study of the Governorate of Muscat in the Sultanate of Oman) by Dr Amira al Aamri.

In the environmental and biological resources sector, the award went to (investigating the efficiency of greenhouse production): A two-stage approach based on data envelopment analysis and double bootstrapping by Dr Nawal al Mezeini. Under the Young Researcher's category, 'Detection and Trust Evaluation of the SGN Malicious node' by Faisal al Yahmadi from Military Technological College took the award in the Information and Communication Technologies sector.

For the education and human resources sector, the

award went to (The Situation of Entrepreneurship Education and Future Technology in Omani Schools) by Yasir al Shuhumi from the Ministry of Education. (A novel and selective multi-emission chemiluminescence system for the quantification of deltamethrin in food samples) by Iman al Yahyai from the SQU took the award in the cultural, social and basic sciences sector, while (Operational modifications of a full-scale experimental vertical flow constructed wetland with effluent recirculation to optimise total nitrogen removal) by Buthaina al Wahaibi. (Oman Wastewater Services Company SAOC) was awarded in the environmental and biological resources sector.

In addition to announcing the winners of the NRA, the forum also announced the three winning teams of the 5th edition of Upgrade programme, which transforms the best graduation projects in the 4th Industrial Revolution technologies into successful ICT startups to bring socio-economic benefit to the Sultanate of Oman.

Upgrade is a collaborative partnership between the Ministry of Higher Education, Research

and Innovation, Omantel, Oman Technology Fund (OTF), Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Sas Center and the Authority for SME Development.

The winning projects of this year's Upgrade programme were awarded to (Industrial IoT for Operational Efficiency Improvement) by Ahmed al Ghadani from the National University of Science and Technology, (Development of AI based Arabic Natural Language Processing of sentiment analysis application software for national security and planning) by Ali al Harthi and Safiya al Harthi from the Middle East College and (Thermal Infra-Red Imaging Assessment of Solar PV Modules) by al Qaisar al Aamri, Majid al Omairi and Sultan al Shabibi, SQU.

The forum also included signing a cooperation agreement on "Oman Innovate Platform", which is a unified digital platform that transforms ideas into direct and indirect profits through the integration of efforts and the establishment of an effective digital environment that contributes to building a knowledge-based society and economy.

SQU holds graduation of second group of 32nd batch



MUSCAT: Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Dr Mahad bin Said bin Ali Baowain, Minister of Labour, on Wednesday presided over the graduation ceremony of the second group of Sultan Qaboos University's (SQU) 32nd batch.

The total number of graduates in this ceremony stood at 1,346 from the College of Agricultural and Marine Sciences, the College of Medicine and Health Sciences, the College of Nursing, the College of Science, the College of Economics and Political Science and the College of Law. — ONA





PROMISE OF FAST BUCKS COULD BE FRAUD

DON'T GET DUPED IN MONEY CHAIN BUSINESSES, WARNS ROP

KABEER YOUSUF

[@kabeeryousef](#)

The Royal Oman Police has warned residents and citizens not to fall prey to financial frauds. People should be wary of enrolling in businesses like multi-level marketing (MLM) schemes that offer promise high returns in short term. Under MLMs, members pay a joining fee which is passed on to those above them.

Members sell products in return for a commission and keep on recruiting new members to keep the share of their commission flowing.

Whereas, ponzi schemes use funds from new investors. The existing investors pay interest to other investors from these funds and keep on adding members to it. Personal saving scheme, investment programmes and direct selling are some of such schemes.

"Many online businesses that ask the potential victim to transfer money or to conduct multi-level marketing (MLM) are not genuine and one needs to take precautions while dealing with them," said a source at the ROP.

Many those who invested hundreds or thousands of rials, mostly from the South Asian countries, were said to have been duped after joining these schemes.

"I was approached by a male nurse promising partnership in a number of shops which his company was planning to open this year and I invested RO 3,800," said Mohammed Ashraf, a man who collects and sells scrap paper.

He was told that the income would double if he add two more investors for the equivalent amount or less and was given lectures and online classes on how to conduct business.

"Although they told me to market these products and add more investors, I was shocked to see that I was supposed to tell lies to lure people. But it was too late and I had already invested my 7 years of savings," Ashraf, who was left without work during the pandemic, said.

Similar traps are also prevalent online. "Not all online deals or MLM may prove to be genuine and one needs to check the authenticity, goodwill and creditworthiness of the firms with which they are dealing," Tariq al Barwani, IT specialist, told the *Observer*.

OLX, one of the leading online platform for buying and selling, warns its customers not to be lured or let the perpetrators take them for a ride.

"While millions of people who would usually be out socialising or shopping in the evening and on weekends are stay at home, streaming and online shopping are becoming more and more popular. Unfortunately, little did we know that cybercriminals too follow the trends, setting traps for any popular activities online," says Al Barwani.





Minister participates in Arab housing and construction conference

AMMAN: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, took part in the 38th session of the Arab Ministers of Housing and Construction Conference and the opening session of the 4th Arab Ministerial Forum for Housing and Urban Development.

The 3-day event is hosted by the Jordanian capital Amman, in cooperation with the Arab League.

The Sultanate of Oman was represented in the conference by Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning.

The forum discusses 4 main themes: the legislative environment to regulate the growth and resilience of cities, urban planning and city resilience, humanisation of cities and the role of partners in preserving cities. Specialised technical sessions will review the most important issues in each theme.

An open discussion will be organised after each session, in which specialists and experts from all authorities concerned with housing and sustainable urban development will be invited.

Dr Bisher al Khasawneh, Jordanian Prime Minister and

the chief guest of the conference opening ceremony, said that the 4th Ministerial Forum comes in line with the challenges that the world is going through.

He added that these challenges are represented in the economic conditions, regional and international conflicts, climate change, lack of resources and the Covid-19 pandemic, which continues until today to be an obstacle against achieving most of the sustainable development goals.

On his turn, Rachid Khattabi said in his speech on behalf of the Secretary-General of the Arab League, "The 4th Arab Ministerial Forum on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development will enable everyone to review the state of Arab cities and the challenges they face through the increasing climatic impacts, the rising number of natural and human disasters, epidemics and diseases."

On the sidelines of the conference, an exhibition was inaugurated on the best experiences and practices of countries and governments and innovative technologies in the field of construction and renewable energy. — ONA

Arab post committee meets

CAIRO: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, participated in the 40th meeting of the Arab Permanent Committee for Post and its affiliated work groups.

The event, held in Sharm El Sheikh, Arab Republic of Egypt, saw the participation of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) and Oman Post. In its current session, the committee discussed important topics on joint Arab action in the postal sector, most notably the role and importance of digital transformation and e-commerce.

The meeting also reviewed the proposed fees for e-commerce delivery services, in a bid to enable the postal sector in the Arab countries to benefit from the rapid global growth of e-commerce. — ONA

Commander of US 9th Air Force received

MUSCAT: Dr Mohammed bin Nasser al Za'abi, Secretary-General at the Ministry of Defence, received in his office at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Wednesday Lt Gen Gregory M Guillot, Commander of the US ninth Air Force. The meeting exchanged viewpoints and discussed matters of common interest.

The meeting was attended by the US Ambassador to the Sultanate of Oman and the Military Attaché at the US Embassy in Muscat.

Air Vice Marshal Khamis bin Hammad al Ghafri, Commander of the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO), also received Lt Gen Gregory M Guillot.

During the meeting, the two sides exchanged cordial conversations and discussed several matters of common interest. — ONA



Syrian delegation visits Oman National CERT



MUSCAT: A delegation from the National Agency for Network Service in the Syrian Arab Republic on Wednesday visited Oman

national computer emergency readiness team (Oman National CERT) at the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology.

The visit aims at reviewing the Sultanate of Oman's experience in the fields of cybersecurity, digital transformation, and the services provided by the

ministry in the ICT sector. It also seeks to exchange expertise between specialists and bolster cooperation in the field of digital economy. — ONA



Omani Derby Cup on Saturday



MUSCAT: The Royal Horse Racing Club (RHRC) will organise Oman Derby Cup at Al Rahba Horse Racing Track in the Wilayat of Barka on Saturday.

The race, to be held under the auspices of Sayyid Said bin Sultan al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Culture, will include eight rounds, seven of them for purebred Arabian

horses and a race for purebred hybrid horses.

This race is one of the most prominent horse racing events in the Sultanate of Oman. On the sidelines of the race, some equestrian sports shows will be performed by the Royal Cavalry.

The first round of the race is allocated to purebred Arabian horses for a distance of 1,600 metres.

The second round of the race is allocated to purebred Arabian horses (local production) for a distance of 1,600 metres.

The third round is allocated to purebred Arabian horses (local production) for a distance of 1,600 metres.

The fourth round is allocated to purebred Arabian horses for a distance of 2,000 metres.

The fifth round is allocated to

purebred Arabian horses for a distance of 2,000 metres.

The sixth round is allocated to purebred Arabian horses for a distance of 2,000 meters (Omani Derby Cup). As for the seventh round, it is allocated to purebred horses for a distance of 2,200 metres, and the eighth round is allocated to purebred Arabian horses, for a distance of 2,200 metres. — ONA



Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care & Research Center

Tenders Advertisement

Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care & Research Centre announces the following tenders:

Tender No.	Tender Title	Last Date for Collection of Tender Document	Bid Submission Closing	Tender Specification Fees
CCCRC/T/558/2021	Virtual Desktop Infrastructure	29/12/2021	05/01/2022	OMR 70
CCCRC/T/559/2021	Network Operation Center	29/12/2021	05/01/2022	OMR 70

Qualified companies interested in participating in this tender shall collect the tender specifications from the date of this advertisement from the following address:

Comprehensive Cancer Care and Research Centre.

Biddings that meet the above requirement should be submitted in a sealed envelope by an Omani National from your company addressed to the head of Purchase Committee in the tender box located at:

Comprehensive Cancer Care and Research Center.

Please note:

- Bids received after the deadline indicated above, for whatever reason, will not be considered.
- Queries/ clarifications should be submitted immediately, but not later than one week before the date of tender submission.
- For Queries you may Contact via **e-mail: purchase@ccrc.gov.om**
- The committee is not obliged to accept the lowest price of the bid or any other bid.

Cross-border aid to Syria rebel bastion vital: UN

UNITED NATIONS: Cross-border humanitarian aid to Syria remains vital, the United Nations Secretary-General said in an internal report on Tuesday, as a UN authorisation allowing aid into rebel-held areas in the country's northwest without approval from Damascus is set to expire.

A rare moment of cooperation between the United States and Russia in July allowed for a six-month extension of activity at Bab al Hawa, the only border crossing through which aid reaches the rebel stronghold of Idlib province. That authorisation is due to expire on January 10.

"Cross-border assistance remains lifesaving for millions of people in need in north-west Syria," Antonio Guterres said in a confidential document obtained by AFP, adding that over four million people were in need of crucial assistance across the country.

The United States and several European nations believe the UN authorisation for the crossing between Syria and Turkey should renew automatically for an additional six months, without the need for a new vote.

But Russia, a key ally to the



An aerial picture taken by a drone shows a child running at a camp for Syrians displaced by conflict that was flooded during heavy rains near the village of Kafr Uruq, in Syria's Idlib province. — AFP

Damascus regime, has previously opposed the move, invoking Syrian sovereignty. Moscow has linked any potential extension to Tuesday's report, as well as a possible new vote.

The cross-border mechanism has been operating since 2020 through Bab al Hawa, after the Russian-imposed removal in 2019 of three other access points in Syria.

In Tuesday's document, the UN chief refers to another project for humanitarian operations, this time across the front lines, to reach Idlib. "If implemented, this plan

will make operations across the front lines more predictable and effective," Guterres noted.

However, he insisted upon the importance of the Bab al Hawa crossing.

The United States and several European nations believe the UN authorisation for the crossing between Syria and Turkey should renew automatically for an additional six months, without the need for a new vote

"At this point such cross-line convoys, even if deployed regularly, could not replicate the size and scope of the cross-border operation," he said.

Guterres said some 4.5 million people in Syria need help this winter, up 12 per cent from the previous year, because of the economic crisis and the global pandemic.

Only 2.9 per cent of the Syrian population is fully vaccinated, according to the report.

More than three million people live in Idlib province, much of which is controlled by extremists and allied rebels.

In June, the UN said around 2.4 million people there were in need of humanitarian aid. — AFP

Iran lets UN replace nuclear site's damaged cameras

TEHRAN: Iran has agreed to let the UN atomic watchdog replace damaged cameras at the TESA nuclear complex in Karaj, west of Tehran, news agencies in the Islamic republic said on Wednesday.

The Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has been seeking to replace the devices which Iran says were damaged in a June attack it blames on Israel.

"In a gesture of goodwill, Iran is allowing the IAEA to install new cameras to replace those damaged in a sabotage operation" against the Karaj nuclear site, said the Nour news agency, considered close to Iran's National Security Council.

"This is a voluntary action by Iran to end misunderstandings in its relations with the IAEA," it said.

"Due to the completion of the safety investigation of the damaged cameras, as well as the agency's decision to condemn the sabotage

in the TESA complex and to accept the technical inspection of the cameras by Iranian experts before their installation, Iran has authorised the agency to replace the damaged cameras with new ones," it added.

The development was also reported by other Iranian news agencies.

Iran accuses its arch foe Israel of being behind a "sabotage" attack on the TESA Karaj centrifuge component manufacturing workshop on June 23.

