

P12

MIAMI EXPECTS TROPHIES FROM MESSI'S FIRST FULL SEASON IN MLS



P13

THAMRAIT INDUSTRIAL CITY TO DRIVE DHOFAR'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



P20

THIS BOTANICAL GARDEN IN BOUSHAR BLENDS NATURE WITH EDUCATION



MUSCAT

OPINION POLL ON SOCIAL MEDIA USE

The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) launched a new opinion poll aimed at drawing a national framework for dealing with social media by evaluating children's use of these applications. The survey, which continues until February 20, aims to identify the applications mostly used by children, measure the extent to which families follow the use of these platforms, evaluate their impact on children's behaviour, determine their areas of use of social media applications, and determine the appropriate age for using these applications among them. **DETAILS ON P4**

OMANI-SAUDI JV PLANT NEAR JEDDAH

Acting in cooperation with the Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman in Riyadh, Omani firm Voltamp Energy signed a strategic partnership agreement with Saudi firm Al Sharif Holding Group to establish a factory called 'Saudi Voltamp' for the production of high-voltage power transformers. The two-phase plant, which will be set up in the Saudi western province near the city of Jeddah, has attracted investments worth RO 9.5 million in its first phase. The first phase of the project will occupy and area of 27,000 square metres. It is set to produce high-voltage power transformers of up to 132 kilovolts and it is expected to be ready by 2025. **SEE P13**



Members of the Palestinian civil defence extinguish a fire in a building following Israeli bombardments east of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Monday. – AFP

UN to hold Gaza ceasefire vote

NEW YORK: Despite opposition from the US government, the UN Security Council still plans to hold a Gaza war ceasefire vote on Tuesday. The draft resolution tabled by Algeria and others will be put to a vote at 10:30 am (16:30 GMT) in New York.

Given concerns about a possible major Israeli offensive on the city of Rafah in southern Gaza, the vote increases pressure on the United States. US Ambassador Linda Thomas-

Greenfield had declared that the US would once again use its veto power in the Security Council should a vote be held.

Meanwhile, it is learnt that the United States has proposed a rival draft United Nations Security Council resolution that would underscore the body's "support for a temporary ceasefire in Gaza as soon as practicable," according to the text seen on Monday.

The US draft text also "determines that under current

circumstances a major ground offensive into Rafah would result in further harm to civilians and their further displacement including potentially into neighbouring countries."

The draft US resolution says such a move "would have serious implications for regional peace and security, and therefore underscores that such a major ground offensive should not proceed under current circumstances." **SEE ALSO P6**

Roads linking tourist places to get priority

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, Feb 19

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology said that many strategic road projects will be taken up on priority this year, including those planned to provide connectivity to important and popular tourist areas.

Key projects that are expected to make progress this year include the alternative road that connects Al Batinah South Governorate to Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, the design and implementation of Wadi Bani Jaber Road (Phase 2) in Al Sharqiyah South, Saih Qatna Road in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar and the road linking Jabal Shams.

The ministry has also floated a tender for the implementation of the new alternative road to Al Jabal Al Akhdhar from Al Batinah South Governorate. According to

a top official at the ministry, this road project is important as it will easily link prominent tourist sites with the rest of the country.

"Al Jabal Al Akhdhar is one of them as the place has so much potential. Presently, there is only one road to reach Al Jabal Al Akhdhar which is hard to navigate for smaller cars. So, the ministry is Looking at one or two alternatives where even smaller cars could travel with ease," he said.

The ministry has invited a tender for supervision and consultancy services for the construction of a road to Jabal Shams in the Wilayat of Al Hamra in the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. The scope of the work includes about 26.2-km (Phase 1), and 6.1 km (Phase 2). Jabal Shams is the highest peak in the Sultanate of Oman at an altitude of 3,004 metres above sea level, and has plenty of slopes and summits.



مدينة السلطان هيثم
SULTAN HAITHAM CITY

TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT
FOR PHASE ONE IN SULTAN
HAITHAM CITY PROJECT

إعلان مناقصات
في المرحلة الأولى
لمشروع مدينة السلطان هيثم

يسر وزارة الإسكان التخطيط العمراني وبالتنسيق مع الأمانة العامة لمجلس المناقصات دعوة الشركات المتخصصة والمفيدة بالدرجة الممتازة من ذوي الخبرة للمشاركة في مناقصة التالية:
يمكن الحصول على المستندات عن طريق الموقع التالي:
etendering.tenderboard.gov.om

The Ministry of Housing and Urban-Planning with coordination with the General Secretariat of The Tender Board invites **excellent** companies specialised and with good track-record on respective field to participate in the following Tender:
You can obtain the documents through the following website: etendering.tenderboard.gov.om

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SHC's portfolio

ملف المدينة

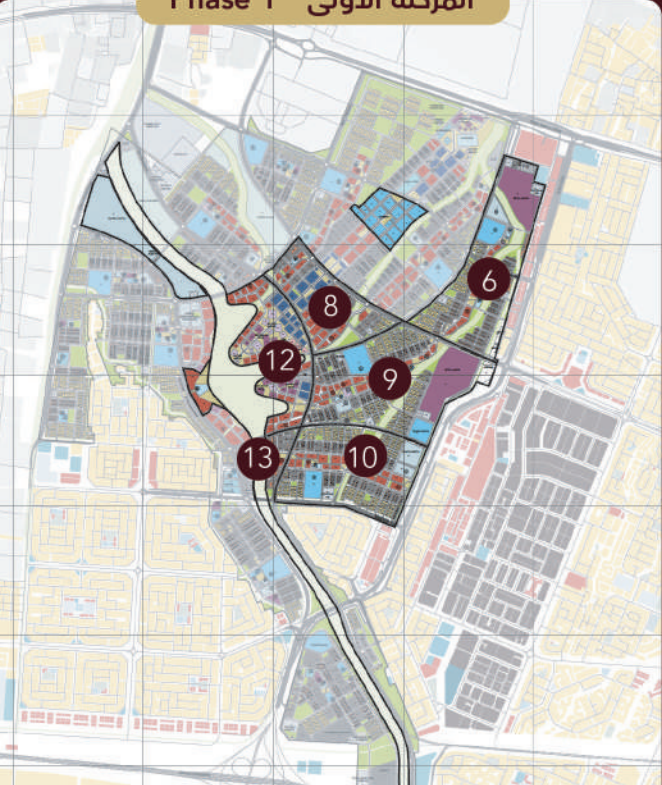


Scan the QR code to download the portfolio

المسحوق QR للحصول على الملف

الدرجة GRADE	رقم المناقصة TENDER NUMBER
Excellent الممتازة	متوفرة بنظام التناقص الإلكتروني يوم الأحد 2024/2/25
TENDER NAME	إسم المناقصة
Bridges Of Contruction	أعمال تنفيذ عدد (5) جسور خرسانية
Construction Of (5) Nos, Concrete Bridges Of Various Lengths at Various Locations across the Wadi and Big-Park	أعمال تنفيذ عدد (5) جسور خرسانية بأطوال مختلفة تربط شوارع المدينة وتقطع الوادي لربط المدينة بالأحياء المجاورة.
Bid Submission Closing آخر موعد لتقديم العطاءات	Tender Document Sales End date آخر موعد للحصول على مستندات المناقصة
2024/3/24 10:00 AM	2024/3/3 05:00 PM
BID SUBMISSION DETAILS	آلية تقديم العطاءات
Please visit: etendering.tenderboard.gov.om	يرجى زيارة الموقع: etendering.tenderboard.gov.om
	
+968 9671 7716 - +968 9951 1778	لل التواصل والاستفسار For contact and inquiries
shc@housing.gov.om	

Phase 1 المرحلة الأولى



المساحة المستهدفة
DEVELOPMENT AREA
+600
Hectare

LAND AREA
مساحة الأرض
4,222,762 sqm

POPULATION
عدد السكان
35,000

NUMBER UNITS
عدد الوحدات السكنية
6,700

BUILDING AREA
مساحة البناء
2,217,970 sqm

WEATHER

MUSCAT: Max 26°C Min 23°C SALALAH: Max 28°C Min 23°C NIZWA: Max 29°C Min 18°C

PRAYER TIMINGS

SUNRISE: 06:37 FAJR: 05:21 DHUHR: 12:26 ASR: 15:43 MAGHRIB: 18:10 ISHA: 19:20



OMAN TAKES PART IN 8TH GCC TOURISM MINISTERS MEETING

DOHA: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, on Monday took part in the 8th meeting of the GCC Tourism Ministers, which was held in the Qatari capital, Doha.

Oman's delegation was led by Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism.

The meeting discussed the GCC tourism strategy and means of promoting the GCC joint action in the tourism and heritage sectors.

— ONA



Foreign Under-Secretary receives Chinese official



The two sides discussed aspects of cooperation between the two countries. — ONA

MUSCAT: Shaikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Foreign Ministry for Diplomatic Affairs received on Monday Wang Di, Director General of the Department of West Asian and North African Affairs of the Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed aspects of cooperation between the two countries and means of enhancing them in various fields.

They also exchanged views on the latest developments on Israel's war against the Palestinians in Gaza and its regional and

international repercussions.

The meeting was attended by Li Lingbing, Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to the Sultanate of Oman, Shaikh Abdulaziz bin Saif al Hosni, Head of the Asia-Pacific Department and several officials from both sides.

— ONA

Middle East Scholarship Forum concludes

MUSCAT: The ICEF Middle East Scholarship Forum, hosted by the Sultanate of Oman, concluded on Monday. The event, organised spearheaded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation in collaboration with the ICEF Foundation, attracted over 100 international educational institutions and more than 150 representatives from Gulf government bodies.

It also welcomed contributors from private universities and colleges, fostering collaboration and enriching academic exchange programmes.

On the second and final day of the forum, Omani and Gulf higher education institutions engaged in bilateral meetings with their counterparts from participating international countries, as well as entities specialising in scholarship services.

Chairman of the Board of Directors of Gulf College, emphasised the forum's significance as an opportunity to align and assess the state of the higher education sector in the Sultanate of Oman with renowned international universities.

Notable participants included institutions from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, as well as prominent Arab and Gulf universities.

Faisal al Zahrani from Taif University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia underscored the forum's role as a platform for exchanging experiences and insights.

He noted that it provided an avenue for reviewing challenges faced by institutions, exploring best international practices in scholarship administration, and staying abreast of new systems in registration and admission processes for

higher education institutions, along with the development of student exchange programmes.

Dr Khaled al Dhanhani, Chairman of the Fujairah Cultural Council in the UAE, stated, "Individual discussions contributed to learning about the best successful practices in education and scholarships. We also engaged with several educational institutions expressing a desire to enhance cooperation and draw from our cultural experiences."

Moza bint Mohammed al Hindasiyah, Director of the Department of Public Relations and Media, Al Sharqiya University, said, "Participation in the forum opened up prospects for cooperation and the establishment of a network of international relations, particularly in matters related to the field of higher education."

— ONA



LIBYAN EMBASSY CELEBRATES NATIONAL DAY



MUSCAT: The Libyan Embassy held a reception on Monday evening on the occasion of the Libyan National Day at the Crowne Plaza Hotel. The ceremony was attended by a number of officials in the Sultanate of Oman, heads of diplomatic missions accredited to the Sultanate of Oman, and officials from the Foreign Ministry.

— ONA

Observer mourns demise of long-time colleague

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Shaji Varghese, an employee of the Oman Daily Observer for over three decades, passed away after a brief illness in his hometown, Pathanamthitta, Kerala, early on Monday. He was working as a graphic designer at the time of his death.

Shaji Varghese, fondly known as Shaji among his colleagues and friends, served Observer since 1992 and had been a part of the daily in bringing to the readers the national march of renaissance.

"It is a sad day for the Observer family. May Allah Almighty rest his

soul in peace and grant strength to the bereaved family and friends to bear this irreparable loss," said Abdullah al Shueili, Editor-in-Chief of Observer.

The 'ever-smiling Shaji' was a man for all seasons. Whether addressing production concerns, page-making challenges, or offering spontaneous support, Shaji was the guiding light.

"In this tragic moment, our heartfelt prayers go to his family, hoping they find the strength to endure the loss, and may God protect and support them during this difficult time. It is really shocking news! The void created by the demise of Shaji will remain



Shaji Varghese

forever as he was so dear to one and all at work. RIP and condolences to Shaji's family," said Shaddad al Musalmy, Senior Editor, Observer.

"More than a dedicated colleague,

Shaji is a good human being, and we all at Observer will miss him," said M Rajesh, News Editor, who knows him for more than two decades.

Yasser al Kiyumi, chief designer, who knew Shaji for almost 19 years, says he was a best friend who will be missed by him and his colleagues in the designer department. Shaji worked hard and was very cooperative in his daily duties, he recalled.

Samuel Kutty, a former colleague who started his career at the Observer around the same time as Shaji, said, "Shaji was known to me for more than 25 years and professionally, he was exemplary. His commitment to work was

unparalleled. Before joining the graphic department, Shaji worked in the purchasing department. In the late 90s when Observer was not fully computerised, Shaji was of great help to the editorial staff in finishing the work and sending the paper for print. In every trying circumstance, he was available with his assistance help disregarding the duty hours."

Another long-time colleague Samba Sawant said, "Shaji will always be remembered for being a happy person. May God rest his soul in peace and give his family and friends strength to cope during this difficult time."

Shaji is survived by wife Jessy

Mariam George, working in SQUH, daughters Irene Anna Shaji (Architect), and Ilene Maria Shaji who is pursuing MBBS.

Vicars, managing committee and all parish members of the Mar Gregorios Orthodox Maha Edavaka (MGOME) extended their heartfelt condolences to the bereaved family and remembered him as a very loyal and service-oriented believer who never spared any opportunity to help fellow beings hoping for the departed soul rest in eternal peace.

Family members of the deceased informed that the funeral will be held at St Stephen's Orthodox Cathedral Church, Makkamkunnun on Wednesday.



OMANI TOURISTS NEED TO PAY \$10 TAX IN BALI: EMBASSY

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 19

The Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman in Jakarta said that all foreign tourists, including Omani citizens, planning to visit the Republic of Indonesia must pay \$10 or 150,000 Indonesian rupees as a tax.

Certain categories of people

are exempted from paying the tax imposed by the Bali Provincial Government, which includes holders of diplomatic and official visas, crew of transport vehicles, holders of a temporary residence card (KITAS), or a permanent residence card (KITAP), student visa holders and golden visa holders.

International visitors now have to pay this amount on top of the usual \$50 for a visa on arrival. The tax can be paid by visiting the Love Bali website, lovebali.baliprov.go.id, or downloading the Love Bali app. To pay, travellers must enter details including their passport number, arrival date, and full name. They will then be

emailed a voucher to present on arrival.

The money will be used to make tourism in Bali more sustainable. It will go towards better waste management and the preservation of local culture and the environment.

It will also be channelled into building quality infrastructure and transportation.



The money will be used to make tourism in Bali more sustainable

Sohar University conference looks at sustainable economy

SIHAM AL SAIDI
SUHAR, FEB 19

Sohar University kicked off the fifth edition of the Environmental Law and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Conference on its campus from February 19 to 20, with the title 'Legislation Towards a Sustainable Economy in the MENA Region: Current Status and Future Directions' under the auspices of Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour.

The conference, sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in collaboration with the Policy Law Programme in the Middle East and North Africa (SADER) for legal publishing, and Unesco Chair on Environmental Law, at Hamad bin Khalifa University, Doha, Qatar, aims to bring together experts in environmental education, university lecturers, trainers and practitioners in environmental law to exchange knowledge and experience on enhancing environmental law education and practice in the region.

The conference will mainly cover four main fields related to international environmental law and sustainable development goals, local and regional approaches and the involvement of various stakeholders in addressing the latest developments in adopting environmental, social and governance standards.

During the opening ceremony, Dr Hamdan bin Sulaiman al Fazari, Sohar University Vice-Chancellor, emphasised



The conference included a number of workshops on a number of legal topics related to the environment, including the rule of international environmental law. – ONA



the role of environmental law in accelerating progress toward achieving sustainable development goals in the region.

He highlighted the university's commitment to sustainable development goals, particularly those related to environmental law, through partnerships with the industrial sector and the community, including scientific and research projects.

Dr Abdullah bin Ali bin Abdullah al Amri, Chairman of the Environment Authority, highlighted the stages of development of environmental institutions and legislation in

Oman, the efforts and results aligning with 'Oman Vision 2040' and their strategic sustainable goals.

The conference hosted distinguished guests from different countries such as Dr Prof Patricia Mbote, Director of the Law Division at the United Nations Environment Programme and Prof Damilola Olawuyi, Unesco Chair in Environmental Law and Sustainable Development at Hamad bin Khalifa University, among other researchers and others around the world.

The conference programme included panel discussions

featuring deans of law colleges from various universities in the region, as well as workshops on topics such as international environmental law sovereignty and sustainable development goals, integrated approaches and multiple stakeholder involvement regarding sustainable development goals, and enhancing environmental law education on biodiversity conservation and nature preservation.

Additionally, Sohar University organised a sightseeing tour for conference guests in Sohar to acquaint them with its landmarks and Omani culture.

UTAS Al Musannah releases first book on sustainable growth



The event was held under the auspices of Dr Said bin Hamad al Rubaie, Vice-Chancellor, University of Technology and Applied Sciences

MUSCAT: The inauguration ceremony of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) first book titled 'Strategies for Business Transformation- Accelerators for Sustainable Growth' was held last week.

The event was held under the auspices of Dr Said bin Hamad al Rubaie, Vice-Chancellor, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, in the presence of Dr Ahmed bin Ali al Shahri, Assistant Vice-Chancellor at the university branch in Salalah, Dr Nasser bin Salim al Bimani, Assistant Vice-Chancellor, university branch in Al Musannah, deputies, authors, and academics.

Dr Nasser bin Salim al Bimani, in his speech, hailed the distinguished role played by the university and its affiliates in the field of scientific research, among other areas.

Dr Aziza bint Abdullah al Qamshouai, Head of the Business Studies Department, at the university branch in Al Musannah, presented a visual overview of the university's first

book and the most important upcoming research projects. The book aims to support the prominent priority of Oman Vision 2040, which focuses on a sustainable national economy and establishing effective, balanced and strong systems.

"In today's rapidly evolving business landscape, the need for institutions to adapt and transform is more important than ever. This transformation should ensure a balance between economic, environmental and social requirements according to the principles of sustainable development outlined in 'Oman Vision 2040,'" he said.

One of the notable features of this edition is its issuance with the international standard number registered under the name of UTAS, making it the first registered edition as intellectual property under the name of the university. The university owns all copyrights and the edition includes digital identifiers for the book to ensure easy access for interested parties and proper documentation for easier impact assessment.

OWA launches 'Eshraqat Ahad' for 213 artists

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, FEB 19

For the first time in the Sultanate of Oman, the 'Eshraqat Ahad' forum was launched on February 19 to draw the image of the Honourable Lady as part of a national artistic demonstration.

The event was held in most of the Omani Women's Association (OWA) in the governorates and arts ceremonies affiliated with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth.

Maryam bint Mohammed bin Abdulkarim al Zadjalayah, President, OWA, Muscat and Head of the Forum's Supervision Committee, said, "The forum which was announced on January 14, attracted large numbers of artists, nearly a total of 300 participants from various governorates of which about 213 applications were approved."



The forum comes as an initiative from the Omani Women's Association in Muscat in recognition and gratitude for the Honourable Lady's support of Omani women in various fields of work

Al Zadjalayah added that the initial screening of names and works revealed distinguished Omani talents in various fields, including many emerging talents. This proved that such events are worthy of encouragement taking



the role in shaping and developing national talents.

The forum comes as an initiative from the OWA in Muscat in recognition and gratitude for the Honourable Lady's support of Omani women in various



fields of work. The choice of fine arts drew attention to its role as a tool for expressing national identity.

Al Zadjalayah also said that the roles played by the Honourable Lady at the national level deserve such a celebration

that raises the appreciation and gratitude that befits her.

A deadline of one month was provided for the artists to produce artistic work from February 19 to March 19.

All the headquarters of women's associations, as well as the youth centres affiliated with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, are prepared to host the artists, as the committee provided all the tools an artist needs.

The step also allows various schools of fine art to participate in this national artistic competition.

Maryam thanked the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for its unlimited support for organising the forum. She also thanked the supporters from the private sector and the Omani women's associations participating in this demonstration by harnessing their capabilities to make the forum a success.



U N R A V E L L I N G

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CHILDREN

AFRAH
AL BALUSHI
@afrahalbalushia

USING social networking sites has become a daily chore for children that steals many hours from their day. A new survey by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) purposes to draw a national framework for dealing with social media through evaluating children's use of these applications.

The survey sample includes about 2,500 men and women citizens aged 18 years and above from various governorates of Sultanate of Oman and educational levels, which allows obtaining estimates for most indicators at the overall level.

The survey seeks to reveal the applications most used by children, measure the extent to which families follow the use of these platforms, evaluate their impact on children's behaviour, determine their areas of use of social media applications, and determine the appropriate age for using these applications among them.

Social media is a big part of many children's lives. This makes it possible to create online identities, connect with others, and create social networks. Children use social media for entertainment and self-expression as platforms can expose them to current events, allow them to interact across geographic barriers and teach them about a variety of topics.

However, social media use can negatively impact them by distracting them, disrupting sleep, exposing them to bullying, and spreading



The dangers of social media on children emphasises the need for awareness programmes and educational curricula

DR AMJAD BIN
HASSAN AL HAJ

Assistant Professor of Social Work,
Department of Sociology and Social Work,
College of Arts and Social Sciences, SQU

gossips and unrealistic views about the lives of others. Therefore, risks may be related to the extent of adolescents' social media use.

The survey will help develop national plans and programmes to regulate children's use of social media, contribute to raising families' awareness of the importance of monitoring their children's use of these platforms, and provide valuable data to decision-makers about children's online behaviour.

Through the results of a previous survey in 2019 conducted by the NCSI indicated that 94 per cent of Omanis have accounts on social media, and the most popular of these is the WhatsApp application, which is used by 93 per cent of users of social media platforms, followed by YouTube at 71 per cent, followed by Instagram at 50 per cent.

The results at that time revealed that the average daily use of social media reached six hours a day, and that 36 per cent of Omanis trust to one degree or another that social media as a source of news and information about important events, compared to 35 per cent who do not trust it.

The results showed that the Omani citizen has on average three accounts on different social networking sites.

Communication with family

and friends also came at the top of the reasons for using social media, and followed by learning about the news.

While a research study on the dangers of using social media on children emphasised the importance of developing awareness-raising programmes and educational curricula to protect children from misuse of social media.

Dr Amjad bin Hassan al Haj, Assistant Professor of Social Work in the Department of Sociology and Social Work, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University, in his survey revealed the extent of the danger of communication programmes and their negative impact on the child and the reasons that prompted children to use them.

The study also proved that there is a positive, statistically significant correlation between the use of social networking and aggressive behaviour.

Social media also isolates children from their real society, wastes time, and negatively affects children's moral behaviour.

As educators, teachers, and parents, we have reached a stage that requires us to ask this question:

How do we protect our children of the negatives of using social networking sites?

In order to be logical, let us believe that preventing children from using social networking sites has become very difficult, and it can even be said that it is impossible, but we can exploit it to the benefit of our children.

94%

OF OMANIS
HAVE ACCOUNTS ON
SOCIAL MEDIA
(NCSI)

93%

WHATSAPP
APPLICATION



71%

YOUTUBE



50%

INSTAGRAM





Workshop on electronic security held in Dhofar



SALALAH: The Office of the Governor of Dhofar, in cooperation with the Electronic Defence Centre, organised an awareness workshop at the Sultan Qaboos Youth Complex for Culture and Entertainment in Salalah on 'electronic security.'

The opening of the seminar

was sponsored by His Highness Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, in the presence of a number of excellencies and officials.

The episode presented by Dr Mazen bin Hamad al Shueili, Assistant Head of the Cyber Defence Centre, included a

number of topics, including an introduction to the centre, the most prominent works and legislation it has developed, in addition to a review of the National Cyber Defence Strategy 2022-2025, and the current and future challenges of the cyber security system and methods of

targeting cyberspace.

The episode also reviewed statistics on monitoring, alerting, and electronic incidents on various government sector networks in the Sultanate of Oman, and the mechanism for using data and how to protect it, in addition to discussing

the importance of establishing the Advanced Cyber Security Academy in partnership with the University of Technology and Applied Sciences to enhance national capabilities in this field.

It is noteworthy that the Cyber Defence Centre seeks to enhance the ability of concerned

authorities and individuals to address electronic threats and ensure the security of the Sultanate of Oman's cyberspace by creating strategic national partnerships between the relevant sectors locally and internationally, which contributes to achieving the Oman Vision 2040. — ONA

Struggles persist in adopting mobile-based taxi metres

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

While the Sultanate of Oman has made rapid strides in streamlining the public transport facilities, especially taxi services in the past decade, there seems to be some work to do so on this front.

The app-based on-demand taxi services have taken off well and seem to have established themselves to some extent and the efforts to regulate street taxis seem to have hit a roadblock.

Speaking to Observer, Mohammed, a taxi operator based, said, "I am associated with one of the taxi companies and use metre with our users. But, when it comes to picking up passengers from the roads, we do not use the mobile-based metre (Aber) to determine fares and still follow the traditional system based on negotiations with passengers."

He added, "The obvious reason is that the taxi owners have not agreed to operate under a company as mandated by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology."

A top official at Otaxi, one of the licenced companies and the market leader, confirmed to Observer that the situation has not changed regarding the Orange and White Street taxis."

While app-based taxis offer reliable service and even offer card payments,



The app-based on-demand taxi services have taken off well and seem to have established themselves to some extent

getting a street taxi for the right fare is still a challenge.

"Firstly, I felt that the on-demand service is not possible without a local SIM and the street operators do not offer a fare structure, with fares on the high side even for a short distance," said a German tourist.

The Otaxi official added, "It is possible to use without the local pain, but sometimes local operators block for some technical reasons."

Earlier, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) had directed all Orange and White taxis operating must join the licenced company before January 1, 2024.

The MoTCIT planned to streamline street Orange and White taxis in the country, which was to operate as per a mobile-based metre called Aber.

The new guidelines stipulated that

to practice taxi activity, a light driving licence must be 3 years old from the date of issuance, and the operator's monthly salary must not exceed RO 600 if an employee is in the private sector.

The age must not be less than 21 years and not more than 60 years. One-year extensions can be given based on a medical report from accredited health institutions indicating his ability to drive a taxi.

It also required that the age of the taxi vehicle must not exceed 7 years from the date of the year of manufacture to carry out operations at airports, ports, and hotels while the age of the taxi vehicles should not exceed 10 years from the date of the year of manufacture to practice the activity in the public places and commercial centres.

The Ministry stressed the need for everyone to reconcile their situation before September 1, 2024.

8 compensation initiatives for project-affected citizens

OHOOO AL JAILANIYAH

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning said that it has expedited work to raise citizens' satisfaction over the compensation related to the implementation of public benefit projects, and to draw up a plan for each project and provide the necessary funding to complete the compensation programme for each project.

The ministry has devised 8 initiatives for the implementation of the compensation programme during the course of this year.

The compensation initiative for the bypass road project in Al Dhahirah Governorate aims to complete the compensation for all plots of land affected by the road project the implementation of which comes in response to the Royal directives of His Majesty the Sultan to establish a network of modern roads to streamline economic and societal activities and to bolster the nation's road network. The initiative aims



to compensate the owners of 246 plots of land by the end of 2024.

Regarding the compensations for those affected by the railway project, the ministry confirmed that it will pay indemnity for the lands affected by the project in Al Buraimi and Al Batinah North governorates which amount to 48 plots of land in Al Buraimi as well as 647 other cases in Al Batinah North Governorate with a total of 147 residential lands, 490 agricultural lands, 2 commercial lands and 8 commercial-residential land plots.



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

Tenders Announcement

Tender No.	37/2024/MHT/HQ-9	Tender Name	Providing a Labor Supply Service for the Al Sarooj Factory, South Al Batinah Governorate
	38/2024/MHT/HQ-10		Providing Material for the Al Sarooj Factory, Wadi Al Maawal Province
Fees of Tender Documents for SME		10 O.R	
Fees of Tender Documents		25 O.R	
Tender Document Sales End Date		10/3/2024	
Last Date for Bid Submission		2/4/2024	
Grade	37/2024/MHT/HQ-9	Fourth	
	38/2024/MHT/HQ-10	Third	
E-Tendering Portal		https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om	
Interested Companies registered with Tender Board (in the mentioned Grade) may obtain Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om, against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document. The Tenderers must acknowledge commitment to the bid. The Ministry shall not be obligated to accept the lowest or any other bids The bid submission period starts after the end of the inquiry period shown in the e-tendering system, until the last date for submitting bids before (10:00 am, Oman time).			
Support and inquiries	For more information, related to the tender, kindly communicate through the website of the e-tendering system: https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om For inquiries related to the technical support for the e-tendering system, kindly communicate through etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om or 24402200		
For further information	Email : sotc@mht.gov.om Phones : 22088348 - 22088085		



وزارة الصحة
ANNOUNCEMENT

The Ministry of Health - Directorate General of Health Services Al Dhahirah Governorate (DGHS) - invites specialized companies to participate in the following Tender:-

Tender Ref.	Description	Last date for Collection of Tender Document	Closing Time/ Day/Date	Eligibility	Tender Fee (Non-Refundable)
4791/2023/ MOH/ DGHSDH-5- Recall - 1	RENT MULTI-FUNCTION DEVICES TO SCAN DOCUMENTS	MONDAY 26/FEB/2024	At 9:00 am on SUNDAY 03/MARCH/2024	Specialized Companies registered with Tender Board	R.O 25/= Per set

Notes:-

- All Specialized and interested Companies registered with Tender Board may obtain Tender documents from the E. Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>.
- The DGHS is not bound to accept the lowest tender and reserves the right to accepts or reject any tender.

Any Clarification, you may contact via
Telephone: 24402200
Email: etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om



Palestinians accuse Israel of ‘apartheid’ at The Hague

THE HAGUE: Palestinian foreign minister Riyad Al-Maliki told the UN’s top court Monday his people were suffering “colonialism and apartheid” under the Israelis, urging judges to order an immediate and unconditional end to the occupation.

“The Palestinians have endured colonialism and apartheid... There are those who are enraged by these words. They should be enraged by the reality we are suffering,” Al-Maliki told the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

The ICJ is holding hearings all week on the legal implications of Israel’s occupation since 1967, with an unprecedented 52 countries, including the United States and Russia, expected to give evidence.