At the time it had said it thwarted the attack on the building without identifying the nature of the incident.

Until Wednesday, Iran had turned down the IAEA's requests to replace the cameras.

Negotiations resumed on Thursday last week to try to revive a 2015 deal between Iran and world powers, which the United States withdrew from under Donald Trump in 2018. — AFP

Omicron ruins hope for Xmas boom

BETHLEHEM: After collecting dust for nearly two years, the 228 rooms at Bethlehem's Ararat Hotel were scrubbed last month in anticipation of a post-lockdown Christmas boom, hopes that have again been dashed by the coronavirus.

A large Christmas tree and decorations did little to brighten a deserted lobby.

Like other hotels in Bethlehem, the Ararat has no guests, with the tree offering cheer to no one but the seven out of 105 employees who have not been fired.

"We were expecting 70 per cent occupancy for Christmas but all overseas reservations have been cancelled," said Augustine Shomali, a manager at the hotel.

The people of Bethlehem — a Palestinian city in the Israeli-occupied West Bank considered the place of Christ's birth according to Christian tradition — are used to welcoming an influx of tourists each December.

After a near-total pandemic lockdown last year, Bethlehem began to hope for a joyous Christmas when Israel, which controls all access points to the city, announced in October that it



A child poses for a picture before the giant Christmas tree in the almost empty Manger Square outside the Church of the Nativity, traditionally believed to be the birthplace of Christ, in Bethlehem on Wednesday. — AFP

would reopen to foreign tourists on November 1.

But less than a month later, just as hotels were getting a makeover and businesses were replenishing their stocks in anticipation of the holiday season, Israel closed again.

The first case of Omicron — a highly transmissible strain of the coronavirus detected by South

Africa on November 24 — had been discovered in Israel, and foreign tourists were barred from entry.

All that Shomali can hope for now is a meagre amount of local tourism, and only a dozen rooms at Ararat have booked for Christmas weekend.

The hotel manager is closely following the news in Israel in

hopes a reopening to tourists could save his establishment, but Israeli media have reported that with Omicron raging across much of the West, the government is considering tightening restrictions, not loosening them.

While Israeli hotels have been compensated by the Jewish state, Palestinian ones have received nothing, and Shomali's livelihood is hinging on the policies of a government in a country where he cannot vote.

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, more than three million people visited Bethlehem each year.

More than 20 per cent of the city's population is employed in the tourism sector, but the jobless rate has risen from 23 per cent to 35 per cent through the pandemic.

The Palestinian Authority, the civil authority in parts of the West Bank, is mired in an economic crisis and has only offered affected workers in Bethlehem's hard-hit tourism sector a one-time stipend of 700 shekels (\$224).

Sitting outside his Armenian ceramics shop next to the Church of the Nativity, marked as the site of Christ's birth, Afram Shaheen said "there is no work". — AFP

DUBAI

Turkey, UAE say they want deeper cooperation

Turkey and the United Arab Emirates said on Wednesday they aim to deepen cooperation after talks in Dubai between the Turkish foreign minister and the UAE's prime minister, as the rivals step up diplomacy to mend ties strained by years of animosity.

Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu arrived in the UAE on Monday to discuss bilateral relations and meet Turkish businesspeople in Dubai, the region's trade and tourism hub. The



Dubai Media Office said Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum met Cavusoglu to discuss "strengthening cooperation between the UAE and Turkey and developing frameworks to collaborate on all areas of common interest."

BEIRUT

Lebanon prosecutor orders arrest of politician

Lebanon's public prosecutor on Tuesday instructed the security forces to arrest a top politician over the Beirut port blast, a senior judicial source said, setting the stage for a possible confrontation with the lawmaker and his powerful ally Hezbollah.

Tarek Bitar, the judge investigating last year's catastrophic port explosion, first issued a warrant for the arrest of Ali Hassan Khalil (pictured), a former finance minister, on October 12 after he did not attend a scheduled



interrogation. He is a right-hand man of House Speaker Nabih Berri and one of several current and former senior politicians and security officials charged in connection with the blast that killed more than 215 people.

PARIS

'Mostly Iraqi Kurds dead in Channel tragedy'

French authorities said on Tuesday that they had formally identified 26 out of 27 migrants who drowned last month in a Channel boat accident, with most of them Kurds from Iraq.

A statement from the Paris prosecutor said that there were 17 men among the deceased aged 19-26, seven women aged 22-46, as well as a 16-year-old teenager and a child aged seven.

Sixteen of the victims were Kurds from Iraq, four were Afghan men. Three Ethiopians, a



Somalian woman, as well as an Iranian and an Egyptian man made up the others.

Authorities often have difficulties identifying dead migrants because they do not carry official documents.

In brief

■ PYONGYANG



PARLIAMENT TO CONVENE AMID ECONOMIC CRISIS

The North Korean Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) will convene on February 6 to discuss government budgets and other issues, state media said on Wednesday as the country faces mounting economic woes.

The North's parliament rarely meets and usually serves to approve decisions on issues such as governing structures and budgets that have been created by the state's powerful Workers' Party, members of which form the vast majority of the assembly.

The agenda for February's meeting will include the work of the cabinet, government budgets, childcare legislation and "the law on the protection of the rights and interests of overseas compatriots," KCNA news agency reported.

■ MUMBAI



CARGO LOADER FALLS ASLEEP, ENDS UP IN ABU DHABI

A baggage loader at the Mumbai Airport fell asleep in the cargo hold of an Indigo Airlines flight bound for Abu Dhabi and was found only after the aircraft landed at its destination, an official of India's air safety regulator said.

The incident took place on Sunday on an Airbus A320 aircraft operated by Indigo as flight 6E 1835, a spokesman for the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) said. "The worker decided to relax for a few minutes after he loaded bags into a baggage compartment of the aircraft and fell asleep," said Arun Kumar, director general of the DGCA.

■ MANILA



THOUSANDS EVACUATED AHEAD OF TYPHOON RAI

Thousands of residents from high-risk areas in the eastern and southern Philippines were evacuated on Wednesday as the country braced for Typhoon Rai, authorities said.

Rai was packing maximum sustained winds of 120 kilometres per hour (kph) and gusts of up to 150 kph as it moved closer to the country's southern island of Mindanao, the weather bureau said.

It was expected to make landfall over northern Mindanao or the eastern Visayas region on Thursday afternoon or evening, the bureau added.

After nearly two years, Australia opens borders to visa holders

SYDNEY: Skilled workers, international students and other eligible visa holders are again allowed to enter Australia almost two years after the country's international borders were closed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Vaccinated visa holders were initially supposed to be allowed to come to Australia without needing to apply for an exemption from December 1, however the Canberra government postponed the reopening to Wednesday due to the emerging Omicron coronavirus variant.

Eligible visa holders included what Prime Minister Scott Morrison termed "skilled workers and student cohorts, temporary working holidaymakers and provisional family visa holders."

Vaccinated travellers from Japan and South Korea were also allowed to enter Australia as part as bubble arrangements starting on Wednesday following a two-week delay.

The reopening pause ended on schedule despite spiking case numbers in some states.

"Australia is well placed to deal with Covid-19 and its emerging



Passenger arrives at Melbourne International Airport. — Reuters

challenges like the Omicron variant," Australia's Chief Medical Officer Professor Paul Kelly said in a statement.

"Our high Covid-19 vaccination rates an boosters have put us in a very good place... We are well prepared."

Australia's international borders have been closed to all but

residents and citizens, with a few exceptions, since March 2020, with caps on international arrivals introduced in July 2020.

Restrictions had been eased recently, with quarantine requirement and caps scrapped for fully vaccinated citizens, permanent residents and their immediate families travelling to some states

and territories.

Inter-state borders in Australia have been shut at short notice multiple times during the pandemic, with Tasmania reopening to mainland states and territories on Wednesday and Western Australia set to become the last state or territory to remove travel restrictions on February 5. — dpa

Japan admits overstating data for years

TOKYO: The Japanese government overstated construction orders data received from builders for years, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said on Wednesday, an admission that could dent credibility of official statistics widely used by investors and economists.

It was not clear why the government started the practice of rewriting the data. It is also unclear how gross domestic product (GDP) figures may have been affected, though analysts expected any impact to be minimal, particularly as the builders involved were likely to be smaller firms.

"It is regrettable that such a thing has happened," Kishida said. "The government will examine as soon as possible what steps it can take to avoid such an incident from happening again."

He made the comment in a parliamentary session after the *Asahi* newspaper reported the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism had been "rewriting" data received from about 12,000 select companies since 2013 at a pace of about 10,000 entries per year. — Reuters

US considers new measures against Myanmar junta

KUALA LUMPUR: The United States is considering new measures to pressure the Myanmar junta to return to a "democratic trajectory," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday, as alarm grows over an escalating crackdown on dissent.

Myanmar has been in chaos since February when Aung San

Suu Kyi's civilian government was ousted by the military.

The United States has imposed some sanctions and regional bloc the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has drawn up a peace roadmap, but there are serious doubts about the generals' commitment.

Speaking during a visit to Malaysia — among several

ASEAN states that have strongly criticised the coup — Blinken conceded that the "situation has not improved."

"I think it is going to be very important in the weeks and months ahead to look at what additional steps and measures we can take — individually, collectively — to pressure the regime to put the country back on

a democratic trajectory," he said.

"That is something that we are looking at," he added, without saying what the measures might be. The coup triggered nationwide protests but the junta has responded with a brutal crackdown that has left more than 1,300 people dead and seen thousands arrested, according to a local monitor.

Blinken also said the United States was looking "very actively" at whether the treatment of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar might "constitute genocide".

The group faces widespread discrimination in Myanmar and hundreds of thousands fled to neighbouring Bangladesh in 2017 following a military crackdown. — AFP



People search Tanjung Balau beach after a boat carrying migrants capsized. — Reuters

11 migrants drown off Malaysia, 25 missing

KUALA LUMPUR: At least 11 Indonesian migrants died and 25 are believed to be missing after a boat sank on Wednesday in stormy weather off southern Malaysia, authorities said.

Indonesians looking for work sometimes try to enter neighbouring Malaysia illegally by making sea crossings in rickety boats and accidents happen regularly.

The vessel, believed to be carrying 50 migrants, went down in the morning off Malaysia's southern state of Johor, the coastguard said, correcting an earlier figure of 60 is released. Soldiers on patrol discovered the bodies of seven men and four women on the shore, coastguard chief Admiral Mohamad Zu-

bil Mat Som said.

Another 14 people were found alive following the voyage from a nearby Indonesian island and have been taken into custody, the coastguard said.

Those missing are believed to have fled into hiding or drowned and authorities have deployed boats and an aircraft to hunt for them.

"We deeply regret this deadly tragedy," Mohamad Zubil said. "I urge migrants not to enter Malaysia illegally."

Relatively affluent Malaysia is home to millions of migrants from poorer parts of Asia, many of them undocumented, and they work in industries including construction and agriculture. — AFP

Report decries 'war crimes' committed in Afghanistan

KABUL: Amnesty International has documented war crimes and atrocities committed during the collapse of the internationally backed Afghan government to the Taliban in August.

According to a report released on Wednesday, the Taliban, the US military and Afghan security forces were all responsible for attacks that resulted in extensive civilian suffering before the full collapse of the country to the Taliban.

The report documents torture, extrajudicial executions and killings by the Taliban during the final stages of the conflict in Afghanistan, as well as civilian casualties during a series of ground and air operations by the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) and US military forces.

"Homes, hospitals, schools and shops were turned into crime scenes as people were repeatedly killed and injured," said Agnes Callamard, Amnesty International's secretary-general.

Callamard called on the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate all possible war crimes, "no matter where it leads."

The United Nations in



A vendor sells vegetables along a road during the first snow in Kabul on Wednesday. — AFP

Afghanistan reported that 1,659 civilians were killed and another 3,524 injured in the first six months of 2021, an increase of 47 per cent from the prior year.

In the report, the Taliban is accused of torturing and killing ethnic and religious minorities as well as former Afghan security forces during the seizure of new cities.

Victims spoke of atrocities committed by the insurgents in at least two districts of Panjshir province, as well as in Spin Boldak of Kandahar province.

In one instance, at least six civilians were executed in a village

in Panjshir, mainly by gunshots to the head, chest or heart.

"Such killings constitute war crimes," the report states.

The report also documents four airstrikes carried out by the US and Afghan Air Forces in recent years, killing a total of 28 civilians and wounding another six.

On August 29, a US drone strike killed 10 civilians, including seven children.

The Pentagon later admitted that civilians were targeted and announced that those responsible would not have to expect a punishment. — dpa

Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia seek EU entry

BRUSSELS: The leaders of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine lobbied the European Union at a summit on Wednesday to let them begin negotiations to join the bloc, but for now they are expected only to win reassurances of support against any possible Russian aggression.

The one-day 'Eastern Partnership' summit also highlights the limited success of the EU's approach to the six ex-Soviet republics it embraces, all of them in what Russia considers its backyard where it has existential security and other interests.

Of the six, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are all locked in territorial disputes with Moscow. The leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan are attending the summit but are not seeking EU membership. Belarus's President Alexander Lukashenko, hit by Western sanctions over his human rights record, stayed away.