ILLEGAL OCCUPATION

Speaking in the Peace Palace in The Hague, where the ICJ sits, the minister urged judges to declare the occupation illegal and order it to stop “immediately, totally and unconditionally.”

“Justice delayed is justice denied and the Palestinian people have been denied justice for far too long,” he said.

“It is time to put an end to the double standards that have kept our people captive for far too



Protesters hold a Palestinian flag as they gather outside the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in The Hague. – AFP

The Palestinians have endured colonialism and apartheid. There are those who are enraged by these words. They should be enraged by the reality we are suffering.

RIYAD AL MALIKI
Palestinian foreign minister

long.”

Summing up, Palestinian UN envoy Riyad Mansour struggled to hold back his tears as he called for a “future where Palestinian children are treated as children not as a demographic threat.”

While any ICJ opinion would be non-binding, it comes amid mounting international legal pressure on Israel over the war in

Gaza started on October 7.

The hearings are separate from a high-profile case brought by South Africa alleging that Israel is committing genocidal acts during the current Gaza offensive.

Al-Maliki charged however that “the genocide underway in Gaza is a result of decades of impunity and inaction.”

“Ending Israel’s impunity



Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki and Palestinian U.N. envoy Riyad Mansour attend a public hearing held by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in The Hague, Netherlands. – AFP

is a moral, political and legal imperative,” he said.

In January, the ICJ ruled in that case that Israel must do everything in its power to prevent genocide and allow humanitarian aid into Gaza, stopping short of ordering a ceasefire.

On Friday, it rejected South Africa’s bid to impose additional measures on Israel, but reiterated

the need to carry out the ruling in full.

The UN General Assembly asked the ICJ to consider two questions.

Firstly, the court should examine the legal consequences of what the UN called “the ongoing violation by Israel of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination”.

Secondly, the ICJ should advise on how Israel’s actions “affect the legal status of the occupation” and what are the consequences for the UN and other countries.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) said that while advisory opinions are non-binding, “they can carry great moral and legal authority” and can eventually be inscribed in international law. — AFP

Qatar slams Netanyahu over captives pressure

DUBAI: Conflict mediator Qatar on Monday criticised comments from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in which it said he asked the Gulf state to pressure into freeing Israeli captives, describing them as a new attempt to prolong the Gaza war.

Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said at the weekend that the pattern of negotiations for a framework ceasefire deal for the conflict between Israel and Palestinians in Gaza was “not very promising” in recent days.

“The Israeli Prime Minister’s recent statements in which he calls on Qatar to pressure into releasing the Israeli captives are nothing but a new attempt by him to delay and prolong the war for reasons that have become clear to everyone,” Qatar’s foreign ministry spokesman Majed Al-Ansari posted in a statement on social media platform X.

Sheikh Mohammed, who is also foreign minister, said on Saturday he could not give details of talks but as with past deals there were two elements: humanitarian conditions in Gaza and the number of

Palestinians to be released for Israeli captives.

Meanwhile in Gaza, fourteen patients were evacuated from a hospital that has been raided by Israeli troops, the Gaza health ministry said on Monday, as Israel denied its military operations had stopped the hospital from functioning.

The two sides gave conflicting accounts of the situation at Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, Gaza’s second-largest, with Israel denying an assertion by the Gaza ministry’s spokesperson that its forces had detained the hospital director.

The ministry said the evacuated patients, including five who required kidney dialysis and three intensive care cases, were moved from the hospital to others in southern Gaza thanks to efforts by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The ministry later added that 25 medical staff and 136 patients were without electricity, food, water, oxygen or the necessary medical capabilities.

On Sunday, the U.N. agency’s Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that the hospital was no longer functional. — Reuters



This picture shows an Israeli battle tank crossing the border into Gaza. – AFP

EU warns Israel against launching ‘catastrophic’ Rafah offensive

BRUSSELS: The European Union on Monday warned Israel against launching an offensive in Rafah that ministers said would create a disaster for the roughly 1.5 million refugees crammed into the city on the southern edge of Gaza.

“An attack on Rafah would be absolutely catastrophic ... it would be unconscionable,” Ireland’s Foreign Minister Micheal Martin said before a meeting with foreign ministers from the 27 EU member states in Brussels.

“Over 1.5 million people are crowded into a very small corner of Gaza. They’re weary, they are exhausted, they have nowhere else to go - how can anyone contemplate adding to that trauma?” he said.

Israel is preparing to mount a ground invasion of the enclave’s southernmost city, which it has called a last bastion of Palestinian groups control after nearly five months of fighting.

Defence Minister Yoav Gallant said the Israeli military (IDF) was planning operations in Rafah targeting Palestinian fighters, command centres and tunnels, stressing that “extraordinary measures” were being taken to avoid civilian casualties.

Israel accuses fighters of hiding among civilians, something the Palestinians deny.

But EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said that avoiding those casualties would be impossible. “We have to continue putting pressure on Israel to make them understand that there are so many people in the streets of Rafah, it will be impossible to avoid civilian casualties,” he said.



A picture shows smoke billowing over Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip during Israeli bombardment. – AFP

Over 1.5 million people are crowded into a very small corner of Gaza. They’re weary, they are exhausted, they have nowhere else to go.

MICHEAL MARTIN
Ireland Foreign Minister

“This, certainly, will be against the respect of humanitarian law.”

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock also called on Israel to respect humanitarian law, but added Israel had the “right to self-defence” as she said it was clear that fighters were still operating from Rafah.

“But Israel has to comply with international humanitarian law. Over a million people went to the south of Gaza because the IDF told them so. They can’t just disappear in the sky.”

Baerbock repeated her call for a “humanitarian ceasefire”, to allow refugees to go back home in the north of Gaza.

Meanwhile, Germany is very

concerned about an envisaged Israeli offensive in Rafah, a government spokesperson said on Monday.

“We are deeply concerned about the ground offensive in Rafah,” the spokesperson said during a regular press conference in Berlin.

“It is difficult to correctly assess the humanitarian situation there, but I think everyone recognises that it is catastrophic.”

If there is to be an offensive, Israel must answer the question of how to evacuate the up to 1.3 million civilians who are currently sheltering there, the spokesperson added. — Reuters



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In brief

■ BRUSSELS



EU INVESTIGATES INTO TIKTOK OVER CHILD PROTECTION

The EU on Monday announced a formal investigation into TikTok over alleged breaches of its obligations to protect minors online, under a landmark new law on policing digital content.

It is the second probe into a major online platform since Brussels introduced the Digital Services Act (DSA), after targeting tech billionaire Elon Musk's X in December.

Brussels is particularly concerned that the video-sharing app may not be doing enough to address negative impacts on young people. A key worry is the so-called "rabbit hole" effect in some cases leading to more dangerous content. — AFP

■ PRAGUE



TRACTORS ROLL INTO PRAGUE AS FARMERS JOIN PROTESTS

Hundreds of Czech farmers drove their tractors into downtown Prague, disrupting traffic outside the Agriculture Ministry, as they joined protests against high energy costs, stifling bureaucracy and the European Union's Green Deal.

Farmers are planning to join protests this week, although major agricultural associations distanced themselves, in which tractors blocked one lane of a major road through Prague. Several hundred whistling and jeering protesters gathered outside the Agriculture Ministry yelling "Shame" and "Resign". The government has said the organisers have little to do with real farming. — Reuters

■ MADRID



SANCHEZ FACES DEFEAT IN GALICIA REGIONAL ELECTION

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez emerged weakened from Sunday's parliamentary elections in the northwestern region of Galicia after his Socialist party (PSOE) won just nine seats in the 75-seat assembly.

The conservative People's Party (PP) maintained its outright majority after winning 40 seats, while PSOE's far-left coalition ally Sumar failed to win a single seat, according to official results. The Nationalist Galician Bloc (BNG) gained six seats to 25. In the significant election, Sanchez was hoping a better-than-expected economic performance. — Reuters

Russia strikes with 'heavy fire' in Ukraine



Smoke rises behind a World War Two memorial in the course of Russia-Ukraine conflict in Donetsk, Russian-controlled Ukraine. — Reuters

the enemy is inflicting heavy fire," Tarnavsky's spokesperson Dmytro Lykhoviy said.

Like many areas across eastern Ukraine, Robotyne has been completely flattened by months of artillery fire.

Ukraine's defences have been stretched in recent weeks by shortages in ammunition and manpower.

Lykhoviy said the Russians were "regrouping" after Ukraine

withdrew from Avdiivka and "will probably transfer units to other sectors."

Russian President Vladimir Putin hailed the capture of Avdiivka as an "important victory" for his troops, just days before the two-year anniversary of Russia's attack on February 24.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's prime minister urged Japan's government and private sector on Monday to step up support

for the country's reconstruction, promising an "economic miracle" once the almost two-year-old war with Russia ends.

"Since the full-scale attack started, Japan has provided Ukraine with over \$10 billion of various support," making it the fourth-biggest donor, Denys Shmygal told a conference of around 300 government and business leaders from Japan and Ukraine. "Thanks to this funding



These offensive attempts are being halted, the enemy is being eliminated in the outskirts of Robotyne. The situation is dynamic here, the enemy is inflicting heavy fire

OLEKSANDR TARNAVSKY

Senior Ukrainian commander

during this terrible war caused by Russia, millions of Ukrainian people have been able to survive," Shmygal said

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had also been due to address the gathering in Tokyo by video link but this was cancelled, organisers said without elaborating.

The conference comes after Russian forces recaptured the eastern Ukrainian stronghold of Avdiivka and as \$60 billion in US military aid remains stalled in Congress. — AFP

Poland slams Hungarian holdout on Sweden Nato bid

WARSAW: Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk on Monday criticised Hungary's "unacceptable" delay in ratifying Sweden's Nato accession amid the nearly three-year-old attack of Ukraine.

Hungary's ratification is the last obstacle to the Nordic country's membership which Stockholm sought after the Ukraine conflict began.

"It's unacceptable, not only from my point of view, that one country can block the other one, especially in the context of the war with Russia in Ukraine," Tusk told reporters as he hosted his Swedish counterpart Ulf Kristersson in Warsaw.

Although it supports Stockholm in principle, Budapest prolonged the process by asking Sweden to stop "vilifying" the Hungarian government, which is accused by critics of being authoritarian.

However on Saturday, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said he and the Swedish premier had "taken important steps in order to rebuild trust".

"The good news is that our current dispute with Sweden is moving towards a conclusion," Orban said in his state-of-the-nation address.

"We are on course to ratify Sweden's accession to Nato at the beginning of parliament's spring session," he added.

Orban also said the "dispute with Sweden is moving towards a conclusion" and that Hungary was "on course" to ratify the bid..

Asked about the remarks, Kristersson said on Monday



Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk (R) and Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson address a joint press conference after their meeting in Warsaw, Poland. — AFP

that Orban was better suited to answer that question.

"I don't know specifically what he meant by that... I simply think there is a strong will to finalise this process of Nato accession," Kristersson said.

Hungary's ratification is the last obstacle to the Nordic country's membership which Stockholm sought after the Ukraine conflict began

Swedish authorities have repeatedly refused to hold talks with Hungary on the ratification despite Orban inviting his Swedish counterpart to "negotiate" Nato accession.

On Wednesday, Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias

Billstrom said his country hoped that Hungary will soon ratify its accession to Nato, removing the last obstacle to its membership.

"There is nothing to negotiate, if there is a visit, it's not going to be a negotiation, that has been made very clear by my prime minister," the Swedish minister said earlier this week.

Although it supports Stockholm in principle, Budapest prolonged the process by asking Sweden to stop "vilifying" the Hungarian government, which is accused of taking an authoritarian turn.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Sweden announced its application to join Nato in May 2022, at the same time as Finland.

Finland became the organisation's 31st member in April 2023 after all Nato members ratified its bid.

— AFP

Ursula wins Germany backing for second term

BERLIN: European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on Monday won the backing of her German centre-right party for a second term, putting her in a strong position to clinch another five years running the European Union's executive body.

At a meeting of the party leadership, Germany's opposition Christian Democrats gave their support to von der Leyen to be their candidate for Commission president. It confirms a widespread assumption that von der Leyen would seek another term.

The 65-year-old former German defence minister is now likely to become the candidate of the pan-European centre-right umbrella group, the European People's Party (EPP), at a congress in Bucharest in March.

"I am taking a very conscious and well-considered decision. I would like to run for a second term in office and I am very grateful to the CDU for nominating me as the top candidate for the EPP today," von der Leyen said at a news conference following the party meeting in Berlin.

The first woman to hold

the job, von der Leyen steered the EU through the Covid-19 pandemic, the formal exit of Britain from the bloc and the ructions following Russia's full scale attack of Ukraine in 2022.

She would begin a second term at a time when Europe is focusing on how to strengthen its security, with Russia waging a war on its borders and the possibility of former US President Donald Trump returning to the White House.

At a security conference in Munich at the weekend, von der Leyen said the Commission would present a defence strategy proposal aimed at fostering higher and more efficient spending with joint procurement and agreements to provide predictability to industry. The leaders of the EU's 27 member countries will choose the Commission president after elections to the European Parliament in June.

By convention, they choose a candidate from the grouping that has come first in the EU elections. As polls show the EPP has a strong lead and von der Leyen enjoys broad backing among EU leaders, she seems likely to win another term.

— Reuters



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (2ndL) stands next to the leader of Germany's Christian Democratic Union CDU Friedrich Merz (2ndR) during a leadership meeting of the CDU party in Berlin, Germany. — AFP

Find solace amidst the noise



Hyesha Barrett
@coach_hyesha

The writer is a certified Master Life Coach and NLP Practitioner based in Muscat

In today's fast paced world, where every moment seems to be consumed by digital distractions, the act of journalling offers a sanctuary for self-reflection and introspection. Far from being just a quaint pastime, it is a powerful tool that can profoundly impact our mental health, creativity and personal growth. In essence, journalling captures the complexities of life, emotions, and experiences through written expression. A deeply personal practice, it offers individuals a safe space to explore their thoughts, feelings and dreams without the fear of judgment or criticism. Whether it's through free-flowing streams of consciousness or crafted prose, journalling allows us to delve into the depths of our psyche. Not confined by rules nor conventions, it is a fluid, adaptable practice that can take on a myriad of forms; from traditional handwritten journals to digital platforms and multimedia expressions such as doodling, poetry or a scrapbook. The key lies in finding a method that resonates with you and allows you the freedom to express yourself in a way that feels authentic and

meaningful. One of the most significant benefits of journalling are its therapeutic effects on our mental well-being. A scientifically proven method which helps reduce stress, anxiety, and depression through providing an outlet for processing emotions and gaining perspective on challenging situations. By externalising our thoughts, we gain clarity and insight into our deepest feelings, leading to greater self-awareness and emotional resilience. Journalling can also enhance our creative and problem-solving skills. Many artists, writers, and innovators throughout history have kept journals to capture ideas and insights. It can also be a powerful tool for goal setting and personal development. By articulating our aspirations, intentions and action plans on paper, we can gain clarity on our priorities and hold ourselves accountable for progress towards our goals. Whether it is achieving career milestones, improving relationships or cultivating healthy habits, journalling can provide the structure and motivation needed to turn aspirations into reality. Journalling also offers a sense of continuity

JOURNALLING OFFERS A TRANSFORMATIVE OUTLET FOR EXPRESSION AND EXPLORATION AND CAN ALSO ENHANCE OUR CREATIVE AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

and connection to the past. By chronicling our experiences and reflections over time, we create a tangible record of our personal journey, documenting our growth, challenges and achievements. This sense of continuity can be incredibly grounding and affirming, especially during times of uncertainty or transition. The art of journaling is a multi-faceted practice that transcends mere writing. I encourage you to practice putting pen to paper for ten minutes daily and allow the flow of your thoughts and feelings to run through you. Whether used as a tool for self-reflection, a catalyst for creativity or a road-map for personal development, journalling offers a transformative outlet for expression and exploration. It is a deeply personal practice that provides a multitude of benefits for the mind, body and soul. In a world that often feels chaotic and overwhelming, journalling presents a quiet refuge - a space where individuals can reconnect with themselves, find solace amidst the noise, cultivating a deeper sense of meaning and purpose within the ebb and flow of life's ever-changing currents.

Natural pesticides gain ground in ‘agri-tox’ Brazil

MORGANN JEZEQUEL

Inspecting a thriving green field, Brazilian farmer Adriano Cruvinel is beaming: Using a fraction of the chemical products he used to, he is growing even more soy, thanks to natural pesticides. Agricultural powerhouse Brazil may be the world leader in chemical pesticide use, but Cruvinel is part of a growing trend of farmers turning to natural products known as “biopesticides.” “Our soy is doing great,” says the 36-year-old agricultural engineer, giving a tour of his 1,400-hectare farm in the central-western county of Montividiu, as combine harvesters work their way across a field. “Thanks to the microorganisms we apply to the crop, it’s a lot more resistant to pests and disease.” Brazil, the world’s biggest exporter of soy, corn and cotton, is also the top consumer of chemical pesticides: nearly 720,000 metric tons in 2021, or one-fifth of global sales, according to the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization. Seeking to improve his profits, in 2016 Cruvinel started transitioning toward so-called “regenerative” agriculture. The technique seeks to restore the soil’s biodiversity, replacing chemical fertilisers and pesticides with natural alternatives. He still uses genetically modified soy, widespread in Brazil. But near those fields he built an ultra-modern laboratory and factory. Inside, refrigerators conserve fungi and bacteria, some harvested from forestland on his farm. He cultivates them en masse in vats, then uses them to treat his fields. “Here, we imitate nature on a giant scale,” says Cruvinel, who has replaced 76 per cent of the chemical pesticides he formerly used with natural products. The approach is good for health and the environment, but also business: His production costs have fallen by 61 per cent, while his soy yields have risen by 13 per cent, he says. Natural pesticides “could revolutionise Brazilian and global agriculture,” says Marcos Rodrigues de Faria, a researcher at Embrapa, Brazil’s public agricultural research agency. But “there’s a long way to go,” he adds. Brazil still relies heavily on chemical pesticides, known here as “agrotóxicos,” or “agri-toxic” products. Natural products grew from four per cent of total pesticide sales in Brazil in 2020 to nine per cent in 2022. Their use has expanded four times faster in Brazil than internationally, says Amalia Borsari, of CropLife Brasil, an organisation representing the agricultural chemicals industry. — AFP

Sayyid Badr and the Palestinian cause



Zahir bin Harith al Mahrouqi

The author is an Omani writer concerned with the Arab affairs. He is the author of *The Road to Jerusalem*

The lecture delivered by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (OXCIS) last Friday, came at an opportune time particularly with regard to the Palestinian cause that is presently preoccupying the world at a time when the Gazan people are being subjected to mass extermination and displacement attempt with the aim of eliminating the issue once and for all. Entitled ‘Talking to All for the Good of All: Diplomacy in a Multipolar World’, dealt with the Palestinian cause which he discussed in detail and highlighted its historical developments focusing on the obstacles that stand in the way of reaching a comprehensive settlement based on the two-state solution. Sayyid Badr spoke frankly and categorically about the Hamas movement as one of the authentic Palestinian components. He said: “Hamas cannot be eliminated. So, if peace is ever to be achieved, its makers will have to find a way to talk to them and listen to them as well.” Such a remark is to be added to the account of the Omani diplomacy. At a time when the Gazan people are being annihilated, some talk about the future of the Gaza Strip after the war and more than one party has expressed its willingness to bear responsibility for the Gaza Strip. If Sayyid Badr believes that the Hamas movement cannot be eliminated, the Israeli Military Intelligence (Aman) is of the same opinion. It ruled out eliminating Hamas movement, considering that “even if the army succeeds in defeating it, as a ruling regime in the Gaza Strip, Hamas will remain as an armed organisation. However, this opinion is inconsistent with the declared Israeli goals of the war on Gaza, i.e the overthrow of Hamas’ rule in the Gaza Strip, eliminate its military power, return Israeli prisoners from Gaza and ensure the presence of an administration in Gaza that does not pose a threat to Israel. Among the points that I see crucial in the Foreign Minister’s lecture is his assertion that the establishment



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, delivering a lecture at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies.

of a Palestinian state is an existential necessity and without a state the Palestinians are condemned to the constant threat of destitution, extermination and death. In his opinion is that this state will allow us to see ourselves alongside an Israeli state as people with complex social and cultural identities rather than identities that are mostly defined on the basis of religious affiliations. In other words, we can return to the hopeful path of the Arab renaissance and Jerusalem can be one of its homelands. Likewise, I also liked that he did not limit himself to propose the convening of an urgent international conference tasked to agree on the necessary arrangements for the establishment of a Palestinian state and to establish mechanisms for its implementation. He stressed that Hamas’ presence in this conference would be one of the reasons for its success. Beside Hamas, the conference must be attended by all components of Palestinian society and it must be held in the presence of the leaders of a group of countries representing the global majority. The minister’s opinion regarding the importance of abolishing the Security Council’s veto power which is, from my point of view, the most important proposal in this lecture because voting at the present time and as Sayyid Badr explained is based on political calculations of the five members who have the power to block any decision even if it was unanimous. He is right in what he said about the importance of reforming international institutions based on the management of international relations so that these institutions are concordant with events

of today’s world rather than focusing on finding solutions to problems of the past. Indeed, his suggestion to start this process now by taking urgent collective action to establish a Palestinian state and taking practical steps to ensure the realisation of the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination, is correct. Omans’ stance towards the Palestinian cause or the situation in Yemen is faultless. It is a firm attitude stemming from the firm Omani policy that distances the country from childish political squabbles. It enabled Oman to establish good relations with all parties in the region and qualified it to be an acceptable mediator to everyone. We have become accustomed to this: Oman publicly declares what it believes and this is what was embodied by Sayyid Badr in this lecture. At a time when some Arabs are contending to consider Hamas a terrorist movement, Sayyid Badr announced publicly during his meeting with a number of European journalists that Hamas is a resistance movement and not a terrorist organisation. We cannot ignore the earlier statement of the Foreign Ministry of the Sultanate of Oman which considered that the continued dangerous escalation, the policy of collective punishment, and the gross violations of international law and international humanitarian law practiced by the Israeli occupation forces during their brutal war on the Gaza Strip, are deemed war crimes and crimes against humanity. Similarly, we cannot ignore the Sultanate of Oman’s confirmation that the Ansar Allah in Yemen are an essential component of the Yemeni people and there cannot be any solution without them. The Omani message was clear and straightforward regarding Oman’s support for the brothers in Palestine and their right to establish their independent state, and that under no circumstances can those who defend themselves and their right to exist be considered terrorists. (*Translated by Khalid Abdullah. The original article was published in Arabic language in Oman newspaper, sister publication of the Observer on February 19, 2024, Monday).*

Don't keep a thank you for tomorrow

NO matter what form of procrastination one has, the tendency is to postpone everything for later, even a 'thank you' gets moved over.

But there comes a time when we might not have another chance to express our gratitude. That is when the stream of regrets seem endless and sentences begin with, 'If Only..'

We take tomorrow often for granted so much that when someone goes without saying goodbye, we are left speechless. The words left unsaid seem to echo through our head. We want to convey our feelings of gratitude and think maybe it is okay to say it to the relatives. Try it and you are never satisfied.

The tomorrow we think about may never exist. It all depends on our destiny and then is it not better we complete our duties?

We laugh at this moment not realising what each day is to reveal. It could be tears of sorrow or happiness.

It takes a lot to understand our emotions. Feeling sad is something we connect with from early childhood. We cry when we are born, but that could be a reaction to being out of the comfort zone and the need to inhale oxygen. The lung capacity probably sets its pace from then on. The newborns are often persuaded to cry. That first cry proves the ability to breathe on their own. Everyone waits for that cry, it is musical then.

After that, everyone wants to hush the sobs and wipe away the tears because they want to see happiness on the child's face, no matter what the age is.

The absence of a person is harsh when we know we will never see them again, we can never have discussions and chats. And then the most difficult factor - we will never hear that voice again. You will wish again and again if the time could go back and could rewind and rewrite fate. A little more time for a few more minutes. That is why the wise ones say live as if it is the final one. And one would realise there is a lot of homework to be completed.

So let us not wait for tomorrow



Lakshmi Kothaneth @lakshmioman

The writer is a senior journalist and a radio anchor

WE TAKE TOMORROW OFTEN FOR GRANTED SO MUCH THAT WHEN SOMEONE GOES WITHOUT SAYING GOODBYE, WE ARE LEFT SPEECHLESS

to say thank you. This week, I met a cyclist who has been cycling in different countries because of his passion to cycle and experience cultures. Now he is cycling with a purpose and that is to preserve our environment and to protect our planet Earth. He is concerned about micro plastics in our food. His name is Michael Everzst, sustainability researcher. He explained how scientists have proven that we could be consuming weekly micro plastics which could when put together be in the size of a credit card. Apparently this has already been impacting our health in various ways especially fertility.

We are consuming too much, he says. Look around you and one would know how all of us are being sucked into commercial. The flavours of coffees, and tea, fruits out of season, fragrances to detergents; there is a list of must haves. In the make belief world they all look like essentials but abandon them and we realise life is perfectly fine without them.

Michael explained how he experienced soul richness once he decided he will cycle the countries of the world for Expedition hope. He has a flag which states, Stand up for Planet. Climate change would only make the poor, poorer. We plan our future, the economy and worry about the future of our children, but we think so little about the planet. Groups of people think about it emotionally and others think of it in terms of words and contracts. And now there is a want of actions.

So Micheal chose to start cycling from Germany and will complete in total 30 countries, climb mountains in Eastern Africa, reach Cape of Good Hope and cross the sea on a boat to reach Amazon for COP30.

Accompanying him throughout the journey is Kermit the Frog, a conversation starter for children and then it becomes easier for Michael to explain why it is important to be green.

Earlier the better to teach why we need to be grateful to Earth and how we can collaborate to become world citizens. Let us learn to say thank you on time, not when it is too late. Words hold power that can heal and nurture, and action makes it a fact.

WITH A SNOWMAN!



An Afghan girl carries a snowman along a snow laden pavement in Kabul on Monday. – AFP

Islam's evolving role in the protection of foreign workers

IN the midst of the ongoing atrocities in Gaza, a resurgence of Islamism in the public space is noticeably visible. Availing of this phenomenon to address an important policy issue in the region, I try to explore the question: how can Islam guide labour practices in the region?

Practitioners in the field of migrant workers' rights often invoke the principle of justice as a foundation to improve the rights of foreign workers. Having worked with committed practitioners, and being a committed Muslim myself, I was often asked about the compatibility of Islamic jurisprudence with international migration law. I was also asked how Islamic jurisprudence can be invoked to create a more dignified working environment for migrant workers.

Islam remains a source of legislation for the majority of Arab countries. If appropriate approach and discourse were adopted, the Sultanate of Oman could position itself as a model for justice and respect of international law.

Leaving the issue of wages aside, the most problematic area in labour laws and regulations in the GCC countries is the sponsorship system, or kafala in Arabic. Receiving countries see in the kafala system an essential means for gathering statistics, regulating entry and residency, managing the labour



Ahmed Al Mukhaini

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REVAMPING THE SPONSORSHIP SYSTEM IN THE REGION ACCORDING TO ISLAMIC JURISPRUDENCE WILL BENEFIT BOTH EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES

market in view of high rates of unemployment among youth, and capping cultural influence.

Kafala is based on an employer-employee model, which provides one party (the employer) with authority over the other (the employee). Given the gap that naturally exists between obligations of responsibility and practices of protecting workers, additional safeguards are needed. On the other hand, employers complain from 'excessive' rights accorded to employees. This becomes more apparent in the case of domestic workers. The result is a mismatch of expectations. Capitalising on Islamic finance, two models could be considered to address the above-mentioned mismatch. The first is Ijarah (loosely speaking usufruct) and the second is Mudarabah (profit-sharing).

Usufruct is a limited right which has historically been associated with benefitting from the use of an asset or a privilege, hence the name 'fruits of use'. When applied to employment of migrant workers, the asset or privilege could either be: (1) the ability to legally sponsor a migrant worker, or (2) the actual labour or expertise or knowledge of the migrant worker.

Commoditising the ability to

legally sponsor a migrant worker is already a practice in Oman and the MENA region. It exists formally and informally. On the positive side, it has been providing a mutually benefiting solution for short term contracts in specialised services, such as in construction, and oil and gas industries. Regulating or incentivising the commoditisation of the actual labour or expertise or knowledge of migrant workers seems a more just route for the usufruct or Ijarah approach.

Building on the above, an incentive system, in the form of profit sharing or allowing entry of expatriate labour based on a contract rather than a sponsorship, sounds fair. Oman already has

a precedence, where foreign companies can establish a wholly-owned branch contingent on them having a valid government contract. A similar principle can be applied. This will be beneficial to all parties involved. Employment contracts should also include a non-competition clause, which is a valid and fair contractual right-obligation to protect employers and enable fair competition.

Both models are similar in terms of moving the relationship from an employment context to a service, lease, or investment context. It is a form of partnership where an investor puts in money and the worker invests effort. It moves the relationship from the prospect of abuse or uncertainty to more solid

grounds. The Mudarabah principle has been in practice, though with a different name, in higher education in the USA. Investors fund tuition fees for higher studies and training of promising individuals with a contractual obligation to share a proportion of their salary when employed. This arrangement allows for socially responsible investors to solve the skill gaps, while earning revenue. It also incentivised these investors to create or find job opportunities for their prodigies. This also meant speedy recovery of investments and shorter job-seeking periods for the prodigies.

Oman should explore combining these two models to create a system wherein the country can attract the right calibre of talented and skilled expatriates, according to national economic needs, in a fair and humane manner that is less prone to abuse. Such a system will mitigate the current imbalance in the labour market structure through proper and commensurate remuneration of expatriate expertise, which in turn will create competition in the market, and hopefully adjust in 2-3 years' time.

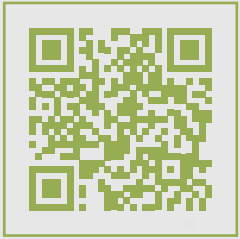
In conclusion, as a receiving country we have a duty of acting justly and responsibly.



Islam remains a source of legislation for the majority of Arab countries.



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FISU World University Championship concludes in Muscat

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 19

The thrilling action of International University Sports Federation (FISU) World University Championships Cross Country (Muscat 2024) concluded in Muscat, after two days of thrilling competitions at the Military Technological College. with participants of more than 200 athletes representing 21 nations took part in the World University Championships.