"Our goal is full membership in the European Union," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Twitter after meeting EU summit chair Charles Michel. — **Reuters**

WHO sees unprecedented Omicron spread, 'probably' in most countries

GENEVA: The World Health Organization warned on Tuesday Omicron was spreading at an unprecedented rate and urged countries to act, as drug maker Pfizer said its coronavirus pill was effective against the variant.

Dutch primary schools will close early as Europe battles a fresh wave of infections and hospital admissions, while British Prime Minister Boris Johnson faced a major parliamentary test seeking to impose fresh Covid curbs.

Omicron, first detected by South Africa and reported to the WHO on November 24, has a large number of mutations, setting alarm bells ringing since its discovery.

Early data suggests it can be resistant to vaccines and is more transmissible than the Delta variant, which was first identified in India and accounts for the bulk of the world's coronavirus cases.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters the strain had been reported in 77 countries and "probably" spread to most nations undetected "at a rate we have not seen with any previous variant".

Omicron now accounts for around three per cent of cases in



Julia, 6-years-old, is comforted by her mother after she gets a dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine, in the Bethesda Children's Hospital during a vaccination programme for children aged 5-11 years, in Budapest on Wednesday. — **Reuters**

the United States, a figure that is expected to rise rapidly as has been seen in other countries.

The United States is the nation hit hardest by the pandemic, and it crossed 800,000 known Covid-19 deaths on Tuesday, according to a Johns Hopkins University tracker.

Although Britain on Monday confirmed what is thought to be the world's first Omicron death, there is no proof yet that the variant causes more severe illness.

The WHO on Tuesday provided room for cautious optimism saying Africa had

recorded a massive rise in cases over the past week but a lower number of deaths compared with previous waves.

But it urged countries to act swiftly to rein in transmission, protect their health systems and guard against complacency.

WHO expert Bruce Aylward strenuously warned against "jumping to a conclusion that this is a mild disease".

"We could be setting ourselves up for a very dangerous situation."

The warning came as Pfizer on Tuesday said clinical trials of its Covid pill reduced hospital admissions and deaths among at-risk people by almost 90 per cent.

The American drug maker said its new treatment, Paxlovid, held up against Omicron in lab testing.

Chief executive Albert Bourla called the news a "game changer" and said he expected approval from the US medicines regulator as early as this month.

"This news provides another potentially powerful tool in our fight against the virus, including the Omicron variant," added US President Joe Biden.

A real-world study from South Africa has showed two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine was 70 per cent effective in stopping severe illness from Omicron.

Researchers called the results encouraging, though it represented a drop compared with earlier strains, underlining the threat of the coronavirus.

— **AFP**

Tourists head to snowy Lapland seeking Santa Claus

HELSINKI: Santa Claus and heavy snow falls are attracting British tourists back to Lapland, bolstering Finland's tourism industry that has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic.

Most of the tourists coming to Lapland over Christmas are from Britain, Sanna Karkkainen managing director of Rovaniemi Tourism and Marketing said.

"The first British charters come in mid-November and for them the focus of the trip is to meet Santa," Karkkainen said.

The city of Rovaniemi in Lapland is the official hometown of Santa Claus, its tourism website says, with attractions that include a Santa Claus village and trips inside the Arctic Circle.

Karkkainen said that the discovery of the new omicron variant had not caused cancellations like rising case



A man dressed as Santa Claus talks to visitors behind a plexiglass screen in his chamber at the Santa Claus Village in the Arctic Circle, near Rovaniemi, Finland. — **Reuters**

rates and Finland's strict travel restrictions did last year.

Britain has recently tightened rules for people coming back into the country, requiring them to take a pre-departure Covid-19 test and another test on arrival in England, despite their vaccination status.

Finnish airport group Finavia and tourist agency Visit Rovaniemi both said there had been no cancellations.

Finavia said the number of charter flights for this year's Christmas season was close to 90 per cent of what it was in the 2019 season. — **Reuters**

NATIONS BACK UKRAINE INDEPENDENCE AT UN

GENEVA: Western countries spoke up at the UN in Geneva on Wednesday to declare "unwavering" support for Ukraine's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, amid growing concern Russia will invade.

As the United Nations Human Rights Council gathered to hear an update on the rights situation across Ukraine, diplomats from the US, EU, Britain and elsewhere voiced alarm at signs of looming Russian aggression against the country.

"We are gravely concerned by evidence that Russia has developed plans to take further aggressive action against Ukraine," Patrick Elliot, a human rights officer at the US mission in Geneva, told the council.

"We are unwavering in our support of Ukraine's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity."

British Ambassador Simon



A Ukrainian serviceman talks on a phone in a dugout on the frontline with Russia-backed separatists, near the village of Pesky, Donetsk region, on Wednesday. — **AFP**

Manley also voiced alarm at the "pattern of destabilising activity and military build-ups on Ukraine's border", warning that "Russia's activity poses a threat to Ukraine's and international security."

Ukraine and its Western allies have accused Moscow of massing tens of thousands of troops near

its border with Ukraine in preparation for an invasion.

Kiev's military command believes a possible escalation could come at the end of January.

Moscow has said the troop build-up is part of routine deployments, saying it has the right to do what it wants on its territory. — **AFP**

NEW YORK

New York gets first woman police chief

New York will appoint Keechant Sewell as its first-ever woman police chief to head the largest force in the country, mayor-elect Eric Adams said on Tuesday, at a time when the city's trust in law enforcement has been shattered.

Sewell will also be only the third Black person in the post, and will have to restore faith in a police department that has faced accusations of harbouring violent, racist and corrupt officers in its ranks. Adams, a Democrat and former police officer, will become



New York's second Black mayor when he takes office on January 1.

With Sewell's appointment, he fills a key post two weeks before his formal start, with security having been one of the main issues during his campaign.

WARSAW

'Treasure trove' of dinosaur tracks found

Hundreds of dinosaur footprints, so well-preserved that even the scaly skin can be seen, have been found in Poland, giving an insight into a complex ecosystem around 200 million years ago, geologists said.

Described by the Polish Geological Institute-National Research Institute as a treasure trove, the fossilised tracks and bones were found in an opencast clay mine in Borkowice, 130 km (80 miles) south of Warsaw.

"In the traces left by



dinosaurs, you can read their behaviour and habits... we have traces left by dinosaurs running, swimming, resting and sitting," said geologist Grzegorz Niedzwiedzki.

LA PALMA

La Palma volcano's tremors stop

The Cumbre Vieja volcano on the Canary Island of La Palma fell silent as constant tremors stopped late on Monday, though experts cautioned this did not necessarily mean the eruption is nearing an end after 85 days.

Seismic activity on the island all but stopped around 9 pm local time on Monday, The Canary Islands volcanology Institute, Involcan, said on Tuesday. It's the longest period without tremors since the eruption began.

"This does not imply the erup-



tion is ending, since on other occasions halts were followed by a renewed increase in activity," Involcan said. It added footage of the Cumbre Vieja showing how the almost constant roaring of the volcano had ceased.

Why is Russia so focused on Ukraine?

MARK TREVELYA

Ukraine has become the main flashpoint in Russia's relations with the West after a build-up of tens of thousands of Russian troops near its border and a series of tough statements from President Vladimir Putin setting out his "red lines".

Many Russians feel a connection with Ukraine that they do not feel towards other former Soviet states in the Baltics, Caucasus and Central Asia.

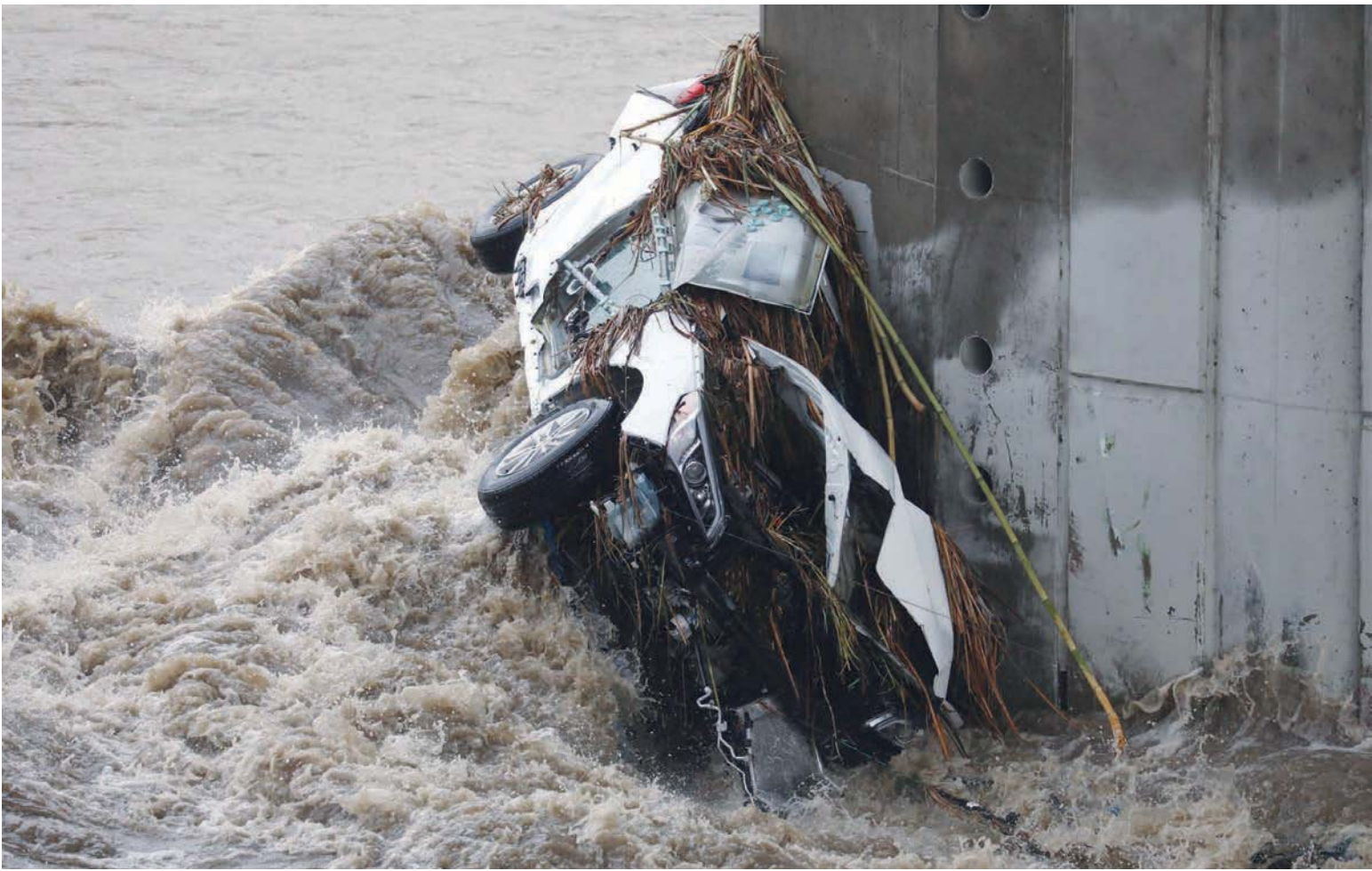
Putin alluded to this in an article in June in which he said Russians and Ukrainians were one people who shared a "single historic and spiritual space" and that the emergence of a "wall" between them in recent years was tragic. Kyiv rejected his argument as a politically motivated and over-simplified version of history.

Since the Cold War ended, Nato has expanded eastwards by taking in 14 new countries, including the states of the former Warsaw Pact and the three Baltic nations that were once in the Soviet Union. Russia saw this as a threatening encroachment towards its borders.

Ukraine is not a Nato member but has a promise dating from 2008 that it will eventually get to join. Since toppling a pro-Russian president in 2014, it has moved closer to the West, staged joint military exercises with Nato and taken delivery of weapons including US.

Russia rejects Ukrainian and US suspicions it may be preparing an invasion of Ukraine, saying it is only responding to threats and provocations. It wants security guarantees from the West including the rescinding of Nato's membership promise to Kyiv. In Ukraine's case, the notion of a democratic, prosperous close neighbour en route to possible membership of the European Union and Nato is unpalatable and potentially threatening for Putin if it inspires Russians with a pro-Western vision.

Maintaining tension over Ukraine helps Putin reinforce a political message in Russia: that he is a resolute defender of Russia's interests in a world where it is surrounded by enemies and threats. Keeping the West guessing about a possible invasion of Ukraine has put Russia high on the international agenda and forced US President Joe Biden to re-engage with Putin in a video call on December 7. Putin's public statements suggest his actions are driven by personal conviction as well as political tactics. He may also be pondering his own legacy — he could run for up to two more six-year terms once his current mandate expires in 2024. In an interview broadcast on December 12, he mourned the collapse of the Soviet Union as the demise of "historical Russia", in which "what had been built up over 1,000 years was largely lost". Such statements support the view of some analysts that Putin sees Ukraine as "unfinished business" and wants to follow the seizure of Crimea — which boosted his popularity in Russia — with further action to bring part or all of Ukraine back under Moscow's control. — Reuters



RAIN RAGE

A car balances against a bridge trestle after entering the rising Los Angeles River as major storm hits California with rain and snow flooding the streets, in Los Angeles, California, on Wednesday. — Reuters

A finest example of inclusiveness



Ali Al Matani
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IT IS THE VISION THAT EVERYBODY SHOULD GET THE OPPORTUNITY TO GROW. THE LIWA PLASTIC INDUSTRIES COMPLEX IS ONE OF THE FINEST EXAMPLES OF INCLUSIVENESS OF THE INDUSTRIAL POLICY MAKING AND PLANNING

On the eve of the celebrations of 51st glorious national day of the Sultanate of Oman, an announcement was made about 13 major investment projects worth approximately RO 3.5 billion. This is considered as a giant and qualitative step in economic diversification and implementation of related policies which calls for attracting investments and advancing the role of the private sector through partnerships with foreign companies.