The conclusion ceremony was held on Sunday under auspices of Dr Bakhait bin Ahmed al Mahri, Under-Secretary of the

Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for Higher Education, in presence of Leonz Eder, FISU President, Dr Salim al Oraimi, Chairman of Oman Committee of University Sports (OCUS) and officials. The chief guest delivered the medals to the top athletes in different categories.

At the team's classification for women, athletes of Great Britain claimed the gold medal, while Spanish athletes received the silver medals, the South African athletes got the bronze medals.

In the Men's team classification, French athletes topped the podium with gold medals, while Spain athletes



came second with silver medals, Great Britain finished third to receive the bronze medals.

South African athlete managed to finish the short course in 7 minutes and 58

also Spanish athlete Adam Maijo Frigola received the bronze medal after clocking a similar timing of the runners up with minor difference in the timing.

In the Women's short course category, Simonay Weitsz from South Africa emerged champion as she completed the race within 9 minutes and 14 seconds, followed by Spanish athlete Marta Serrano Azpiazu who registered a timing of 9 minutes and 17 seconds, Bethan Morley of Great Britain received the bronze medal after completing the race within 9 minutes and 18 seconds.

In Men's long course event, Seth Akampa of Uganda topped

the men's section after registering a time of 29 minutes and 12 seconds, Spanish athlete Miguel Baidal Marco came in second with a timing of 29 minutes and 23 seconds, while Baptiste from France finished third with a time of 29 minutes and 26 seconds.

In the same category for Women, Maria Mailula of South Africa led the race after completing the race within a time of 34 minutes and 03 seconds, while Alice Goodall from Great Britain came second with a time of 34 minutes and 14 seconds, the Japanese athlete Haruka Ogawa finished in third within a time of 34 minutes and 22 seconds.

Al Harthy officially confirms dual GT programme with WRT and BMW

MUSCAT: Omani sports star Ahmad al Harthy has officially launched his biggest ever season of racing — a dream, headline-grabbing move to Team WRT and BMW for a dual programme in the FIA World Endurance Championship and GT World Challenge Europe Endurance Cup.

Marking a huge development in Al Harthy's glittering motorsport career, the Sultanate of Oman's number one racing driver officially revealed his exciting new global challenge on Sunday evening at BMW Oman in Muscat, where he was joined by key partners, sponsors, dignitaries, media, family and friends.

For his second season in the globe's premier endurance racing category, the FIA World Endurance Championship, Al Harthy joins the prestigious new WRT and BMW partnership in the No 46 BMW M4 GT3 car of worldwide sporting icon Valentino Rossi and pro BMW factory driver Maxime Martin.

Italian legend Rossi, of course, needs no introduction as a seven-time Moto GP World Champion.



Martin is one of the most respected drivers in modern endurance racing, a former winner of the Le Mans 24 Hours.

As part of Sunday's launch, invited guests were able to see the BMW M4 GT3 car Al Harthy will race in the Fanatec GT World Challenge Europe powered by AWS Endurance Cup. Run by Team WRT under the OQ by Oman Racing banner, the Omani will be

joined in the No 30 Bronze class entry by Sam De Haan and BMW factory driver Jens Klingmann.

For his packed 2024 motor racing season in FIA WEC and GTWCE, Al Harthy enjoys the support of an incredibly prestigious line-up of key partners — OQ, Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Omantel, Experience Oman and BMW Oman.

AHMAD AL HARTHY: "This is an extremely proud moment for us, unveiling our collaboration with Team WRT and BMW in both programmes and announcing the incredible portfolio of partners who are making such a dream season possible. It is a huge time in my career, all of the success of previous years has allowed us to be in the position to be part of

this unbelievably exciting new partnership.

"To be competing in the new LMGT3 class in FIA WEC with Maxime and the legend that is Valentino Rossi — someone I watched on TV in MotoGP in Oman — is quite incredible, truly a dream come true. Of course, it is a huge bonus to be able to learn from such amazing and talented drivers, continue our learning

curve, and the two programmes in WEC and GTWCE will help each other.

"It's fantastic to be racing with Sam again in GTWCE in our OQ by Oman Racing car and I'm looking forward to working with Jens for the first time as well. None of this would be possible without our incredible partners, and having the Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth on-board with our programme again is wonderful news. We are proud promoters of Oman and it is an honour to have the support of the ministry once again as we embark on our new challenge with BMW."

Biggest ever season of racing for Oman's Al Harthy on world stage

The new FIA World Endurance Championship season will be Al Harthy's second year in the globe's biggest endurance racing category, comprising eight race meetings — including two in the Middle East. Following the official prologue in Qatar at the end of February, the first round will take place in Losail on 2nd March while the final race of the campaign will be in Bahrain on 2nd November.

2024 FIA WORLD ENDURANCE CHAMPIONSHIP CALENDAR

- 24/25 February: Prologue Test - Losail, Qatar
- 1/2 March: Rd1 - Losail, Qatar
- 20/21 April: Rd2 - Imola, Italy
- 10/11 May: Rd3 - Spa-Francorchamps, Belgium
- 15/16 June: Rd4 - Le Mans, France (Le Mans 24hrs)
- 13/14 July: Rd5 - Interlagos, Brazil
- 31 August/1 September: Rd6 - Texas, USA
- 14/15 September: Rd7 - Fuji, Japan
- 1/2 November: Rd8 - Sakhir, Bahrain

2024 Fanatec GT World Challenge Europe powered by AWS Endurance Cup Calendar

- 5/6 March: Prologue Test - Paul Ricard, France
- 6/7 April: Rd1 - Paul Ricard, France
- 21/22 May: Prologue Test - Spa-Francorchamps, Belgium
- 26-30 June: Rd2 - Spa-Francorchamps, Belgium (Spa 24hrs)
- 27/28 July: Rd3 - Nurburgring, Germany
- 21/22 September: Rd4 - Monza, Italy
- 22/23 November: Rd5 - Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

NIZWA TRIUMPHS OVER AL SUWAIQ IN YOUTH BASKETBALL LEAGUE



The match between Al Seeb and Salalah

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 19

In a thrilling match, Nizwa Club defeated Al Suwaiq with a score of 66-56, while Al Seeb Club won Salalah with a score of 60-38. The match marked the conclusion of the second round of the Youth Basketball League for the 2023-24. Both matches were held at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher.

With these results, Seeb continues to lead the standings with 12 points, followed by Salalah in second place with 10 points, Nizwa in third place with 8 points and Al Suwaiq in fourth with 6 points.

Nizwa managed Al Suwaiq

In the first match, Nizwa managed to defeat Al Suwaiq after an exciting match. The winner dominated in terms of points, despite a strong start from Al Suwaiq to lead the first quarter and taking the 16-9 lead.

In the second quarter, the game changed, and advantage shifted in favour of Nizwa, who managed to score points, narrow the gap. The first half ended with Nizwa leading of 36-27.

In the third quarter, Nizwa continued their offensive dominance by scoring more points. The third quarter ended with Nizwa leading Al Suwaiq 51-40.

Al Suwaiq put up a better performance

in the fourth quarter, scoring 16 points to Nizwa's 15. However, Nizwa held on to secure the victory with a final score of 66-56.

Seeb Defeats Salalah

In the second match, Al Seeb defeated Salalah by a score of 60-38. Al Seeb put in a good performance, scoring points and widening the gap by the end of the match.

The match started with both teams performing equally in the first quarter, with Al Seeb ending the quarter with a one-point lead 12-11.

The second quarter saw a change in the game's script, with Al Seeb gaining the

offensive advantage. They scored 17 points, while Salalah could only manage 4 points. Al Seeb ended the first half with a 29-15 lead.

The third quarter saw another change in the game, with Salalah gaining the upper hand. They scored 19 points, while Al Seeb scored 15 points. However, the difference in points from the first half tipped the scales in Al Seeb's favour, as they ended the third quarter with a 44-34.

In the fourth quarter, Al Seeb maintained their offensive and defensive dominance, scoring 16 points to Salalah's 4. The match ended with Al Seeb defeating Salalah by a score of 60-38.

Bosher clinchs Junior Domestic League

MUSCAT: Bosher Sports Center (BSC) U11 beat Indian School Wadi Kabir (ISWK) U11 by 8 wickets in the Oman Cricket Junior Domestic League Season 2023-24 supported by Mazoon Dairy SAOC at Municipality Grounds recently.

ISWK U11 posted 156 in 15 overs courtesy Ishan Goyal's 48 followed by quickfire innings from Ashbel Burboz scoring 25(11) and Siddhanth Narayan scoring 32(15). Urjita Dande was the sole wicket-taker for BSC U11 A. In response, Aarush Sangati 45 of 20 balls and Urjita Dande's 39 of 15 ensured BSC U11 A claim the championship with 3 overs remaining. Ashbel Burboz and Vihaan Anchan picked 1 wicket each.

In the Prize Distribution ceremony, Mr. Alkesh Joshi, Treasurer - Oman Cricket, Mr. Kiran Asher - Board Member, Oman Cricket, Mr. Paul Martin, Mazoon Dairy and Mr. Duleep Mendis - Chief Development Officer - Oman Cricket graced the stage.

Aarush Sangati of BSC U11 A was awarded the Best Batsman, Urjita Dande of BSC U11 A was awarded the Best Bowler and the Best All Rounder was awarded to Abhay Santosh of ISM U11. BSC U11 A claimed the championship and ISWK U11 were the Runners Up.

Brief Scores (Final) : ISWK U11 156/2 in 15 overs (Ishaan Goyal 48(29); Urjita Dande 1/32) lost to BSC U11 A 157/2 in 12 overs (Aarush Sangati 45(20); Ashbel Burboz 1/29) by 8 wickets.



ISWK U11 - Runners UP

No Kohli, no problem: Jaiswal leads charge of bright new India

Rajkot: Talented young batsmen Yashasvi Jaiswal and Sarfaraz Khan were hailed on Monday as the future of Indian cricket after they led their team to a monumental Test victory over England.

The left-handed Jaiswal, hit an unbeaten 214 and put on a destructive 172-run partnership with debutant Sarfaraz to set up India's 434-run win in Rajkot on Sunday.

There had been fears for India's inexperienced batting line-up with former captain Virat Kohli out for the series for undisclosed personal reasons and KL Rahul injured.

Already missing destructive wicketkeeper batsman Rishabh Pant, who is still not quite ready

to return after being hurt in a car crash in December 2022, it meant four of India's top five had just 33 Test caps between them.

But the new batsmen more than rose to the challenge, with the 22-year-old Jaiswal scoring a double century in Rajkot for the second match in a row and Sarfaraz, aged 26, making 62 and 68 on his first Test outing.

"Double hundred. Double fifty. This duo of Yashasvi & Sarfaraz has been double trouble for England," cricket icon Sachin Tendulkar wrote on X, formerly twitter.

Jaiswal, once a homeless boy in Mumbai who sold street food to pursue his sporting passion, scored 171 on debut in the West Indies last



India's Yashasvi Jaiswal celebrates after reaching his double century. — Reuters

year and has never looked back.

He averages 71.75 in seven Tests, leads the series batting chart with 545 runs, and needs 139 in his

next innings to become the fourth-quickest batsman in history to 1,000 Test runs, and the fastest in 75 years.

Sarfaraz, 26, was presented with his Test cap by spin great Anil Kumble, with his teary-eyed wife and father looking on, and he handled the England spinners with panache and was unlucky to be run out in the first innings.

"We need to see him in a few more Test matches," former chief selector MSK Prasad told Kolkata-based newspaper The Telegraph.

"Jaiswal definitely has the ingredients to be the next superstar. He's proving to be an all-format player," he added.

"The opportunities came knocking at their door just ahead of the transition period for Indian cricket, and it was really good to see these players grabbing the

chances with both hands."

Instant hit

India have introduced a string of new players in the series including Rajat Patidar, 30, who made his debut in the second Test.

Dhruv Jurel, the 23-year-old wicketkeeper who won his first Test cap in Rajkot alongside Sarfaraz, was dubbed "an instant hit on debut" by the Indian Express newspaper.

"Yashasvi Jaiswal is a special talent, that he can play defensively 50 balls, so (has) good technique against the new ball, and unleash and get into T20 mode immediately," former batsman Sanjay Manjrekar told website cricinfo. — AFP

MIAMI EXPECTS TROPHIES FROM MESSI’S

Miami: Lionel Messi and Inter Miami get the new Major League Soccer season under way on Wednesday with pressure on the Argentine star to deliver trophies for his club and more eyeballs on the league.

The World Cup winner joined Inter from Paris Saint Germain in mid-July, the biggest name ever to move to MLS and his signing caused a massive spurt in interest in American soccer.

The eight-times and current Ballon d’Or winner, made an instant impact, leading Miami to the Leagues Cup title, packing stadiums and massively increasing subscriptions to Apple TV’s MLS Season Pass broadcast package.

But the excitement waned as the 36-year-old struggled to maintain his fitness in the face of a hectic schedule and Miami were unable to overcome their poor early season results and make the playoffs.

Then Inter’s decision to undertake a gruelling overseas pre-season tour backfired with Messi and the team booed in Hong Kong after the star sat out a high-profile friendly due to injury.

Poor performances added to the sense that money-spinning trips to El Salvador, Saudi Arabia and Japan had been a mis-step for a team looking to hit the ground running this season.

A long and busy season awaits for Messi and his team-mates who as well as competing in MLS, have qualified for the regional CONCACAF Champions Cup.

Miami will also aim to defend their Leagues Cup title — against Mexican as well as MLS opposition — and all those challenges come in a summer which will include Argentina’s bid for the Copa America in the USA.

Messi has been joined in Miami by another veteran striker in Uruguayan Luis Suarez, making up a quartet of former Barcelona players with midfielder Sergio Busquets and left-back Jordi Alba.

Coping with expectation

No MLS team has ever been able to draw on players of such pedigree and experience and with that comes the expectation that they will land the club’s first MLS title.

Messi is well used to such pressure but it is a new sensation for some of the younger players in Gerardo Martino’s squad.

Shanyder Borgelin, the 22-year-old striker who scored in last week’s home friendly against Argentine club Newells Old Boys, says the team can cope with the high expectations.

“That’s expected when you have the greatest player in the world, four of the greatest players in the world, but I think we’re ready,” he told the Miami Herald.

“We are all called up to a big task. I definitely think the (preseason) losses and everything that comes with that made us a lot stronger,” he added.

Miami kick-off their campaign on Wednesday at home to Real Salt Lake with the rest of the league getting under way on Saturday.

Defending champions Columbus Crew start their title defence at home to Atlanta United with their French coach Wilfried Nancy looking to maintain the momentum of a playoff campaign which ended in victory over Los Angeles FC.

LAFC, the 2022 MLS Cup winners, host Western Conference rivals the Seattle Sounders in the biggest clash of the opening weekend.

LAFC have lost four regular starters from last season’s team including Italian Giorgio Chiellini, who has retired.

But Steve Cherundolo’s side have added a World Cup winner of their own with France

goalkeeper Hugo Lloris joining from Tottenham Hotspur.

Top-scorer Denis Bouanga remains with the club despite reports he could head back to France but the future of the team’s talismanic Mexican forward Carlos Vela remains unclear.

The 34-year-old Vela is a free agent after his contract with the club was not yet renewed.

There are some new faces on the bench with former Aston Villa manager Dean Smith taking charge at Charlotte and Phil Neville, the former Manchester United player and ex-Inter Miami boss now at the Portland Timbers. — AFP



Depleted Milan miss chance to go second with 4-2 loss at Monza

MONZA: AC Milan missed out on the chance to move into second in the Serie A standings when they lost 4-2 at mid-table Monza on Sunday after being reduced to 10 men early in the second half.

Milan remained third in the standings on 52 points, two adrift of second-placed Juventus and 11 behind leaders Inter Milan, who have a game in hand.

The Rossoneri, who beat Stade Rennais 3-0 at home in the Europa League in midweek and

travel to France for the second leg on Thursday, suffered their first league loss in more than two months to end their unbeaten run of nine games.

Matteo Pessina and Dany Mota put Monza ahead in the first half before substitutes Olivier Giroud and Christian Pulisic pulled Milan level in the second.

Warren Bondo and Lorenzo Colombo secured the hosts all three points with a goal apiece in the dying minutes.



Ruben Loftus-Cheek reacts after his team lost against AC Monza.— AFP

Milan went down to 10 men in the 52nd minute when Luka Jovic was sent off for violent conduct against Monza captain Pessina, with the referee overturning his original decision to just book the Serbia striker after consulting the VAR screen.

With Giroud, Pulisic and Rafael Leao starting on the bench, Milan had early chances through Jovic and Theo Hernandez before a shot by Samuel Chukwueze was denied by Monza goalkeeper Michele Di Gregorio.

Pessina gave Monza the lead from the spot just before the break, sending Milan keeper Mike Maignan the wrong way after the penalty was awarded for a foul by Malick Thiaw, and Mota doubled the advantage for the hosts in first-half stoppage time.

Di Gregorio had to be substituted late in the first half after a clash of heads with defender Andrea Carboni

— Reuters



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Suez Canal revenues decline by 50% due to Red Sea crisis



CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi revealed a decline in Suez Canal revenues from 40% to 50%, due to crises on the border, in reference to the Red Sea crisis.

The president said during a speech at the 7th Egypt International Energy Conference and Exhibition EGYPS 2024, “The current crises on our various borders with Libya, Sudan, and the Gaza Strip have caused Suez Canal revenues to decline from 40 to 50%,” noting that the shipping lane’s annual revenues amount to \$10 billion.

Al-Sisi stated that Egypt faced the Covid crisis, and bore the consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, and currently the conflict in the Gaza Strip.

Osama Rabie, Chairman of the Suez Canal Authority, stressed that the authority is keen on continuous consultation with customers and direct coordination to find joint work mechanisms, where the effects of the current crisis in the Red Sea can be reduced. — ONA

Oman to develop National Energy Model

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, FEB 19

Oman’s Ministry of Energy and Minerals is embarking on the development of a National Energy Model aimed at formulating a sophisticated roadmap for the country’s energy future.

An inaugural workshop on the initiative was hosted recently by Mohsin bin Hamad al Hadhrami, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals. In attendance were representatives of government and public sector stakeholder organisations, leading energy companies, universities and R&D institutions, and energy consultancies.

Underlining the significance of



Mohsin al Hadhrami speaking at the inaugural workshop on the National Energy Model initiative.

the initiative in a post, the ministry said the proposed National Energy Model will serve as a powerful tool for, among other things, simulating the impact of future energy policies and investments on the national energy landscape.

Additionally, the modelling framework will help identify optimal pathways for meeting

Oman’s growing energy demand.

Furthermore, it will facilitate informed decision-making for a sustainable energy future. Addressing the workshop, Al Hadhrami said the initiative attests to the Omani government’s commitment to building a robust and resilient energy sector

Besides promoting diversification and innovation in the energy mix, the modelling framework will also ensure that the growth of the sector aligns with Oman’s Vision 2040.

To help oversee the delivery of this strategic initiative, a dedicated modelling team is proposed to be established with representatives from various energy industry stakeholder organisations. This

specialised team will spearhead the development and ongoing maintenance of the National Energy Model, according to the ministry.

Additionally, a high-level Advisory Board comprising leading experts will also be constituted to provide invaluable guidance and oversight to the Modelling Team, thereby ensuring the model’s accuracy and effectiveness.

When completed, tentatively in about a year’s time, the National Energy Model will closely consider Oman’s ambitious goals for economic diversification, environmental sustainability, and energy security, the ministry noted.

Oman oil price reaches \$82.26 per barrel

MUSCAT: Oman oil price (April delivery 2024) yesterday reached \$82.26 , comprising a rise by 16 cents compared to the price of last Friday, which stood at \$82.10.

The average price of Oman oil (February delivery 2024) has stabilised at \$77.21 per barrel, thus \$5.96 per barrel lower than January delivery 2024.



A worker fills up a car with fuel at a gas station, in this photo. — Reuters

Meanwhile, Brent oil prices dipped on festering demand concerns and profit-taking prompted by last week’s gains as conflict in the Middle East showed no signs of easing.

Brent crude futures were down 78 cents, or 0.9 per cent, at \$82.69 a barrel by 1030 GMT.

The March contract for US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude, which expires on Tuesday, was down 33 cents, or 0.4 per cent, at \$78.86 in tepid trade. The WTI April contract was down 72 cents, or 0.9 per cent, at \$77.74.

Front-month Brent and WTI futures last week gained about 1.5 per cent and 3 per cent respectively, reflecting increasing risk of Middle East conflict widening.

Capping those gains was slowing demand forecasts from the International Energy Agency and a bigger than expected increase to US producer prices in January, amplifying inflation concerns. — Reuters



THAMRAIT INDUSTRIAL CITY TO DRIVE DHOFAR’S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, FEB 19

Thamrait, a town in Oman’s Dhofar Governorate, is poised for a major transformation with the development of the Thamrait Industrial City. This ambitious project aims to not only establish Thamrait as a commercial and economic centre but also act as a key driver of sustainable national economic development, aligning with Oman’s Vision 2040 goals.

Thamrait’s strategic position is a major advantage. Its proximity to concession areas, quarries, and the Najd agricultural area provides access to valuable resources. Additionally, its closeness to Salalah Port and Salalah International Airport makes it an ideal destination for investors, offering seamless logistics and connectivity.

Spanning a vast 4 million square metres, Thamrait Industrial City boasts integrated facilities including roads, electricity, water, and sanitation. To attract investors, the project offers financial incentives, such as reduced rental fees and grace periods, particularly for contracts signed between 2021 and 2024.

Thamrait Industrial City also aims to create job opportunities for local residents, strengthen local industries, and empower the local economy. It will also support small and medium enterprises and transform the town into a thriving economic hub.

Voltamp Energy to set up \$10m transformer project in S Arabia

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, FEB 19

In a strategic move, Oman’s Voltamp Energy Company and Saudi Arabia’s Al Sharif Holding Group have announced a partnership to establish a high-voltage power transformer production plant in the Kingdom.

The agreement, signed under the auspices of HH Sayyid Faisal bin Turki al Said, Oman’s Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, marks a significant \$10 million investment aimed at powering the Kingdom’s grid with locally-made transformers.

Branded as ‘Saudi Voltamp,’

the factory will be strategically located in the Western Region near Jeddah. The first phase, targeted for completion by 2025, will focus on manufacturing 132 kV transformers on a sprawling 27,000 m2 site.

To meet the Kingdom’s growing energy demands, the second phase, envisioned for 2027, will see the factory expand to 45,000 m2, ramping up production to include powerful 380 kV transformers.

This landmark partnership aligns seamlessly with both nations’ ambitious visions. It dovetails with Oman’s Vision 2040, which prioritises economic



The agreement was signed by Ayman bin Hamad al Busaidy, Chairman of Voltamp Energy and Al-Sharif Nawaf bin Fayeze, CEO of Al-Sharif Holding Group.

diversification and international collaboration.

For Saudi Arabia, the project aligns with Vision 2030’s goals of fostering domestic industry and building a thriving economy.

“This strategic partnership signifies a pivotal moment in our journey to expand into international markets,” expressed Ayman bin Hamad al Busaidy, Chairman of Voltamp Energy.

“We are confident that our collaboration with Al-Sharif Holding Group will not only benefit both companies but also contribute to the wider objectives of Oman and Saudi Arabia.”

Echoing the sentiment, Al-Sharif Nawaf bin Fayeze, CEO of Al-Sharif Holding Group, emphasised, “This joint venture marks a significant step towards achieving our industrial expansion goals and meeting the

Kingdom’s growing demand for high-voltage transformers.

We are proud to partner with Voltamp Energy and contribute to Saudi Arabia’s economic diversification and Vision 2030 aspirations.”

The signing ceremony, held at the Al Faisaliah Hotel in Riyadh, is a testament to the strong ties between Oman and Saudi Arabia.

The event witnessed the participation of dignitaries from both countries, including representatives from the Saudi Ministry of Investment, General Authority for Foreign Trade, Local Content Authority, and Saudi Electricity Company.



The gathering brought together cycling enthusiasts of all ages, showcasing an exceptional blend of skill, camaraderie, and sportsmanship.

National Finance powers Tornado MTB race

MUSCAT: In a remarkable display of commitment to community-centric initiatives that celebrate unique sporting activities, National Finance, the Sultanate of Oman's leading finance company, extended its support to the Tornado MTB Race, a thrilling cycling event. Organised by Adventure Box Oman, the gathering brought together cycling enthusiasts of all ages, showcasing an exceptional blend of skill, camaraderie, and sportsmanship.

The Tornado MTB Race, conceptualised by Adventure Box Oman, featured teams of two individuals randomly selected, embarking on an exhilarating journey of cycling, strategy, and teamwork.

Beyond fortifying the niche interests of the cycling community, the event served as a platform to promote healthy living habits and fitness pursuits.

National Finance's strategic support for this initiative emphasises its commitment to meaningful community engagement and the promotion of community wellness.

At the event, the company also presented its comprehensive product portfolio to potential patrons, aligning with its dedication to providing tailored financing solutions.

Tariq bin Sulaiman al Farsi, Chief Executive Officer at National Finance, said, "Witnessing the zeal and thrill of the Tornado MTB Race has strengthened our endeavour to be a part of such diverse activities.

At National Finance, our customer-centric approach extends beyond delivering unparalleled service quality; it aims to empower our customers in the pursuit of their passions.

Therefore, we strive to tailor our finance solutions to cater to customer preferences, and that includes our unique Bike Finance offering under our Consumer Durables Financing arm."

Hongqi HS3: Redefining luxury and comfort in the SUV segment

MUSCAT: MHD ACERE is proud to announce the launch of the highly anticipated Hongqi HS3, the epitome of luxury, innovation, and performance in the SUV segment. Crafted with meticulous attention to detail and engineered to exceed expectations, the Hongqi HS3 sets new standards for sophistication, comfort, and driving experience.

Every model in the HS3 series is equipped with cutting-edge features designed to enhance convenience, safety, and driving pleasure. Standard features include a reversing camera and cruise control, ensuring seamless manoeuvrability and effortless driving experience in any situation.

Furthermore, high-end models elevate the driving experience with additional features such as 360° panoramic images, transparent chassis images, full-speed adaptive cruise control, automatic parking, and a premium audio experience with 10 Dynaudio speakers.

The Hongqi HS3 boasts the longest, widest, and tallest dimensions in its class, providing unparalleled spaciousness and comfort for occupants.

With the highest wheelbase in its segment, the HS3 ensures a smooth and stable ride, making every journey a luxurious experience.



The Hongqi HS3 sets new standards for sophistication, comfort, and driving experience.

Experience ultimate versatility with the Hongqi HS3's array of customisation options. With five distinct drive modes, drivers can tailor their driving experience to suit their preferences and driving conditions. Additionally, the HS3 offers 12 driver seat adjustment options, ensuring optimal comfort and support for every passenger.

With its unmatched combination of features,

comfort, and performance, the HS3 redefines the standards of excellence in the automotive industry.

Mohsin bin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of MHD ACERE, remarked, "The HS3 embodies our commitment to excellence, marrying cutting-edge technology with the timeless elegance that defines the Hongqi brand.

With its unparalleled features,

striking design, and luxurious comfort, the HS3 is not just a vehicle; it's an experience that redefines the very essence of driving."

He further stated that "We invite you to embark on a journey of opulence and innovation with the Hongqi HS3 – where every drive is a testament to our unwavering pursuit of automotive perfection."

Sohar International joins Estidamah in establishing Omani Business Growth Fund

MUSCAT: In line with its commitment to play a catalytic role in Oman's economic growth and contribute to the nation's diversification agenda aligned with Oman Vision 2040, Sohar International, the fastest growing bank in Oman, has joined hands with the National Program for Fiscal Sustainability and Financial Sector Development (Estidamah) and the Embassy of the United Kingdom, to initiate the establishment of the Omani Business Growth Fund.

The collaboration aims to strengthen the financial sector, enhance competitiveness, and expand access to tailored financing options in line with global best practices.

The overarching goal of this initiative is to stimulate market growth and foster economic diversification, supporting Oman's long-term vision for sustainable development and



The official signing ceremony symbolises the unwavering commitment of both local and international stakeholders towards the prosperity of Oman.

economic prosperity.

The official signing ceremony, held within the framework of the 10th meeting of the Omani-British Strategic Group, symbolises the unwavering commitment of both local and international stakeholders towards the prosperity of Oman.

Nasser bin Khamis al Jashmi, Chairman of the Tax Authority, led the Omani delegation, while Lord Gerry Grimstone headed the British delegation. Furthermore,

the presence of Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Chairman of Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, underscores the importance of this initiative in advancing the nation's long-term strategic objectives.

Mahmoud bin Abdullah bin Ahmed al Owaini, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Finance, alongside Dr Liane Saunders, the designated Ambassador of the United Kingdom to the Sultanate of Oman, and Khalil bin Salim al

Hedaifi, Chief Government and Private Banking Officer, have officially endorsed the letter of intent for the establishment of the Omani Business Growth Fund.

Khalil bin Salim al Hedaifi, Chief Government & Private Banking Officer at Sohar International, emphasised, "This represents a significant milestone for Sohar International, reaffirming our unwavering commitment to driving Oman's economic development forward.

These strategic alliances underscore our steadfast pledge to support local businesses and entrepreneurs, enabling Omani enterprises to flourish in both domestic and international markets, thus paving the way for boundless opportunities.

Together, we aim to ignite unprecedented growth and cultivate lasting economic prosperity in the Sultanate of Oman."

OOMCO launches Ultimax 98 fuel with additional 10 additional service stations across Oman

MUSCAT: Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO) added the Ultimax 98, to ten more service stations reaching a total of more than 100 locations offering the higher-octane unleaded fuel to customers across Oman.

The announcement came during an event held in collaboration with the Oman Skyline GTR Club and One More Drive at OOMCO's Al Ansab service station showcasing the company's commitment to providing customers with premium fuel that supports the optimum performance of car engines.

Considered the highest quality fuel in the market, Ultimax 98-Octane is exclusively offered by OOMCO in Oman.

"Today's announcement is another one of our milestones that highlights our unique and diverse offerings to our customers, to our stakeholders and to the nation as a whole. Since our establishment, we have been a company that consistently delivers on its brand purpose, which is to become the most customer-centric fuel marketer in the region," said Tarik bin Mohammed al Junaidi, Chief Executive Officer of Oman Oil Marketing Company.