Such arrangement also makes opportunities for exchanging experiences. The opening of the Liwa Plastic Industries Complex, the largest of these projects ever, with investments estimated at about RO 2.7 billion, is seen as a quantum leap of the manufacturing industries of the Sultanate of Oman working in petrochemicals. It is a turning point in the sector of manufacturing industries.

It has been a practice in the industrial sector of the country to start only those projects which has long term benefits for the local people. The Liwa Plastic Industries Complex which will open on December 20 will employ latest industrial technologies. It will maximise the added value as RO 578 million were invested in various phases of the project for goods, services, and support for small and medium enterprises. In fact, the complex enhances the manufacturing sector by

producing 838,000 tonnes of polyethylene and 215,000 tonnes of polypropylene. There was a time when establishing such a huge industrial project was a dream. Now we see it being a reality. This has become possible due the farsighted leadership of the country.

The OQ Group is managing the Liwa Plastics Industries Complex. It is one of the largest investments it manages in the fields of petrochemicals and petroleum industries. This will increase the use of the country's natural resources and add high local value to them if industries are established which works on the derivatives of oil and gas. It will contribute to achieving self-sufficiency in the plastic industries, as well as to export the surplus to the global markets, and boost the role of small and medium enterprises. We realise that when there is an industrial planning in the country, the element has never been ignored that it should be beneficial for all, even for the small players of the sector. It is the vision that everybody should get the opportunity to grow. The Liwa Plastic Industries Complex is one of the finest examples of inclusiveness of the industrial policy making and planning.

Around RO 578 million were spent for the project in the local markets. It also shows that the OQ group has a policy to maximise added value of investment projects and circulate the capital within

the country to stimulate and boost other economic activities. It is a model which many others would like to follow.

Such large projects enhance confidence in the Omani economy and in the world's financial and investment institutions. Investors' assurance will increase trust in government commitments to properly employ international finances in establishing productive and economically feasible entities. This is how it will help in increasing investments as well as material and moral support for investments made in this and other economic sectors.

There is no doubt that the completion of the Liwa Complex for Plastic Industries will open wider horizons for small and medium enterprises. They will be able to invest in the products of the complex and establish industries based on the products of the factory. This will increase investments in economic activities.

We are hopeful that these projects will be successful and will bring similar triumph for those who would be associated with it. It is a major shift in the national economy. It will open up broader avenues for investments in the product and service sectors aimed at achieving self-sufficiency and strengthening the balance of payments. It will also increase exports and trade exchange with various countries of the world. It is the best vision and commitment to it which ultimately wins.

These four vicious crises are interrelated, not separate



Bill Emmott

EACH PROBLEM OPERATES IN A FEEDBACK LOOP WITH THE OTHERS, DEMANDING MORE HOLISTIC THINKING AND NOVEL STRATEGIES

Those who are disappointed by the inconclusive outcomes of the COP26 climate-change meeting, US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping's recent virtual summit, or efforts to achieve Covid-19 vaccine equity need to wake up about the world we live in. Under current circumstances, global governance is guaranteed to disappoint.

The only way forward is to recognise the connections between planetary public health, climate change, declining public trust and democratic legitimacy, and geopolitical instability. These issues are interlinked. Treating them as separate domains will get us nowhere.

Environmental stresses increase

the likelihood that zoonotic diseases will spread to humans and become pandemics. The social, political, and economic stresses introduced by a pandemic then foster attitudes and behaviours that undermine social solidarity, making it harder for governments to secure public buy-in for strong decarbonisation measures.

This description is especially apt for the United States, the country to which so many look for leadership. The crisis of trust has weakened the US both internally and on the world stage, contributing to the deteriorating relations between the West and China. Following the logic of feedback loops, tensions over the pandemic and climate change

have contributed to the world's foremost geopolitical crisis. Yet without US-China engagement and mutual understanding, little substantive progress against either the pandemic or climate change can be made.

Sino-American cooperation could close this gap, given the two countries' unmatched capital and logistical resources, and also could deal swiftly with the looming sovereign-debt crisis that is likely to strike low-income countries and then the rest of the world in 2022. Unfortunately, there is no prospect of such agreements any time soon.

The first principle – and the most immediate task – is to get all populations vaccinated, so that

we can accelerate the shift from a pandemic to a more manageable endemic public-health issue.

The second (and longer-term) principle is to recognise that the US-China rivalry plays a central role in global affairs. Neither that rivalry nor the continuing importance of either countries can be wished away. The most urgent task therefore is to define an agenda and create a mechanism for the two superpowers to consult each other and collaborate on global challenges, even as they continue to compete in other fields.

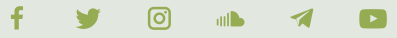
The US and the Soviet Union exercised such discipline during the Cold War. But learning to do so took decades. Neither climate

change nor international security nor effective governance can wait.

The third principle is that the trust and legitimacy crisis in the West needs to be taken more seriously. Western democracies' increased vulnerability to extremist politics poses a danger not only to those countries but also to global stability and security. Here, the most urgent tasks are to update democratic rules and institutions for the twenty-first century; regulate social media to make those platforms more responsible; rekindle citizenship through new forms of participation; and expand investments to ensure greater equality of treatment and opportunity. *Copyright: Project Syndicate 2021*

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National volleyball team gears up for GCC Games

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 15

The Sultanate of Oman volleyball team gears up to take part in the third GCC Games which will take place in Kuwait from January 10 to 17.

The team will have an external camp in Bahrain as part of the preparatory programme ahead of GCC Games. The camp, which started on Wednesday and will conclude on Saturday, will feature many friendly matches against Bahrain national team and local Bahraini clubs.

The new national head coach, Jamal al Mamari, opted with 14 players for the camp after a close follow up and monitoring them in the first division league.

The list includes Hilal al Maqbali, Saud al Mamari,



Ayman Ahmed, Ismail al Hedi, Mohammed al Maqbali, Ahmed al Toobi, Younis al Amri, Abdullah al Maqbali, Khamis al

Jabri, Yousef al Shukaili, Khalid al Maqbali, Adam al Jalbobi, Falah al Jaradi and Mahmood al Saadi.

The coaching staff comprised Jamal al Mamari as head coach, Hilal al Jabri as assistant coach, Khalid al Maqbali as

THE TEAM WILL HAVE AN EXTERNAL CAMP IN BAHRAIN AS PART OF THE PREPARATORY PROGRAMME AHEAD OF GCC GAMES. THE CAMP, WHICH STARTED ON WEDNESDAY AND WILL CONCLUDE ON SATURDAY, WILL FEATURE MANY FRIENDLY MATCHES AGAINST BAHRAIN NATIONAL TEAM AND LOCAL BAHRAINI CLUBS

team manager, Ali al Farsi as physician and Hamed al Ghabshi as admin member. The team will look for top show in

the event and will eye for the top places.

On the other hand, the first round of the Sultanate of Oman volleyball first division league concluded on Friday. Oman club beat Sohar 3-0 (25-22, 25-28, 25-21). Saham defeated Bahla 3-0 (25-20, 25-24, 25-26).

Seeb managed to register tough win over Al Kamil W'al Wafi club 3-2 (26-28, 25-19, 23-25, 25-23, 23-21). After the completion of the first round, Al Kamil W'al Wafi club is leading the table by 16 points while Seeb is positioned as the runner up with 14 points. Masirah club in the third place and possesses 12 points. Oman club (11) and Sohar (6) are placed in fourth and fifth positions respectively. Saham is in sixth place with four points while Bahla in the bottom with nil points.

Oman Sail sets new beach clean-up Guinness World Records™ Title

MUSCAT: Oman Sail has set a Guinness World Records title for the Most Nationalities Collecting Litter. Under supervision by an adjudicator from Guinness World Records, participants at the Youth Sailing World Championships, including sailors, Oman Sail officials, staff at Barceló Mussanah Resort and members from the OMRAN Group broke a new record with 73 nationalities collecting over 344kg of litter at Mussanah public beach on Wednesday, December 15, 2021.

Dr Khamis al Jabri, CEO of

Oman Sail, said, “During the beach clean-up, it was clearly evident the global challenge of single-use plastic. Oman Sail encourages everyone to reduce or even eliminate single-use plastic within their daily activities and to take the UN Clean Seas pledge, a life-long commitment to help protect our environment.”

He added, “This record is a great achievement by everyone involved and also highlights just how much litter there is on beaches and in seas around the world. The Youth World Sailing



Championship boasts a fleet of over 60 nations, showing how collaboration can help to restore and preserve the environment. Beach clean-ups have been taking place across the country throughout our Sultanate of Oman Sailing Festival, and now at Barceló Mussanah Resort. We are calling on members of the public, residents and tourists across the Sultanate of Oman to dispose of their litter appropriately and help out when needed to keep our nation beautiful and clean for future generations.”

Dermot Birchall, General Manager of Barceló Mussanah Resort, said, “Musannah is blessed with a wonderful stretch of beach and incredible clear blue seas. It is our responsibility to maintain the environment and do everything we can to preserve the beauty for others to enjoy. To set a new Guinness World Records title whilst hosting the 50th edition of the Youth World Sailing Championships, the first to be held in the Middle East, will be part of our legacy as responsible operators and set a positive example.”

Pakistan outlast West Indies to take T20I series

KARACHI: Pakistan beat a resurgent West Indies in a thrilling finish by nine runs to win the second Twenty20 international in Karachi on Tuesday, taking an unbeatable 2-0 lead in the three-match series.

For the home team Mohammad Rizwan top-scored for a second match running with 38 to help Pakistan get to 172-8 before keeping the West Indies down to 163 all out in 20 overs.

The win gives Pakistan another series with the last game on Thursday, also in Karachi.

Pakistan skipper Babar Azam praised man-of-the-match Shadab Khan for his brisk scoring.

“The finish from Shadab (with the bat) was very good and then bowlers did well too - especially Shaheen (Shah Afridi),” said Azam.

“The idea was to set a target and defend, and play as per the conditions and the wicket.”

Brendon King knocked a fluent 43-ball 67 — his maiden T20I half century — with three towering sixes and six boundaries but Pakistan bowlers were tough to handle for other batsmen.

Romario Shepherd tried to stop the inevitable with a fiery 19-ball 35 not out spiced with two sixes and as many boundaries but failed to get the required 23 off the last over.

Lanky pacer Shaheen Shah Afridi (3-26), fellow fast bowlers Mohammad Wasim (2-39) and Haris Rauf (2-40) and spinner Mohammad Nawaz (2-36) shared the bowling honours.

With 61 needed in the last five overs, King hoisted pacer Haris Rauf for a big six but fell next ball while attempting another maximum, caught near the long-on boundary.



Pakistan's Haris Rauf (C) celebrates after the dismissal of West Indies' Oshane Thomas (L) during the second T20I at the National Stadium in Karachi. — AFP

“The finish from Shadab (with the bat) was very good and then bowlers did well too — especially Shaheen (Shah Afridi). The idea was to set a target and defend, and play as per the conditions and the wicket

BABAR AZAM
Pakistan captain

WEST INDIES RUE 'SILLY MISTAKES'

West Indian skipper Pooran admitted there were silly mistakes during the run-chase.

“It was a tough one for us,” said Pooran. “It was a big improvement from the first game but I felt we lost here due to silly mistakes. Irresponsible from myself too.”

For Pakistan Rizwan, Iftikhar Ahmed (32) and Haider Ali (31)

SCOREBOARD	
PAKISTAN	
M Rizwan c Hope b Smith	38
B Azam (run out)	7
F Zaman st Pooran b Hosein	10
H Ali c Brooks b Smith	31
I Ahmed c Pooran b Thomas	32
M Nawaz c Powell b Walsh	1
A Ali c Powell b Shepherd	9
S Khan (not out)	28
M Wasim (run out)	5
H Rauf (not out)	0
Extras: (LB-4, W-7)	11
Total: (for 8 wkts; 20 overs)	172
Fall of wickets: 1-14, 2-38, 3-86, 4-109, 5-111, 6-124, 7-141, 8-171	
Bowling: Hosein 4-0-16-1, Thomas 3-0-35-1, Shepherd 3-0-29-1, Walsh 4-0-30-1, Drakes 3-0-34-0, Smith 3-0-24-2	
WEST INDIES	
S Hope c Iftikhar b Wasim	1
B King c Nawaz b Rauf	7
S Brooks lbw Nawaz	10
N Pooran c Rauf b Nawaz	26
R. Powell c Zaman b Wasim	4
O Smith c Asif b Shaheen	12
R Shepherd (not out)	35
D Drakes c Rizwan b Shaheen	0
H Walsh c Rizwan b Shaheen	0
A Hossein (run out)	2
O Thomas b Rauf	0
Extras (W-6)	6
Total (all out, 20 overs)	163
Fall of wickets: 1-17, 2-31, 3-85, 4-102, 5-118, 6-127, 7-131, 8-131, 9-149	
Bowling: Shaheen 4-0-26-3, Nawaz 4-0-36-2, Wasim 4-0-39-2, Rauf 4-0-40-2, Shadab 4-0-22-0	

got good starts but failed to play a big knock.

Skipper Babar Azam failed yet again, scoring just seven with a boundary before fell run out off a sharp single to backward point.

Fakhar Zaman also flopped for a second match in succession when he was stumped by Pooran off spinner Akeal Hosein for ten leaving Pakistan down to 38-2.

Rizwan, who hit four boundaries and a six in his 30-ball knock, added 48 for the third wicket with Haider but both fell to medium pacer Smith who was the pick of bowlers with 2-24.

Iftikhar Ahmed smashed two sixes and a boundary in his 19-ball knock while Shadab cracked three sixes and a boundary in his 12-ball 28 not out.

— AFP

Richardson to replace Hazlewood, Warner fit for second Ashes Test

MELBOURNE: Jhye Richardson will replace injured paceman Josh Hazlewood but opener David Warner has been cleared to play against England in the second day-night Ashes Test, Australia captain Pat Cummins said on Wednesday.

Hazlewood was ruled out of Adelaide after suffering a side strain during Australia's nine-wicket win in the first test at the Gabba.

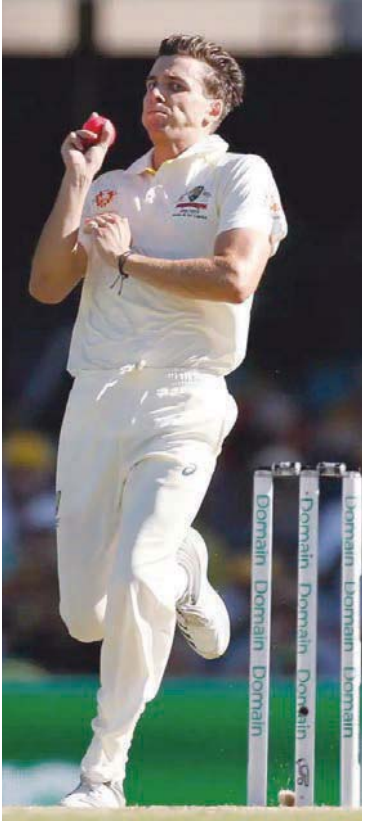
Two-test Richardson beat out the uncapped pace veteran Michael Neser for the spot in Australia's attack with Cummins, Mitchell Starc and spinner Nathan Lyon.

Richardson, who generates a lot pace from a 1.78m frame, rejoins the team nearly three years on from his impressive debut series against Sri Lanka in 2019.

The 25-year-old's international career suffered a setback when he dislocated his shoulder in a fielding mishap against Pakistan's one-day side soon after his Test debut.

But he returned to top form in the Sheffield Shield this season to earn a place in the Ashes squad.

“He played two really good Tests and was on the verge of an Ashes series and a World



Cup before his shoulder injury,” Cummins told reporters at Adelaide Oval on the eve of the Test.

“He's worked incredibly hard, had a great start to this year for WA and we think he's firing.”

Lefthander Warner suffered a bruised rib after taking a few body blows during his 94 in Brisbane and appeared in some discomfort during a net session on Tuesday.

— Reuters

Root needs batting support if England are to make most of the pink ball

ADELAIDE: Much is being made of what a recalled England bowler James Anderson might conjure up with the pink ball being used in the second test starting in Adelaide on Thursday, but unless England's batting improves it might make little difference.

Skipper Joe Root aside, England's batting has been brittle this year and was exposed again in the first test in Brisbane that Australia won by nine wickets.

Root, who scored 89 in the second innings at the Gabba last week after suffering a duck in the first, is averaging a superb 64.33 in tests this year, accumulating 1,544 runs.

The next highest run scorer for England this year is opener Rory Burns with a meagre 492.

Burns was bowled by Pat Cummings for a first-ball duck in Brisbane — a moment that set the tone for what was to come.

He will get another go in the day-night test in Adelaide where Australia's bowlers are probably just as likely as Anderson to make the pink ball sing under the lights.

England's reliance on Root to score the runs is painfully obvious in a year in which they have lost seven of the 13 test matches they have contested.

In the four they have won Root



has posted first-innings scores of 228, 186, 218 and 121. When he has not scored big, no other batsman has stepped up to the plate.

“In recent years, has there been an England batsman who has put as much distance between himself and his contemporaries?” former England captain Michael

Atherton opined in his column for *The Times* on Wednesday.

“That uncomfortable distance is partly a reflection on how outstanding Root has been, but also how miserably the rest of the batting line-up has fared this year.”

Burns is averaging below 30 this year, with six ducks to his name and only one century. Hameed looked reasonably assured in Brisbane with scores of 25 and 27 while number three Dawid Malan batted well alongside Root for his 82 in England's second innings in Brisbane but needs more consistency.

Jos Buttler, for all his invention, still has only two test centuries to his name in 54 tests.

So while Anderson's return, after being left out in Brisbane, should give England's attack more control and threat, Atherton is worried by England's “flaky batting line-up” at a ground where Australia have won all five day-night tests.

“So much of the pre-Ashes discourse centred on England's ability to take 20 wickets with a Kookaburra ball on flat(ter) Australian pitches, but all that won't matter a jot if England cannot score enough runs,” he said.

— Reuters



KOHLI AVAILABLE

FOR SA ODIS, REFUTES BCCI CLAIM

HARIDEV PUSHPARAJ
MUSCAT, DEC 15

Crystal clear communication has not exactly been the forte of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) and this has been exposed in the latest Virat Kohli captaincy saga.

In his address to the media prior to the South Africa Test series, skipper Kohli cleared the air with regard to his interaction with the BCCI stating there was communication only an hour and a half prior to the selection meeting on December 8th and he is very much available for the ODI series.

"I was contacted one-and-a-half hours before the selection meeting on December 8 for the Test series," Kohli said of the communication (or lack of it) with the BCCI on the ODI captaincy. "There was no prior communication to me at all from when I announced the T20I captaincy decision until the eighth

(of December) where, as I said, I got a call one-and-a-half hours before the selection meeting."

"The chief selector [Chetan Sharma] discussed with me the Test team to which we both agreed, and before ending the call I was told that the five selectors have decided that I will not be the ODI captain, to which I replied, 'okay, fine.' And in the selection call afterwards, we chatted about it briefly. And that's what happened. There was no communication prior to that at all."

This was in complete contradiction to what the BCCI President Sourav Ganguly had communicated to the Press Trust of India (PTI) on December 9th about the BCCI requesting Kohli not to step down from T20I captaincy.

"When I decided to leave the T20I captaincy and communicated that, and I approached the BCCI first about my decision, that this is my point of view, and these are the reasons due to which

I was contacted one-and-a-half hours before the selection meeting on December 8 for the Test series," Kohli said of the communication (or lack of it) with the BCCI on the ODI captaincy. "There was no prior communication to me at all from when I announced the T20I captaincy decision until the eighth (of December) where, as I said, I got a call one-and-a-half hours before the selection meeting

VIRAT KOHLI
Indian Test captain, at BCCI presser

I am doing this, it was received in a very nice way," Kohli said. "There was no offence, no hesitation (from BCCI). I wasn't told you don't leave the T20 captaincy. Instead it was received well; I was told it's a very progressive step and in the right direction."

"At the time I told them 'yes, I'd like to continue (leading) in Tests and ODIs, unless the office-bearers and selectors feel I shouldn't be doing that responsibility'. Even that I had clarified on the call at the time. My communication to BCCI was clear since then about what I wanted to do. I gave them the option as well, that if the office-bearers and selectors feel I shouldn't (remain captain in Tests and/or ODIs), then the decision is in their hands."

TREAT PLAYERS WITH RESPECT
To be fair to Kohli, if going by what

he has clearly spelt out in the presser, this is shabby treatment that the BCCI has meted out to a player of such stature.

Kohli is an all-time India great and possibly already one of the greatest batsmen of modern day cricket.

Despite the downer of not having won ICC trophies, Kohli has had a stupendous captaincy record, especially in Test cricket.

At a time when the team is headed for a crucial away tour of South Africa where they would look to win that elusive Test series, this controversy is needless.

Kohli and Rohit Sharma are giants of Indian cricket and the least they deserve is respect from their own board and the media instead of cooked up stories from so called 'sources'. One only hopes better sense prevails in Indian cricket.

Sultanate of Oman team prepared for Pan Arab Golf Championships

MUSCAT: Following a series of qualifying events the team of four players have been selected who will travel to Egypt to represent the Sultanate in the 40th Pan Arab Golf Championships. Testament to the overall development of golf in the Sultanate, and in particular to the focus on juniors, the team of four includes three 'graduates' from the OGA's Junior Development Programme. Joining National Team stalwart Azaan al Rumhy will be Hamood al Harthy, Fahad al Kitani and current Junior Squad Member Ayman al

Busaidy who at the age of 15 saw off several more seasoned players through qualifying to claim his spot on the team. Last played in Morocco in 2019 the 2021 event will be played from the 16th to the 23rd December at the Dreamland Golf Club in Cairo and will bring together the finest golfers from the Middle East who compete over 4 days, both as a team and individually. The best three scores from four are counted each day for the team championship and individual scores from each country are also recognised for gold, silver



Hamood al Harthy

and bronze medals. Mundhir al Barwani, Chairman of the Oman Golf Association is



Azaan al Rumhy

quoted as saying "We are very excited to be sending our team to participate in the 40th Pan Arab



Ayman al Busaidy

Championships, Dreamland is a course that our players know well as it has been the host venue

on several occasions before. It is sad that the previous hosts, Morocco, will not be able to travel to compete this year but we look forward to a good four days of competition against the other teams from the region. It is great to see our younger players qualifying to represent the Sultanate at senior level and we must thank the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Youth along with our partners, in particular Sohar Aluminium, Moore, Haya Water and Oman LNG for their ongoing support of golf development in the Sultanate of Oman".



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making life easy

Khazaen Dry Port inaugurated in Barka

NEW LANDMARK: Inland port set up within Khazaen Economic City will strengthen Sultanate of Oman's positioning as a global logistics hub

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 15

Asyad Group, the integrated logistics services provider of the Sultanate of Oman, celebrated on Wednesday the official launch of the Khazaen Dry Port set up within Khazaen Economic City in the Wilayat of Barka.

The inland port and the Economic City have been established in line with the strategy of Oman Investment Authority (OIA) to support the growth of a robust logistics sector in partnership with the private sector with the aim of driving national economic diversification and consolidating the Sultanate of Oman's position as a global logistics hub.

The launch ceremony was held under the auspices of Shaikh Issa bin Hamad al Azri, Governor of South Al Batinah, with the attendance of Eng



Khamis bin Mohammed al Shamakhi, Transport Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, among other dignitaries.

In remarks, the chief guest said the logistics sector represents one of the cornerstones of the Vision 2040 strategy in light of its potential to drive new investment inflows into the

The inland port, the Governor said, will help boost commercial and economic activities in the wilayats adjacent to Khazaen Economic City, particularly in the transport, warehousing and customs clearance fields. Opportunities for youth-run businesses are promising as well

SHAIKH ISSA BIN HAMAD AL AZRI
Governor, South Al Batinah

sector, accelerate trade flows and support the country's sustainable growth. The launch of Khazaen Dry Port adds to a list of notable achievements witnessed during the Renewed Renaissance under way under the wise leadership of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, he noted.

TURN TO PAGE 15

Announcement on personal income tax welcomed

KABEER YOUSUF
MUSCAT, DEC 15

The business community in the Sultanate of Oman welcomed the announcement by the government that it has no plans to introduce personal income tax in its 2022 State Budget.

Corporates who spoke to the Observer expressed their relief, with one businessman saying: "We are on the path of recovery, having survived pandemic impacts that nearly drove us out of business."

"We are grateful to the country and the government as it has decided not to proceed with the proposed personal income tax in 2022 as we barely managed to stay afloat during the Covid-19 which hit us to the core," said Mohammed Ashraf Omar, an investor who runs many business entities.

The move was first announced in November 2020 as part of a broader medium term fiscal plan by the government to tackle a budget deficit in the wake of the low oil prices and the coronavirus pandemic.

Speaking to the Observer, Alkesh Joshi, Partner, Ernst & Young, said the announcement is a positive step as the country is looking to attract foreign direct investment and talent to come and help in nation-building activity.

"Also, Introducing the personal income tax at the moment would have reduced the purchasing power of the people.

But if this initiative becomes a GCC-wide initiative where all six Gulf countries come together to introduce simultaneously, it will be more acceptable from the private sector perspective to attract foreign direct investment and talents," said Joshi.

"The Introduction of personal income tax was announced as part of the Medium Term Fiscal Plan announced when the priority was fiscal consolidation and every possible source of revenue would have been welcomed by the government."

However, he feels that the introduction of personal income tax would require careful impact assessment on businesses, as well as extensive interaction with corporates as well, so that the businesses are prepared to welcome the tax system.

Nod for GCC Railway Authority spurs hopes for revival of Omani rail project

HIGH SPEED NETWORK: An ambitious plan for a 2,144 km national railway network was paused in the wake of global oil price collapse of 2014 and the resulting economic downturn

CONRAD PRABHU
@conradprabhu

A decision by GCC leaders to approve the establishment of a GCC Railway Authority, adopted at the 42nd GCC Summit held in Riyadh earlier this week, has reignited hopes of a revival of the Sultanate of Oman's long-standing ambitions to develop its own national railway system integrated with the wider network of the GCC states.