"We pride ourselves for being the only company in Oman that provides Ultimax 98-Octane fuel to our customers. This premium fuel provides enhanced engine performance, fuel efficiency, maximum engine protection, and less environmental impact thanks to its reduced emission rates."

During the recent event, the quality of OOMCO's Ultimax 98 was demonstrated by showcasing its robust performance. This was an excellent opportunity to see both cars achieve their maximum performance potential, while using the premium fuel during a real-world test.

OOMCO launched the high-quality Ultimax 98-Octane in Oman in 2018 as part of its commitment to providing excellent products and services, as well as in several other countries in the wider region to meet the ever-changing needs of customers.

Aiming to become the most customer-centric oil fuel marketer in the region by 2027, OOMCO has been expanding to other countries, diversifying its products and services, and implementing progressive eco-conscious technologies while staying true to its roots and core



Tarik bin Mohammed al Junaidi, Chief Executive Officer of Oman Oil Marketing Company.

Tiggo 8 Pro Max highlights Chery's brand characteristics

MUSCAT: Continuing the high-end positioning of the Tiggo 8 family, Tiggo 8 Pro Max is a luxury and commercial SUV with both forceful powertrain and advanced technology launched for the urban new middle-class elites.

By virtue of its dynamic and energetic exterior design, "2.0T+7DCT+4WD" superior power, intelligent entertainment cabin and ultimate safety, Tiggo 8 Pro Max has successively received a number of international awards and successfully set a new



benchmark for flagship SUVs.

Designed by a team of top international designers, Tiggo 8 Pro Max perfectly interprets the design concept of Life in Motion.

Particularly, the exclusive diamond front grille design of the PRO family and the unique wrapping parts contribute to the distinctive front end, bringing a strong visual impact and highlighting its standing as a flagship SUV.

In terms of the side appearance, Tiggo 8 Pro Max has three

waistlines running across the side of the body, which not only conform to the fluid dynamics and can effectively reduce wind resistance, but also extend the overall body contour to bring a smooth and beautiful visual sense, showing its dynamic temperament both internally and externally as a high-end SUV product without compromise.

In addition, the 19-inch large-sized wheels and 235mm-wide tires complement the massive body of Tiggo 8 Pro Max,

showing off the boldness without sacrificing steadiness.

In Oman, Chery vehicles are distributed by Saud Bahwan Group. For the latest Press Releases, Test Drive requests and more, please visit www.chery.om, www.youtube.com/@OmanChery, www.facebook.com/CheryAutoOman, and www.instagram.com/cheryoman. For any further details & to ascertain the availability of stocks, please visit the Chery Showroom at Wattayah.

Finance ministry issues RfQ to develop Oman Business Gateway project

MUSCAT : As part of Public Private Partnership agreement to encourage private sector investment in infrastructure projects and public services, the Ministry of Finance (MoF), in coordination with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), invites specialised local and international companies to participate in the real estate development of Oman Business Gateway project, including design, finance and development of the MoCIIP's Headquarter.

The last date for obtaining qualification is on March 4, 2024, while the last date for clarification is on March 18, 2024. Meanwhile, the last date for submitting the required qualification document is on April 1, 2024.

Interested companies can obtain the qualification document by sending an e-mail outlining company name, competent staff name, contact number and e-mail ID to: ppp.mociip@mof.gov.om.

Driving inclusivity and competitiveness in Oman's Islamic banking sector

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, FEB 19

The competitive Islamic banking landscape in Oman presents promising opportunities for growth and development, says Kamal Uddin al Maraza, GM and Chief Officer of Dhofar Islamic Banking.

Al Maraza shed light on the inclusive and competitive nature of Islamic banking, in an interview with the *Observer*, on the sidelines of the Islamic window's rebranding from Maisarah Islamic Banking Services to Dhofar Islamic, at a ceremony held yesterday at the JW Marriott Hotel.

Reflecting on a decade of progress since the establishment of its Islamic window in the country, he highlighted the institution's dedication to expanding and evolving its services to offer exceptional banking experiences for all clients.

The growth of Islamic banking in Oman is evident through the establishment of new branches in various cities, totalling 24 Dhofar Islamic branches, supported by modern banking services like mobile and internet banking.

By harnessing technology, Dhofar Islamic aims to provide a seamless and inclusive banking



Kamal Uddin al Maraza (left), GM and Chief Officer of Dhofar Islamic Banking, Abdulhakeem al Ojaili, CEO of Bank Dhofar and Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

experience that caters to a diverse clientele, including non-Muslim customers.

Emphasising inclusivity and competitiveness, Al Maraza said, "these (Islamic banking) institutions welcome customers from all segments of society, ensuring that their services and offerings remain competitive in the market."

The rebranding move, transitioning from Maisarah Islamic Banking Services to

Dhofar Islamic signifies a significant milestone in the sector.

The unveiling of a new visual identity, held under the auspices of Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, symbolised by a constellation of stars, underscores the core values of the institution and its unwavering commitment to providing top-tier products and services to all customers.

Al Maraza expressed that the rebranding to Dhofar Islamic

signifies a proactive move that mirrors the organisation's strong ties to Islamic principles.

The rebranding aims to establish Dhofar Islamic as a dynamic and forward-looking establishment, dedicated to offering innovative and ethical financial solutions.

This initiative strengthens the company's position in the competitive market by presenting a rejuvenated identity that aligns with its core values and long-term

THESE (ISLAMIC BANKING) INSTITUTIONS WELCOME CUSTOMERS FROM ALL SEGMENTS OF SOCIETY, ENSURING THAT THEIR SERVICES AND OFFERINGS REMAIN COMPETITIVE IN THE MARKET

objectives.

As part of this strategic move, Dhofar Islamic has expanded its branch and ATM/CDM network, enhanced its product propositions and focused on cultivating a seamless digital banking experience.

This rebranding effort signifies not only a change in name but a reinforcement of the institution's values, dedication to customers, and pursuit of excellence in banking services, he said.

Looking ahead, Dhofar Islamic is positioned as a forward-thinking entity within the competitive financial sector, dedicated to championing inclusivity and competitiveness.

Through this commitment, the institution aims to deliver exceptional service underpinned by ethical banking practices, transparency and a customer-centric approach, he added.

Global Shapers Muscat hosts 'Meet the Leaders' session



MUSCAT: The Global Shapers Muscat (GSM) Hub hosted the second session of the Meet The Leader series last week at Kadam Café in Muscat.

The session featured entrepreneur and chairperson of MHD ITICS, Lujaina Mohsin Haider Darwish. During the session, she emphasised the importance of staying focused on one's path and avoiding comparisons with others.

She highlighted gratitude, family appreciation and nurturing dreams as essential for maintaining enthusiasm and drive.

The event is part of the group's efforts in connecting young professionals with established leaders in the community.

"The series bridges the gap between experienced professionals and aspiring individuals, creating a valuable

link that enhances imperative skills such as communication, networking and leadership.

Held in an informal and intimate setting, the events ensure comfort and ease in exploring these topics, ultimately cultivating a supportive environment with valuable learning," shared a member of GSM.

"This pilot marks the inception of a promising and beneficial series, and we are excited about the potential impact it holds for the personal and professional development of young professionals," the member added.

Global Shapers is the youth arm of the World Economic Forum and hosts a network of young people working together to solve shared local and global challenges through the power of collaboration.

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 19

The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), is participating in Gulfood 2024, a premier global food and hospitality expo, which began at Dubai World Trade Centre on February 19, 2024.

Gulfood 2024 features an impressive lineup of over 5,500 exhibitors globally eyeing lucrative business opportunities, with deals expected to surpass \$12 billion.

"The Sultanate of Oman, represented by Madayn, is participating at Gulfood for the 12th consecutive year to promote Omani products, explore new markets and expand outreach. The event provides an excellent opportunity for Omani industries to showcase and promote their top-quality products to Gulfood attendees from across the globe," said Hamood al Balushi, Assistant Director General at Madayn.

Al Balushi added, "Through



Oman's pavilion at Gulfood 2024 features the products and services of a wide array of Omani public and private sector entities.

its presence at Gulfood 2024, Madayn also aims to align with the objectives of the national 'Made in Oman' Campaign by introducing Omani products to international markets, establishing new distribution channels, and tapping into diverse consumer segments on both regional and global fronts."

Oman's pavilion at Gulfood 2024 features Madayn, Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, Oman Chamber of Commerce and

Industry, Areej Vegetable Oils and Derivatives, Oman Foodstuff Factory (Al Mudhish), Food World for Industry, Omani Euro Food Industries, Omani Gulf Food Company, A'Saffa Foods, Unique Food Solutions (Zaheb), Luban Foods (Delicio), and Ataya Trading and Industrial Company (Yamama).

Al Balushi noted that the participating companies will have the opportunity to display their products and the latest production technologies to visitors, as well

as gain valuable insights into the products and services of their counterparts in the food and hospitality sector, including advancements in production and packaging technologies.

He also emphasised that the companies will actively seek out new agents, contracts and deals to further expand their businesses internationally.

Gulfood 2024 sheds light on innovations in agri-tech, the increasing use of AI in food production, reducing food loss and waste, public-private partnerships and investment in alternative proteins, which can all help reduce food deprivation and feed the world through to 2050 and beyond.

At Gulfood 2024, international policymakers and F&B industry leaders will share their insights on global food systems, and how they can be transformed to feed an ever-growing global population, while simultaneously building resilience and mitigating the impacts of climate change, to avoid future crises.

Government units applying PP Budget hold annual meet

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Finance yesterday organised the annual meeting of teams tasked with implementing the Programmes and Performance Budget (PP Budget) in government units.

The meeting was attended by representatives of more than 60 units of the State's Administrative Apparatus. The meeting reviewed the progress made in implementing the PP Budget at government units in 2023, as well as the Ministry's follow-up plan of the



Abdullah bin Salim al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Finance.

budget programme in terms of requirements in 2024.

The meeting also touched on improvements that could be introduced to the PP Budget's draft document for the year 2025.

During the meeting, the Governorate of Al Dakhiliyah shared its experience in applying the PP Budget.

The Governorate also gave a presentation on an indicator set for applying the PP Budget within the context of Ejada, the institutional system overseen by the Ministry of Labour.

Abdullah bin Salim al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Finance Ministry, underscored the significance of the annual gathering. He lauded ongoing cooperation between the Ministry of Finance and other government units in finalising the requirements needed for applying the PP Budget.

He pointed out that 45 government units have so far submitted the related budget's documents.

For his part, Dr Talib bin Ali al Siyabi, Director of the

Programmes and Performance Budget Implementation Project, told Oman News Agency that the meeting stemmed from a keenness to improve the performance of government units and further streamline the objectives of Oman Vision 2040 and other strategic goals.

The drive also seeks to link all units with the Detailed Performance Document, so that overall performance could be measured and connected with general spending, Al Siyabi explained. — ONA

How to measure employees happiness?



TARIQ AL BARWANI

The author is Knowledge Oman Founder knowledgeoman.com

HAPPY EMPLOYEES ARE NORMALLY POSITIVE, PRODUCTIVE, CREATIVE, INNOVATIVE AND MOST IMPORTANTLY TREAT THE ORGANISATION THEY WORK FOR AS THEIR OWN.

Saad is all smiles and is filled with positive energy the moment he enters the office in the morning. He greets his colleagues: be it his superiors, subordinates, team-members, and everyone around with respect.

He ensures coffee-meet is organised with the team for periodic departmental updates, and ensures his personal and team's engagements and projects are undertaken timely.

Furthermore, he extends this positive energy to customers, suppliers and all stakeholders that are engaged with the company in one way or another.

Yes, Saad is an example of a happy employee, and yes having more happy employees as Saad is what organisation must strive to attract in order to gain happy customers, who would in return, generate fruitful top line (revenue) and bottom-line (profits) for a company.

Happy employees, as I had elaborated on my last week

article, are normally positive, productive, creative, innovative and most importantly treat the organisation they work for as their own, and that kind of behaviour would ultimately lead to providing a better customer service and experience.

Studies including the Harvard Business Review has shown that happy employees lead to happy customers.

I personally am a firm believer that one of the ideal ways to make oneself happy, is to make other people happy, and to make other people happy, is of course, one first needs to be happy as well. Follow this genuinely and see the profound result it creates ultimately.

My article last week was about “Happy employees gaining Happy Customers”. My article this week is about how can organisations measure the happiness of their respective employees.

There may not be a one technique/measure that fits all type of organisations or industries, yet, some of the observations that continue to be used across many of the leading organisations to help measure employee happiness include employees attendance, turnover, satisfaction, engagements, performance, contributions, customer referrals and the likes.

Common yet effective tools that are used include but is not limited to organisational surveys, team-building activities, KHI (key happiness indicators) to mention as a few.

Employees that take many unplanned leaves and are consistently absent from work is a clear example to note.

In addition, the number of employees that leave an organisation is another strong sign of unhappiness with their role.

Furthermore, organisations will note poor engagement from such employees during the meetings that also effect their performance due to their

inadequate contribution.

Do the employees speak good and refer customers to their organisation?

These are some of the attributes that organisation's will receive out of their unhappy employees.

Tools such as regular surveys, performance and engagement metrics, employee feedback on their managers, help organisations find the attributes and feelings that emanate from employees that I shared above.

Organisations need to conduct periodic surveys that gather the necessary feedback from their employee's on their satisfaction, engagement, thoughts, etc that leads to their overall happiness.

Looking into the absenteeism and turnover rates, so as the level of productivity of each of the employee within their respective teams as part of the performance and engagement metrics is another tool that organisation can utilise.

Finally, encouraging feedback from employees on their relationship with their superiors/managers etc help bring forward necessary gaps that organisations miss to note, as far as leadership is concerned. People managers and leaders can make or break an organisation.

I would like to conclude my article this week by emphasising that employee's happiness and performance work hand in hand.

Organisations that strive to improve work environment, employee's satisfaction and consequently happiness for the same, would surely be sustainable and profitable, and that's because their employees will also go above and beyond to ensure their tasks are undertaken promptly and successfully.

Moreover, the employees in question would be treating the organisation not as work only but also as a family and second home.

Until we catch up again next week, stay happy and be positive, for the impact you create is surely contagious.

How the US became the world’s biggest gas supplier



BRAD PLUMER

The author is a New York Times reporter based in Washington, covering technology and policy efforts to address global warming.



NADJA POPOVICH

The author is a reporter and graphics editor at The New York Times covering climate change, energy and the environment.



Storage tanks are seen at Marathon Petroleum's Los Angeles Refinery, which processes domestic & imported crude oil into California Air Resources Board (CARB) gasoline, CARB diesel fuel, and other petroleum products, in Carson, California. – Reuters

In just eight years, the United States has rocketed from barely selling any gas overseas to becoming the world's No. 1 supplier, a remarkable shift that has profited oil and gas companies and strengthened US influence abroad. But climate activists worry that soaring exports of liquefied natural gas could make global warming worse.

Last month, the Biden administration said it would pause the permitting process for new facilities that export liquefied natural gas in order to study their impact on climate change, the economy and national security.

Even with the pause, the United States is still on track to nearly double its export capacity by 2027 because of projects already permitted and under construction. But any expansions beyond that are now in doubt.

At the core of the debate over whether to allow more exports is a thorny question: With governments across the globe pledging to transition away from fossil fuels, how much more natural gas does the world need?

America's gas export boom initially caught many policymakers by surprise.