Likewise, aspirations for a light rail system from Muscat to Suhar, and a metro system envisioned in the country's Spatial Strategy, will receive a boost as well.

Representing the Sultanate of Oman at the Summit on behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin

Tarik was a high-level delegation headed by His Highness Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for the Council of Ministers.

Among other things, GCC leaders green-lighted efforts to integrate the respective rail networks of member states.

The nod from the GCC Supreme Council comes a year after transport ministers of the Gulf states met virtually to review a draft of the proposal for the establishment of a GCC Railway Authority.

The meeting, with Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) in attendance from the Sultanate of Oman, also studied draft proposals for linking the Gulf states with the railway network and also reviewed projections of passenger and freight volumes expected to be carried by the GCC rail system.

The Sultanate of Oman, for its part, had energetically pursued plans to develop a 2,144 km-long high-speed national railway system connecting the country's



three main seaports at Salalah, Duqm and Sohar and integrating with the GCC network at Hafeet on its border with the United Arab Emirates.

However, the global oil price collapse in 2014 that sparked a wider economic downturn put the brakes on this landmark project.

In the meanwhile, Asyad Group — the state-owned holding company of government assets in ports, transport, shipping and logistics businesses — continued

to explore options for a dedicated Mineral Railway line linking vast mining sites in the south of the country with the Port of Duqm.

It envisages the construction of a roughly 375 km line to support the annual transportation of over 30 million tonnes of mineral commodities from sites in Al Wusta and Dhofar governorates to processing plants and export-channels in Duqm.

It will also enable the transportation of a projected

Asalah Priority Banking wins Signature Luxury 100 Award 2021

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat has won the Signature Luxury 100 award for Outstanding Premier Banking Services for Asalah Priority Banking. The award was given at a grand ceremony in the presence of Sayyid Shihab bin Harib bin Thuwaini al Said and Sayyid Muadh bin Dheyab bin Hamad al Said. The event was also attended by a number of dignitaries and leaders from the corporate world.

During the ceremony, Amjad al Lawati, Assistant General Manager - Cards and eBanking, Bank Muscat, received the award on behalf of the bank. Signature Luxury 100 is a unique annual list of iconic luxury products and services that is drawn up after review of a number of luxury products and services, which have impressed consumers and are vetted by experts.



Speaking on the occasion, Amjad al Lawati, Assistant General Manager - Cards and eBanking, Bank Muscat, said: “Bank Muscat’s Asalah Priority Banking is delighted to win the Signature

Luxury 100 Award and dedicates this achievement to all our valued clients for their continued support and patronage. Bank Muscat has been implementing a new premier banking strategy since 2016 and

is proud to have taken Priority Banking to an exceptional level. Backed by an excellent customer service team, Asalah Priority Banking is working to further enhance its benefits for its valued clientele.”

Asalah customers enjoy a range of unrivalled benefits including access to a team of dedicated Relationship Managers, 35 Asalah Centres across the Sultanate of Oman and a dedicated 24/7 Asalah Call Centre. Exclusive lifestyle benefits include the Asalah Entertainer App, which has more than 3,500 “Buy 1 Get 1 Free” offers in the Sultanate of Oman and at international destinations as well as rewards of indulgence and merchant discounts across fine dining, entertainment, leisure, and the beauty and wellness segments.



Maisarah offers over RO 100,000 at year-end mega prize draws

MUSCAT: Maisarah Islamic Banking Services, BankDhofar’s Islamic banking window, reiterated its full-on readiness for the largest prize values among all at the year-end mega draws.

As per the scheme, three lucky winners from across Maisarah branch network will win RO 100,000 in the Priority Banking category, RO 10,000 in the Standard and Affluent Banking category and RO 2,000 in the children category.

Valid through December 31, 2021, in addition to expected profit, the account — which is a personal savings account that is based on the Islamic concept of Mudaraba — allows customers to win cash prizes distributed from the shareholders’ funds.

Each RO 100 gives customers the chance to win cash prizes as per terms and conditions of the scheme, and

winners are randomly selected by an automated system in line with the approved procedures for the prize draws.

In addition to the year-end mega prize draws, there are also weekly prizes of RO 100 each granted to three winners from each branch, with total number of 30 winners every week. Moreover, there are exclusive prizes for children in the monthly draws where one winner per branch is awarded RO 100, with total number of 10 winners.

For Standard and Affluent Banking customers, there are monthly prizes of RO 500 each for one winner per branch, with total number of 10 winners.

Meanwhile, Priority Banking Customers have the chance to win RO 2,000 each for one customer from every branch, with total number of 10 winners in monthly draws.

ahlibank opens new branch in Ruwi



MUSCAT: ahlibank has announced the opening of its new branch in Ruwi, Muscat. ahlibank aims to enhance its presence in the market, bringing its products and services closer to its customers through a strategic expansion roadmap.

The bank’s consistent opening of branches in prominent locations is a part of its ambitious strategy to provide banking solutions that meet the evolving needs of its customers.

The bank also looks at offering banking products and services for various segments in the society, as well as keeping pace with the trends within their modernised world.

Muneer al Balushi, AGM – Head of Retail Distribution, said, “We are pleased to announce the opening of the new branch. This milestone reflects the bank’s dedication towards implementing its expansion plan that aims to make the bank’s products and services easily accessible by customers. It further resonates with the bank’s objectives of providing comprehensive and secured banking services. It is also in line with its endeavours towards strengthening its relationship with its customers by meeting their changing requirements, surpassing their expectations and cementing its leading position in the market.”

WIN YOUR NEW KIA CERATO SUPREME IN DREAM KIA CAMPAIGN



Kia customers looking forward to owning the Kia Cerato Supreme can now also get a chance to win it back with the most exciting offer in town from Kia. The Cerato Supreme is available with scratch and win offer, or pay only 50 per cent for your car back, or chance to double your cash gift or win periodic services up to 100,000 km and yes VAT is on us which can be used as part of down payment. (Conditions apply. Please visit Kia showroom for details.) The campaign is valid until December 28, 2021.

Ooredoo announces 14 winners of Nojoom raffle draw



MUSCAT: Ooredoo has rounded off another exciting edition of its popular Nojoom raffle draw.

14 lucky winners from across the Sultanate of Oman walked away with iPhone 13 handsets, BeIN Ultimate subscriptions, and the grand prize, where five winners will each receive two tickets for matches at the Fifa Arab Cup 2021 in Qatar, including flights and two nights in a four- or five-star hotel.

Meanwhile, members continue to win

loads of GBs of data and local calling minutes. With draws held daily, weekly and monthly, subscribers get more opportunities to win the more they use the programme.

With over two million members and counting, Nojoom is just one way that Ooredoo is pioneering an outstanding customer experience.

The exciting reward system offers unmatched value, premium recognition and exclusive rewards for both Shahry postpaid and Hala prepaid, as well as Home

Internet customers. Making it super simple, members can earn points simply by paying Ooredoo bills, or using any of the company’s services.

They can then redeem them on a wide range of services, in addition to enjoying exclusive deals and discounts from over 100 partners across the Sultanate of Oman. Start earning points right away by signing up for Nojoom through the Ooredoo app, available on iOS and Android, and as a web app for all other smartphones.

Own the Lexus IS with exclusive benefits

MUSCAT: Owning a Lexus IS is now even more attractive with exclusive benefits like free service 3 years/30,000 km (Whichever is earlier) and 1 year free registration. The campaign is valid up to December 30, 2021. (Conditions apply. Visit any Lexus showroom for details).

The new IS evokes lower, wider proportions with muscular fenders, reflecting the vehicle’s high performance. The sleek lines are also complemented with aggressive sharpness carved into the side and shoulder character lines.

Owners can choose from two engine options; an 2.0-litre, turbocharged and intercooled



inline four-cylinder engine delivering 241 hp and 35.7 kg.M of torque, and a sophisticated 3.5-litre V6 engine that produces 312 hp and 38.5 kg.M of torque. The two engines, paired with an eight-speed sport direct-shift automatic transmission, offers superb drivability, together with outstanding fuel efficiency and quietness even at high speed.

The IS distinct personality is completed by its exquisite interior, which invites drivers and passengers to enjoy a range of advanced features for a refined cabin experience. These include a new 10.3-inch touchscreen multimedia system featuring Apple CarPlay and Android Auto

compatibility, a 4.2-inch colour multi-information display (MID), and a dual-zone automatic climate control system with touch-sensitive controls.

The vehicle also offers SmartAccess with push-button start, a 17-speaker Mark Levinson sound system, a power moonroof, power adjustable and ventilated front seats, as well as ample luggage space thanks to the 60:40 split-folding rear seats.

As with any Lexus vehicle, safety is a top priority for the new Lexus IS.

For more information, please visit www.lexusoman.com or subscribe to YouTube channel “Lexus Oman”.

India pledges customised courses for Omanis under ITEC programme

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 15

The Embassy of India, Muscat, celebrated 'Indian Technical & Economic Cooperation' (ITEC) Day on Tuesday, December 14, 2021. Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Saeedi, Minister of Health, was the Chief Guest on this occasion.

The event was attended by about 100 participants, which included ITEC alumni from the Sultanate of Oman, comprising officials and professionals from diverse sectors who have participated in various training courses in India under ITEC Programme during previous years.

In his address, Dr Al Saeedi lauded historically close relations between India and the Sultanate of Oman. He mentioned that participation of a large number of Omanis in various ITEC courses in India over the years had further strengthened the bonds of friendship between the two countries.

Amit Narang, Ambassador of India to the Sultanate of Oman, noted that over the years ITEC Programme received a good response with hundreds of Omani officials taking part in ITEC



courses.

The ITEC Programme was launched in September 1964 as a bilateral programme of assistance of the Government of India for capacity building of friendly developing countries.

It has emerged as a key vehicle for India's contribution to Human Resource Development of partner countries. Under ITEC Programme, officials from

more than 160 countries from Asia, Africa, East Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean as well as Pacific and Small Island countries are invited to benefit from India's developmental experience.

The ITEC Programme offers over 14,000 courses annually covering diverse range of subjects from traditional areas like agriculture, SMEs, management, English language to IT, Science &

Technology, biotechnology, etc.

The skills which are being provided under ITEC Programme facilitate human resource development, capacity building, skill upgradation and empowerment. Ambassador Narang stressed that the Government of India is a strong partner in the Sultanate of Oman's journey to achieve the objectives of 'Oman Vision 2040'

for which Government of India's ITEC programme can be a key facilitator.

Specialised training, human resource development and skill upgradation is an integral part of this journey for which ITEC is an ideal platform. He committed that special customised courses can be organised dedicated for Omani candidates in their areas of interest.

Khazaen Dry Port inaugurated in Barka

FROM PAGE 13

The inland port, the Governor said, will help boost commercial and economic activities in the wilayats adjacent to Khazaen Economic City, particularly in the transport, warehousing and customs clearance fields.

Opportunities for youth-run businesses are promising as well.

The Transport Under-Secretary described the dry port as a new addition to the country's logistics infrastructure. It also has the potential to enhance the nation's competitiveness at the regional and global levels, and reflect positively on the country's Ease of Doing Business Index.

The Ministry, he said, is enhancing road connectivity between Khazaen Dry Port and Suwaiq Port, among other nearby governorates.

Colonel Said bin Khamis al Ghaithi, Director General of Customs at the Royal Oman Police, said the Customs authorities are keen to ensure that the dry port is well staffed and equipped to deliver integrated customs services via the Bayan system, aimed at minimising delays in the speedy release of cargo.

This is in line with the broad objectives of the Sultanate of Oman Logistics Strategy 2040, he said.

Dr Ahmed bin Mohammed al Abri, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Khazaen Dry Port and CEO of Asyad Ports and Harbours, said the official operation of the inland port will help strengthen the provision of integrated logistics services.

Furthermore, given its strategic location, the Sultanate of Oman has the potential to access a global market of two billion consumers through its integrated logistics system comprising commercial ports, international airports, ports and inland ports.

Khazaen represents a major transit points for goods from regional markets to reach global markets, he pointed out.

Established on an area of 100,000 sq metres as part of the first phase development, Khazaen Dry Port serves as a logistics hub linking the Sultanate of Oman and various regional countries.

It offers facilities for storage and re-exports, sea and air freight, and logistics.

A one-stop-shop offers the complete range of cargo clearance services. In addition to its capacity to handle 70,000 containers annually, the dry port also features a waiting area for trucks, storage for bonded goods, unloading and storage of conventional and reefer containers and other commodities.

Dr Al Abri said that plans are afoot to expand to area of the dry port by another 150,000 square metres in the second phase to keep pace with demand growth over the next five years. On the sidelines of the ceremony, the dry port authorities signed agreements with Naqel Express of Saudi Arabia to provide logistics services, and with Land & Sea Logistics Company of the Sultanate of Oman.

(With inputs from ONA)

Oil slips by more than 1% on rising supply, Omicron

LONDON: Oil prices fell for a third day straight on Wednesday on growing signs that supply growth will outpace demand next year, and as the World Health Organization said Covid-19 vaccines may be less effective against the Omicron variant.

Brent crude futures fell 80 cents, or 1.1 per cent, to \$72.75 a barrel by 11:11 GMT, after losing 69 cents on Tuesday.

US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures fell 88 cents, or 1.2 per cent, to \$69.70 a barrel, after losing 56 cents in the previous session.

The front-month Brent contract is trading at a small premium to the second month, after trading briefly at a small discount on Tuesday, a market structure known as contango. "Widespread restrictions will be the recipe for further gloom leading to continuous weakness and dealing with contango in the oil market in the next month or two has now become a possibility,"

Tamas Varga of oil brokerage PVM said.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) on Tuesday said a surge in Covid-19 cases with the emergence of the Omicron variant will dent global demand for oil at the same time that crude output is set to increase, especially in the United States, with supply set to exceed demand through at least the end of next year.

In contrast, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting (Opec) raised its world oil demand forecast for the first quarter of 2022.

In another bearish indicator, industry data showed that US crude inventories last week did not decline as much as expected.

American Petroleum Institute data showed US crude stocks fell by 815,000 barrels in the week ended Dec 10, according to market sources, compared with a 2.1 million barrel drop that 10 analysts polled by Reuters had expected. — **Reuters**



Flames emerge from flare stacks at Nahr Bin Umar oilfield as a worker wears a mask in Basra, Iraq. — **Reuters**

EU allows joint gas buying, plots low-carbon gas shift



A 10MW proton-exchange membrane electrolyser to make green hydrogen is seen in Germany, in this illustration. — **AFP**

BRUSSELS: The European Commission on Wednesday proposed rules allowing EU countries to jointly buy strategic reserves of gas, under plans that would also bolster gas storage and aim to add more low-carbon gases to the network.

European Union countries including Spain, Greece and Romania have called for joint gas buying, a move they say would help shore up supplies.

Gas prices surged to record highs in recent months, stoked by factors including high demand and lower-than-expected exports from Russia.

The European Commission has responded by proposing a system by which countries' transmission system operators (TSO) could jointly buy strategic stocks of gas, which could be used in an emergency situation of severe scarcity.

Participation would be voluntary and countries would first need to notify the Commission, sharing details including the volume to be

bought, the operating procedures to activate the supply in an emergency, and expected costs and benefits.

EU countries would also need to include storage in their regional assessments of gas supply risks, including relating to foreign ownership of storage infrastructure, under the Commission proposal. If they identify risks, countries should consider measures such as obliging TSOs to buy strategic stocks.

Spanish deputy prime minister Teresa Ribera told reporters on Tuesday that joint rather than individual purchasing could help secure better terms in global gas markets.

Officials from some other EU states have said they do not expect their countries to take part in such a scheme.

The EU executive body's proposal will not take effect in time to combat the gas price spike this winter. It could face months of negotiations between the European Parliament and

EU member countries, who must approve the rules and who disagree on the role of gas in the energy transition.

The proposal would require countries' long-term fossil gas contracts to end by 2050, the date by which the EU has pledged to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions.

Fossil gas provides roughly a quarter of EU energy, with 90 per cent of it imported.

To push more low-carbon gases into the grid, transmission system operators (TSOs) would be required to accept fossil gas with a blend of up to 5 per cent hydrogen from 2025 at cross-country interconnections, while hydrogen network operators would have to cooperate at EU level to help develop a market.

The EU has said its gas use must drop 25 per cent by 2030, from 2015 levels, to meet climate goals and that a shift to locally-produced renewable energy is its long-term defence against supply issues and the volatile price of imported fossil fuels. — **Reuters**

Toyota will send its hybrids to the breaker’s yard

Toyota Motor will make another major strategic shift in the coming months. The \$250 billion Japanese carmaker in December dramatically increased its electric-vehicle ambitions.

But the company run by Akio Toyoda is still devoting as much investment to hybrid vehicles. That is about to change.

Like rival Nissan Motor, Toyota has become an electrification laggard, ceding the early lead the Prius hybrid model gave it 25 years ago. Now, after a series of announcements in September and December, it intends to spend \$35 billion on batteries and electric vehicles. That’s double Nissan’s recent underwhelming target, but still shy of the 73 billion euros Volkswagen has committed.

Nonetheless, Toyoda now reckons his company can sell 4 million pure electric vehicles a year by 2030 — double the amount forecast just three months earlier. That would be impressive.

He has not, however, let go of Toyota’s love of hybrid engines. These are slated to account for another 4 million vehicles sold in nine years’ time.

Toyota is also dabbling in hydrogen technology for passenger cars, even though that’s better suited to large trucks and buses. The carmaker argues such technologies can effectively reduce pollution, and was one of several that refused to support a COP26 pledge to stop selling gasoline-powered vehicles by 2040.

It has also lobbied hard against purely electric propulsion requirements and more stringent tailgate emissions standards, the Sierra Club points out. Until recently, shareholders didn’t sweat these points. Aside from the occasional blip, Toyota’s stock over the past decade generally traded between 9 and 12 times forward earnings estimates, well ahead of traditional rivals, as befitting its market-leading pre-tax margin.

Then EV-touting Ford Motor and General Motors started to gain on Toyota’s valuation, despite far lower projected margins, per Refinitiv data. That may have sparked Toyoda into action. Sending his hybrid-heavy strategy to the breaker’s yard would allow for an even smoother ride. — Reuters

Toyota has become an electrification laggard, ceding the early lead the Prius hybrid model gave it 25 years ago



HOLDING BRAZIL’S PRIDE

A businessman holds an Alagoa Furnace cheese in Alagoa, southern region of Minas Gerais, Brazil. 57 Brazilian cheeses won medals at the biennial 'Mondial du Fromage' in Tours, France, in September. That put unsung Brazil, a country not widely known for its cheese, second only to France on the podium of the world’s best. — AFP

LED lighting can reduce energy costs



HAIDER AL LAWATI
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Many countries are replacing lighting systems with energy efficiency LED lamps and fixtures, whether in homes, streets, or other public places.

Studies have shown that these lights can reduce energy consumption by approximately 60 per cent, helping in the reduction of monthly electricity bills, both for individuals and organisations.

Given the energy consumption of complexes, commercial companies, exhibition spaces and other private sector businesses, the potential savings can be quite significant when LED light systems are installed.

New technologies and even the use of solar energy can help cut the annual expenditures of government and public sector institutions as well.

Additionally, energy efficient lighting systems can reduce carbon dioxide emissions, provide better street illumination for vehicles, and enhance safety for all.

In order for these projects to succeed, it

is necessary to restructure the partnership projects between the public and private sectors, and to expand and modernise public lighting for the benefit of every citizen and institution.

Most of these functions concern the municipalities that oversee street-lighting activities. By embracing energy efficient public lighting systems, municipal bodies can contribute to savings in energy costs for the government, and also create job opportunities for the local population in the process.

Through the formulation of such initiatives, some countries were able to create a permanent partnership between the public and private sectors, thereby mobilising private investments in modernising and expanding public and private lighting systems.

In the context of economic integration among the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, it is appropriate to provide street lights on road networks that connect our countries. We can rely on national products manufactured in the

GCC countries.

However, such initiatives necessitate funding allocations in state budgets as well as private investments to replace old-style lights that consume more energy with LED based lamps.

Today, we see that millions of people are benefiting from these technologies, especially in tourism, commercial and industrial projects, and in a number of other economic projects.

For its part, the World Bank supports moving forward in the implementation of such energy conservation projects through the exchange of knowledge and information, as well as studies and programmes.

The International Finance Corporation is also ready to support and develop such projects that help enhance the quality of people’s lives and nurture their business growth.

This enables increased investments in other areas that are essential to the well-being of the population, such as health, education and others.

Greening Europe’s fiscal rules



BARRY EICHENGREEN

The author is Professor of Economics at the University of California, Berkeley

WHERE INFRASTRUCTURE HAS NETWORK CHARACTERISTICS, AS IN TRANSPORTATION, SOMEONE HAS TO COORDINATE THE RELEVANT INVESTMENTS

The European Union is about to undergo a much-needed review of its fiscal status quo.

Experts at the European Commission are considering how the EU’s fiscal rulebook should be revised, and Germany’s new government has quietly signalled a willingness to consider changes — though any modifications there will most likely be limited, given disagreements within the coalition and control of the finance ministry by the fiscally conservative Free Democrats.

Arguments for reform are compelling. For starters, interest rates on public debt are only a fraction of what they were in 1992, when the EU’s fiscal rules were negotiated.

In 1992, rates on ten-year German government bonds averaged 8 per cent. Back then, 60 per cent of GDP was considered a prudent limit for how much debt a government could safely service, with annual budget deficits capped at 3 per cent of GDP. So surely

the prudent upper limit today is higher.

In fact, post-Covid debt ratios have blown past the 60 per cent ceiling for government borrowing.

Euro zone-wide government debt is 100 per cent of GDP. Three per cent of GDP just happened to be the deficit consistent with keeping the debt ratio stable at 60 per cent, given prevailing interest rates and growth rates.

Drivers obey traffic rules that make sense; they disregard rules that are arbitrary and capricious. We have seen similar behaviours on the part of Europe’s fiscal policymakers. These are reasons enough for a rethink.

Now, however, there is another: the need to make space for climate-related public investments. Cutting Europe’s greenhouse-gas (GHG) emissions by 55 per cent by the end of the decade will cost more than €5 trillion (\$5.6 trillion).

Because curbing GHG emissions is a public good, firms left to their own devices will

underinvest.

Moreover, where infrastructure has network characteristics, as in transportation, someone has to coordinate the relevant investments.

It follows that much of this spending will be done by governments.

So where will European governments find the better part of €5 trillion? Should they borrow it? And should the EU’s rules be revised to encourage them?

In the past, various governments have adopted a “golden rule” that exempts public investment from self-imposed limits on deficit spending, the rationale being that public investment pays for itself.

If productive, it grows the denominator of the debt-to-GDP ratio. If very productive, it generates tax revenues sufficient for servicing and paying off the additional debt.

Investment in the green economy could qualify. Even if it does not boost economic growth, it could avert a climate-related

disaster in which GDP plummets and the debt burden becomes unmanageable.

The current low level of interest rates creates a presumption that many green investment projects will meet the test.

Of course, there is no guarantee that interest rates will remain low. If they rise, the case for borrowing to finance green investment will become harder.

If some green investments fail the test, that does not necessarily mean they shouldn’t be made. Climate change is a moral as well as a narrowly economic issue, and how much to spend on combating it is for society to decide.

But it is an argument for raising taxes or cutting other spending so that green investment can be undertaken without running deficits and jeopardising debt sustainability.

Thus, the decision about how much to borrow, and how much to rely on taxes and cuts to other spending, should turn on forecasts of interest rates and growth rates,

and of how these variables will be affected by green investments. There is uncertainty, to be sure, surrounding such forecasts. Such is life.

Indeed, wouldn’t it be better if other forms of public spending were also subjected to this evaluation? European governments could systematically lay out how their various spending programmes will affect GDP and tax revenues and thus how the debt ratio will evolve.

They could acknowledge the uncertainty surrounding their forecasts and specify upside and downside scenarios. They could delegate responsibility for the assessment to independent national experts and the European Commission.

Disputes could be adjudicated by a specialised chamber of the European Court of Justice. But wait — these proposals are already out there! Unfortunately, they are likely to be a bridge too far for Germany’s new cohort of cautious policymakers.

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Classifieds

Need a Job

A young Omani Women looking for a job in Muscat. She holds a bachelor's degree in computer networks and has experience at Muscat International Airport.



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features

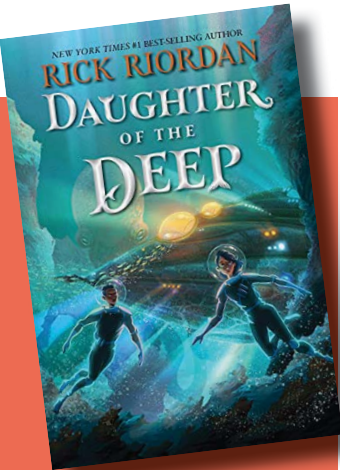


Gardens of Paradise:
The Language
of Flowers
in Iznik
Ceramics

The National Museum and Louvre Abu Dhabi inaugurated on Wednesday “Gardens of Paradise: The Language of Flowers in Iznik Ceramics,” an exhibition that aims to shed light on the art of Iznik ceramics decorated with flowers and the special symbols it embodies related to evoking Quranic descriptions that recall the gardens of Paradise. Here’s what you have to know about the event... **P20**

ENTERTAINMENT

READ



DAUGHTER
OF THE DEEP
BY RICK RIORDAN

Ana Dakkar faces the weekend trials at the Harding-Pencroft Academy.

Rave reviews may help ‘Spider-Man’ deliver holiday gift to theatres

THE NEWEST “Spider-Man” movie adventure won glowing reviews from film critics, and box office analysts predicted the superhero action spectacle would set pandemic-era sales records at cinemas this weekend.

“Spider-Man: No Way Home,” produced by Sony Corp’s movie studio and Walt Disney Co, stars Tom Holland

as Marvel’s web-slinging superhero and Zendaya as his girlfriend, MJ. The film opens exclusively in theatres on Friday.

As of Tuesday afternoon, “No Way Home” had earned a 98-per cent positive score from 65 reviews collected on the Rotten Tomatoes website. Supporters said the storyline would please old and new fans

alike.

“‘Spider-Man: No Way Home’ is a goliath that feels destined to eat the world, a potent combination of the ongoing Marvel Cinematic Universe and nostalgia for what came before,” said Esther Zuckerman of Thrillist.

Brian Truitt of USA Today called the film “a rousing entry that doubles as a love letter to the comic-book character, a film very much about second chances and a cleverly crafted reminder of that famous adage: ‘With great power comes great responsibility.’”

Advance ticket demand has been strong, a welcome sign for movie theatre chains, including AMC Entertainment, Cinemark and Cineworld that are still struggling to lure back audiences amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

The holiday season around Christmas typically ranks as the second-biggest movie-going period of the year, but recent box-office tallies are hovering well below pre-pandemic levels.

Steven Spielberg’s “West Side Story” remake disappointed with \$10.6 million in domestic ticket sales last weekend, prompting new questions in Hollywood about what it will take to attract crowds back to theatres.

First-day presales for “No Way Home” were the highest recorded by ticket seller Fandango since 2019’s “Avengers: Endgame,” the second-highest grossing movie of all time.

“We’ve worked so hard on this film,” Holland said in an interview with Reuters. “For it to be so well-received is awesome.” — Reuters





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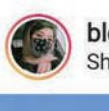
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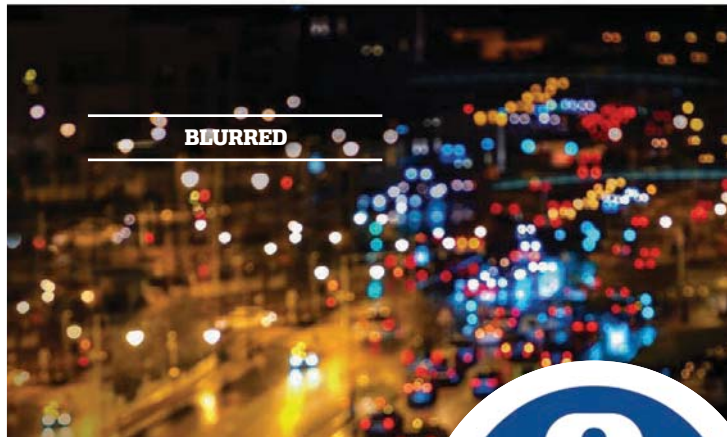
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WHAT'S AHEAD



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AROUND THE WORLD

DISCOVERY

Half of Brits cannot cook traditional Xmas dinner: Survey



NEARLY HALF OF adults in Britain cannot cook a full Christmas dinner that includes all the traditional trimmings, according to a survey unveiled on Wednesday.

Around 47 per cent of respondents admitted they would be unable to cook a December 25 meal featuring roast turkey, cranberry sauce, bread sauce, Christmas pudding, mince pies and other storied elements.

The poll of 2,001 adults conducted earlier this month by researchers Census wide on behalf of food and grocery chain Co-op found that around one in three do not plan to cook a



Christmas dinner.

Around a third blamed never having been taught the cookery skills needed, while a third said they did not have the space or equipment to pull off making the dinner.

Cranberry sauce was the most challenging part to cook, with around four out of five people saying they could not make the sweet turkey accompaniment from scratch.

Bread sauce — another festive staple made from milk thickened with breadcrumbs — and Christmas pudding were next on the list of insurmountable dinner elements.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents conceded they would not be able to cook them.

However, people were more comfortable with roast potatoes and turkey, with only a third not able to make the vegetables and 40 per cent not confident of cooking the bird.

More than half of those surveyed — 55 per cent — said they would rely on others to cook for them on December 25, while 15 per cent revealed they would not eat a Christmas dinner. —**AFP**

CULTURE



Southern Thai dance form 'nora' gets Unesco heritage status

DANCERS MOVED gracefully in a circle, their beaded dress pieces swaying as they struck bird-like poses in a dance-drama known as "nora" — a southern Thai performance art which was added on Wednesday to Unesco's prestigious heritage list.

The dramatic art form — combining dancing, singing and storytelling — has roots in India, and has been practised in Thailand's Muslim-majority southernmost provinces for centuries.

Performances are usually a dramatic retelling of the tale of a local prince who tries to rescue Manora — a half-human, half-bird princess, whose shortened name gives the art its name.

The ultra-elaborate show-cases can last for up to three days.

Unesco on Wednesday officially listed nora as Thailand's "Intangible Cultural Heritage" — a move that could potentially bring more global recognition to a dance typically only seen in small village gatherings in the kingdom's south.

In Narathiwat province's Sungai Padi district — not far from Malaysia's border — young dancers on Saturday carefully pulled on their costumes, with lines of beads strung together in a kaleidoscopic display of colours and patterns.

The backs of their dress pieces swooped upwards, mimicking a bird's tail.

"Nora is important to southerners for two reasons — first, it is for entertainment... the dance conveys messages which teaches people to do good for good karma," said Vichien Ratanaboon, president of the province's dance group.

"And second, it is about ceremony and beliefs. Manora will be performed during ceremonies to show respect to our teachers and parents. It's to

demic started.

The high school student has been performing for nearly seven years, initially picking it up together with some friends.



show our gratitude," he said.

As a small band played the drums and pi nai — an oboe-like instrument — the five dancers twirled around, their expressive finger movements accentuated by their long silver nail tips.

Covid-19 restrictions over the past 20 months have meant fewer public performances, as large gatherings in hotspots were banned.

"After Covid emerged, there have been no plays... it caused us to have no gigs," said 18-year-old Nitichaya Sooksan, adding that Saturday was their first performance since the pandemic started.

Longtime nora performer Saman Dosormi — who is also a graduate student of performance arts in nearby Yala province — said the dance shows off the southern provinces' "shared culture" of Buddhist Thais and ethnic Malay Muslims.

"It doesn't matter whether you are Buddhist, Muslim or Christian — anyone can perform this dance," he said.

"I am very delighted (about nora's Unesco listing) — I'd like for all Thai cultural arts to be recognised by the world," he said. — **AFP**

COOK LIKE A CHEF



Mushroom Whisk Soup

NOW THAT WINTER is finally here, there's no better way to spend the weekend at home than learning a new way of cooking soup. In today's Cook Like A Chef, Chef Jakhr Sha of The View in Al Hamra is sharing one of his beloved dishes served at the cold mountains often incorporating local ingredients to bring out the best flavours of his dishes.

Soup for 2 pax

INGREDIENTS

20 ml Olive oil
30 gms Mushroom
100 ml Veg stock
20 ml Light fresh cream
Salt & Pepper to taste
White onion, half medium
1 Tbsp Parsley
15 gms Parmesan cheese

RECIPE

Add olive oil to the heated pan, add onion till light brown. Then add cut mushroom and add salt and pepper to taste. Add vegetable stock and boil for 10-15 mins. Strain the mix and separate the mushrooms. Prepare a paste of mushroom and add again to stock. Warm the mix and add parmesan cheese. Dish out in a soup bowl sprinkle parsley. Serve it hot.

ABOUT THE CHEF:

CHEF JAKHR SHA is currently the Executive Chef of The View Eco-Resort in Al Hamra. Now in the Sultanate of Oman for more than a decade, Chef Jakhr started out his career as a Commis 1 in Tripura International Hotel in India in 1997. Specialising in Indian cuisine, he would later move on as a demi-chef at Taj Gateway Hotel in 1999 and to the GRT Temple Bay in India a year later picking up some skills and expertise in Chinese Cuisines as an addition to his growing resume. He moved to Muscat as Senior Chef in Marina Bandar Rowdha in 2002 and served as multi-cuisine head chef at Oman Sail from 2010 onwards. Today, Chef Jakhr is enjoying the beauty of the mountains where he utilises local produce in many of his dishes passionate and dedicated to adding diversity to the food scene in the Al Hamra area.





Gardens of Paradise: The Language of Flowers in Iznik Ceramics

BY STAFF REPORTER

The National Museum inaugurated at Splendours of Islam Gallery the "Gardens of Paradise: The Language of Flowers in Iznik Ceramics" exhibition in cooperation with the Louvre Abu Dhabi on Wednesday, December 15, 2021.

The inauguration was under the patronage of Her Highness Dr Mona bint Fahd al Said, Assistant Vice Chancellor of Sultan Qaboos University for International Cooperation and Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the National Museum. Manuel Rabaté, Director of the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum, attended the inauguration ceremony and a number of specialists from the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum, in addition to a number of their Highnesses and Excellences in the Sultanate of Oman, a number of ambassadors of the Arab Gulf countries accredited to the Sultanate of Oman and a number of people interested in cultural and museum affairs, within the joint cooperation between the National Museum and the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum. The exhibition aims to shed light on the art of Iznik ceramics decorated with flowers and the special symbols it embodies related to evoking Quranic descriptions that recall the gardens of Paradise. The exhibition will continue for a whole year (from December 15, 2021, until December 1, 2022). The exhibition is abounding with selected collections of Iznik Ceramic decorated with flowers that were naturally depicted on artworks, as Ottoman art in general and ceramic arts, in particular, passed a turning point in the 16th century. The skilled craftsmen and potters enriched their visual repertoire to include artistic representation for the harmonious flowers of roses, birch, carnations, and tulips, this pattern of the "four flowers" departs from the previous geometric patterns, and focuses on depicting the types of flowers that were growing at that time in the gardens of Istanbul. Some flowers also had a special symbolic significance, such as the tulip, whose Turkish name is (Lalah). The shape of the flower when opened appears to draw the word "Allah", as for the rose, it is only associated in our minds with the name of the Messenger of God, Muhammad (Peace be upon him) and by recalling the Quranic descriptions that mention the Gardens of Paradise, and this is an invitation to the visitor to contemplate the meanings of flowers and their connection to Paradise.

Jamal bin Hassan al Moosawi, Secretary-General of the National Museum, said: "The National Museum is honoured to host in an exhibition from the Louvre Abu Dhabi titled: "Gardens of Paradise: The Language of Flowers in Iznik Ceramics", an embodiment of the bilateral cooperation, which was established in 2017, when a number

of Omani museum artefacts were loaned to be displayed in the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum, to introduce visitors to the civilisation of the land of frankincense and the civilised role of the Sultanate of Oman on the Maritime Silk Road.

"We are excited to lend six 16th-century Iznik ceramics from the museum's collection to The National Museum of Oman for the first time in the region. It is an integral part of our mission to make our permanent collection accessible to the widest possible audience and to ensure the further development of our ongoing partnership," Manuel Rabaté, Director of the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum said.

Iznik is a small city in Turkey in the Marmara Plain that was known

Iznik is a small city in Turkey in the Marmara Plain that was known during the Byzantine era as "Nicaea", about 90 km from Istanbul. The city is famous for its ceramics industry, as it is considered one of the greatest centres of the Ottoman ceramics industries in Turkey

during the Byzantine era as "Nicaea", about 90 km from Istanbul. The city is famous for its ceramics industry, as it is considered one of the greatest centres of the Ottoman ceramics industries in Turkey. The decoration of pottery with roses and flowers comes as a kind of evoking the bliss that God will bestow upon Muslims in the Gardens of Paradise, and in which they will encounter what is more beautiful than these worldly flowers. The cooperation between the National Museum in the Sultanate of Oman and the Louvre Abu Dhabi Museum started in the year 2017 following the signing of an agreement to lend Omani museum artefacts of various historical dimensions represented in the historical treasure of al-Qubba, which includes more than 400 silver dirhams dating back to the early Islamic eras, and a shell incense burner carrying frankincense petrified. This cooperation was in support of the objectives of the National Museum that were drawn up since its establishment, including participating in highlighting the cultural and historical heritage of the Sultanate of Oman at the regional and international levels, with the

aim of reaching a wide segment of the public, and strengthening the bonds of museum cooperations with leading international museums, in a manner that achieves the advancement of the name of the Sultanate of Oman.

The National Museum is the Sultanate of Oman's flagship cultural institution, showcasing the Sultanate's cultural heritage from the earliest evidence of human settlement in the Omani Peninsula to the present day through which we look forward to our promising future. The Museum was established by Royal Decree 62/2013, issued on 16 Muharram 1435 AH (corresponding to 20 November 2013), as a legal entity with financial and administrative independence and the capacity to own, manage and dispose of tangible and intangible assets of the Sultanate of Oman's cultural heritage, in line with internationally recognised experiences and standards in classifying ancient museums. The Museum aims to achieve its educational, cultural and humanitarian mission by consolidating noble Omani values, activating belonging, and raising public awareness among citizens, residents and visitors about the Sultanate of Oman, its history, heritage and culture, and by developing their creative and intellectual abilities, especially in the areas of preserving evidence, collectables, and highlighting the cultural dimensions of the Sultanate of Oman, and by employing and adopting the best practices and standards in the field of museum sciences. Created by an exceptional agreement between the governments of Abu Dhabi and France, Louvre Abu Dhabi was designed by Jean Nouvel and opened on Saadiyat Island in November 2017. The museum is inspired by traditional Islamic architecture and its monumental dome creates a rain of light effect and a unique social space that brings people together. Louvre Abu Dhabi celebrates the universal creativity of mankind and invites audiences to see the humanity in a new light. Through its innovative curatorial approach, the museum focuses on building understanding across cultures: through stories of human creativity that transcend civilisations, geographies and times. The museum's growing collection is unparalleled in the region and spans thousands of years of human history, including prehistoric tools, artefacts, religious texts, iconic paintings and contemporary artworks. The permanent collection is supplemented by rotating loans from 13 French partner institutions, regional and international museums. Louvre Abu Dhabi is a testing ground for new ideas in a globalised world and champions new generations of cultural leaders. Its international exhibitions, programming and Children's Museum are inclusive platforms that connect communities and offer enjoyment for all.