In the early 2000s, natural gas was relatively scarce at home, and companies were spending billions of dollars to build terminals to import gas from places such as Qatar and Australia.

Fracking changed all that.

In the mid-2000s, US drillers perfected methods to unlock vast reserves of cheap natural gas from shale rock.

At the same time, natural gas prices began spiking elsewhere in the world, especially after Japan shut down its nuclear plants in the wake of the Fukushima reactor meltdown in 2011 and began demanding more fuel.

That led to a stunning reversal. US companies, led by Cheniere Energy, began spending billions more to convert import terminals into export terminals, and shipments of US gas to other countries began to surge.

Natural gas is most easily transported by pipeline. To send it across oceans, the gas must be

EVEN WITH THE PAUSE, THE UNITED STATES IS STILL ON TRACK TO NEARLY DOUBLE ITS EXPORT CAPACITY BY 2027 BECAUSE OF PROJECTS ALREADY PERMITTED AND UNDER CONSTRUCTION. BUT ANY EXPANSIONS BEYOND THAT ARE NOW IN DOUBT.

chilled to minus 260 degrees Fahrenheit, turning it into a liquid.

The process of making and shipping liquefied natural gas adds complexity and cost, but if the difference between US natural gas prices and overseas prices is big enough, it is profitable.

“It comes down to economics,” said Kenneth Medlock, senior director at the Center for Energy Studies at Rice University.

“Production just keeps growing in the United States, which keeps prices low. And then we keep seeing major demand growth in the rest of the world.”

The export boom has transformed America's role in energy geopolitics.

Europe has become the biggest importer of American gas in recent years, enabling the continent to slash by more than half its reliance on Russian gas since Russia's attack of Ukraine in 2022.

In the future, Europe is expected to curb its appetite for gas by adding more renewable energy sources such as wind and solar power.

The main growth markets for natural gas are expected to be fast-growing Asian countries such as China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Vietnam that want to use the fuel for electricity, heating or industrial purposes.

But as US exports keep skyrocketing, critics have raised concerns about the climate change impact of transporting and selling more gas around the world.

The last time the Energy Department studied this issue, in 2019, it concluded that US liquefied natural gas often produced fewer greenhouse gas emissions than other types of coal or gas used around the world.

That meant that more exports could actually be beneficial for climate change if US gas replaced those other fossil fuels.

(When gas is scarce, some countries including Pakistan and Bangladesh have recently opted to burn more coal instead.)

But some environmentalists have disputed those conclusions, arguing that the analysis didn't

fully account for all the planet-warming methane leaks that can accompany natural gas production, and that it didn't study whether a glut of gas might displace cleaner renewable energy rather than coal.

The Energy Department is expected to study these questions while it puts permits for new projects on hold.

In the meantime, the US gas boom is far from over, even with the permitting pause.

Since 2016, US energy companies have built seven large facilities in Texas, Louisiana, Maryland and Georgia that can export around 11.4 billion cubic feet of liquefied natural gas per day, according to the Energy Information Administration.

Another five projects along the Gulf Coast are already permitted and under construction and will be able to export an additional 9.7 billion cubic feet per day by 2027 — nearly doubling America's export capacity.

Three more facilities are currently being built in Mexico that will receive US gas by pipeline and then ship it abroad.

The pause, however, could affect nearly a dozen proposed projects in the United States and Mexico that, if built, could boost export capacity by another 10 billion cubic feet per day, according to research by Clearview Energy Partners, a consulting firm.

Whether those projects ultimately go forward remains to be seen. With so many projects locked in, experts say it will be crucial to ensure that methane leaks from gas production are kept as low as possible.

(The Biden administration has put forward several new regulations on methane.) “This is an area where we can actually deliver an emissions win, maybe more so than delaying or even killing a future supply project,” said Ben Cahill, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

“Because it's what we do with the emissions on the projects that we know are with us today.”

— The New York Times



China's first homegrown airliner makes international debut

SINGAPORE: China's challenger to Airbus and Boeing's passenger jets, the narrow-body C919 manufactured by the Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China (COMAC), has made its first trip outside Chinese territory, staging a fly-by at the Singapore Airshow on Sunday.

China has invested heavily in its attempt to break the hold of the dominant two Western planemakers on the global passenger market. China has indicated a push this year to advance the C919 and COMAC's footprint domestically and internationally. The plane is only certified within China and the first of now four C919s began flying with China Eastern Airlines last year.

With Airbus and Boeing struggling to ramp up

production and meet demand for new planes, and Boeing struggling with a string of crises, the aviation industry is watching how COMAC positions itself as a viable alternative.

COMAC will invest tens of billions of yuan over the next 3-5 years to expand C919 production capacity, Chinese media reported a COMAC official saying in January.

China's aviation authority said it would this year pursue European Union Aviation Safety Agency validation for the C919.

The C919 was one of two commercial planemakers flying their planes off Singapore's coast alongside Airbus at a Sunday preview for Asia's biggest air show. Boeing will not display a commercial aircraft this year.

COMAC has two passenger products: the ARJ21 regional jet



A COMAC C919 flies past during an aerial flying display ahead of the Singapore Airshow at Changi Exhibition Centre in Singapore. — Reuters

and the larger C919 twin-engine narrow-body airliner with 158-192 seats, which competes with the established Airbus A320neo and Boeing 737 MAX 8 models.

The C919 made its first flight outside mainland China in December to Hong Kong. ARJ21s are in use by Indonesia's TransNusa Air. Many inside the industry

caution that only four C919s are in service in China; the plane is only certified by Chinese regulators and the C919 relies on international supply chains.

But the aviation industry-wide supply crunch, which is testing an expected full return and then growth of civil capacity in Asia, is garnering COMAC more attention. — Reuters

Asian stocks mostly up as China enjoys Lunar New Year bump

HONG KONG: Asian markets saw an uptick in Mainland Chinese stocks following the Lunar New Year holiday, with holiday spending surpassing pre-pandemic levels.

Both the Shanghai and Shenzhen composite indexes posted gains of over 1.3 per cent, driven by a surge in domestic tourism spending and a 61 per cent year-on-year increase in rail trips during the holiday.

However, Tokyo's Nikkei index remained flat as a larger-than-expected rise in US wholesale prices on Friday dampened hopes for an early interest-rate cut by the Federal Reserve.

Despite this, the Nikkei has been performing strongly in recent months, approaching an all-time record set in 1989, fuelled by optimism around robust Japanese earnings and a weakened yen. Chinese policymakers find relief in the positive holiday data, offering a glimmer of hope amid economic challenges.

Analysts caution about the



A man wearing a protective mask, amid the Covid-19 outbreak, is reflected on an electronic board displaying stock prices outside a brokerage in Tokyo. — Reuters

uncertainty of the long-term sustainability of this surge in tourism.

Meanwhile, Asian markets, including Seoul and Singapore, experienced gains, but Hong Kong faced a slight dip after China's central bank opted to keep a key policy rate unchanged.

Market sentiment in China remains optimistic about sustaining positive momentum in Asian markets despite last week's US inflation shock. — AFP

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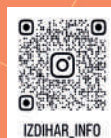
Based on the provisions of Article 13 of the law 18/2019 and its amendments announces, the company (Aal Tech Marine and Industrial) is registered at Commercial Registry under the number (1341764). It is in the process of changing the form of company from Individual Firm/Merchant to SPC (Sole proprietorship company). Anyone who has an objection to this must submit the reasons for his objection to the Secretariat of the Commercial Registry, The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion in Muscat within one month from the date of publication of this announcement.



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ANIMAL PLANET

The Asian elephant "Trompita" is seen next to other animals during the celebration of her 63rd birthday at Aurora Zoo in Guatemala City. — AFP



TRAVEL TALES

A woman takes a picture of red plum blossoms at a park in Chengdu, China's Sichuan province. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

US singer songwriter Billie Eilish arrives for the 2024 People's Choice awards at the Barker Hangar in Santa Monica, California. — AFP



FASHION

A model presents a creation by Turkish-British designer Dilara Findikoglu during the catwalk presentation for her Autumn/Winter 2024 collection.



CHANGING WORLD

A displaced Palestinian child carries a ration of red lentil soup, distributed by volunteers in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. — AFP

art & life

TUESDAY | FEBRUARY 20, 2024 | SHAABAN 10, 1445 AH | OMAN OBSERVER | www.omanobserver.om | features@omanobserver.om



Founded by Maysam al Ismaili and Mohammed al Batashi, the Palmera Botanical Garden in Saad, Bausher blends city farm, petting zoo and educational exhibits. The garden showcases native palm trees, farm animals, birds, bees and a reptile house and aims to educate and preserve local and foreign species....20

BOTANICAL GARDEN IN BAUSER BLENDS NATURE WITH EDUCATION

THE OPERA

Legendary Lebanese oud player Marcel Khalife to perform at ROHM on Feb 22, 23



THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE Muscat was delighted to host two special evenings with the acclaimed Lebanese performer, Marcel Khalife accompanied by his son, composer Rami Khalife, for a unique concert titled "Homage to Palestine" at the Royal Opera House of Musical Arts. The performance will take place on February 22 and 23 at 7 pm promising a night of intricate music and performances. The legendary performer Marcel Khalife is a renowned singer, songwriter and oud player known for his unique style, blending traditional Arabic techniques with his own innovative approach. His beautiful voice as well as his politically charged lyrics have resonated with people around the world for generations. His appeal, rooted in its ability to address contemporary issues such as justice, freedom and love, has inspired social change, making his music timeless. Following in his father's

footsteps, Rami Khalife's style is defined by a bold and eclectic musical journey, adding a new dimension to the family legacy. Together, they shared the stage, blending piano and oud in a captivating display of intergenerational talent and collaboration. For two nights only, Marcel Khalife performed at the Royal Opera House Muscat in a special concert in tribute to the Palestinian people. Sought after across the Middle East, his concerts in Muscat will include the performance of some of his most famous songs including Rita w'al-Bunduqiya (Rita and the Rifle), Ya Sari Min Jadhum, Oh The Breeze of The Wind and Al Hanna. In homage to Palestine, the two concerts served as a poignant tribute, carrying a noble message. Through the universal language of music, Khalife strives to forge a bridge that resonates deeply with audiences worldwide, fostering understanding and solidarity.

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Artisans fear future in Florence ‘dying’ of tourism

GOLDSMITH TOMMASO Pestelli was evicted from his historic Florence workshop to make way for a luxury hotel, the umpteenth victim of a mass tourism critics say is ravaging the Italian city. Calls for urgent action to protect the city centre, a Unesco site, intensified last month after a museum director said “hit and run” tourism had transformed Florence into a “prostitute”. Some 1.5 million tourists flocked to the city last summer, up 6.6 per cent on the previous year, while an increasing number of independent shops and residential apartments are being transformed into fast food outlets and holiday lets. “We’ve been open since 1908. If you get rid of us, and many others like

us, you take away part of the city’s spirit,” said Pestelli, whose father, grandfather and great-grandfather were goldsmiths before him. Pestelli, 55, managed to find another little workshop nearby, but says many fellow artisans have not been so lucky. The average cost of monthly residential rents leapt 42 per cent between 2016 and 2023, while the number of apartments listed on Airbnb jumped from some 6,000 to nearly 15,000, official figures show. Even in February, tourist queues snake around the block at the Duomo and throng around Michelangelo’s David. With locals forced out and traditional shops disappearing, “Florence is becoming an empty box”, Pestelli said. Elena Bellini, 47, who sells work by local artists, said the drop in the number of long-term residents was killing neighbourhoods and had led to more crime, like attempted break-ins. “Florence is dying!” read a notice in the window of a jewellers saying the city had been “sold” to big business.

AIRBNB BAN The Tuscan capital is not alone. Venice and other top destinations like the Cinque Terre in northwest Italy have also seen locals driven

away by astronomical rents, overcrowded sites and endless souvenir shops. While Venice is trialling a ticketing system, with day visitors to be charged an entry fee in high seasons, Florence’s centre-left city council has launched a campaign to entice tourists away from the centre. “People are increasingly looking for ‘experience-based itineraries’, so we have to promote... other points of historical, artistic, naturalistic and gastronomic interest,” Deputy Mayor Alessia Bettini said. Visitors to surrounding villages, castles and abbeys were up 4.5 per cent in January, while the number of hikers tackling the Path of the Gods across the Apennines to Bologna rose 22 per cent last year. The council has also attempted to free up homes for local people and prevent rents spiralling further by banning new short-term private vacation rentals in the historic centre. The measure, adopted in October, also includes tax breaks for landlords if they switch back to ordinary leases.

GONE FOREVER Despite the ban, a dozen or so artisans are being evicted from workshops in a building near the Ponte Vecchio, amid plans to transform it for tourism. “The Florentine goldsmith tradition is rather quickly falling to pieces,” said Pestelli. A few streets away, Gabriele Maselli, president of Florence’s Historical Businesses Association, paints a gold picture frame by hand, rows of brightly coloured pots and powders lining the shelves behind him. A large crucifix stands propped against one wall, while nearby a restorer repairs the surface of a damaged painting. “People come to Florence for quality things, made painstakingly by hand,” 58-year-old Maselli said. “If a business is forced to close though, it affects the whole production chain. A whole world closes, gone forever”. — AFP



Gabon sculptor transforms salvaged paper into fine art

EDDY HEINDRICKX MAYOMBO picks a scrap piece of cardboard from a pile in his rudimentary studio and meticulously folds it into a small, even-sided triangle. Then he picks up another and starts the process over again. The Gabonese artist and designer works primarily with salvaged paper and cardboard, using an origami-like pleating technique to create his pieces, which he has exhibited in

art school; I’m self-taught,” he said. Mayombo’s works are currently on display in Libreville’s Galerie Ephemere and the French Institute of Gabon, as well as in the prime minister’s office. “Really the objects he makes are magnificent,” said Fofana Sidy, a buyer at the Ephemere gallery. “I’ve collected two and I invite people to come and choose one for themselves.”



Senegal, Burkina Faso and Russia. He hopes to inspire people to reconsider the concept of waste. “It is difficult to understand the importance of these resources,” the artist said. “For me it’s a nod to the protection of our environment.” Now 39, Mayombo first began tinkering with paper as a child, using materials his mother had given him to practice writing. He learned the pleating technique from a Brazilian nun and has adapted it to create his sculptures and designer objects. “It’s something that I adopt and adapt according to my senses, my inspiration... but I’ve never been to an art centre or

Edwige Sauzon-Bouit, deputy director of the French Institute, displays a red and beige floor lamp near her office. “It’s very impressive,” she said. “It uses an ancestral folding method that references Asian techniques, and it’s also very contemporary, highlighting the question of recycling.” Although Mayombo hopes to showcase his designs in more exhibitions abroad and dreams of opening a better-equipped studio where he can share his skills with young people. In the meantime, he continues to pleat and fold. The rhythm of his movements, he says, brings him peace. “That’s the ultimate goal,” he said. — Reuters

BOTANICAL GARDEN IN BAUSHER BLENDS NATURE WITH EDUCATION

The project expanded to include farm animals, most of which roam freely in shady enclosures: goats, a baby donkey for petting, white rabbits, chickens, ducks and a Koi Fish tank. With an established bee colony on-site, PBG offers unique adult workshops to the public.

BY GEORGINA BENISON

The Palmera Botanical Garden in Saad, Bausher, could be considered a city farm, a petting zoo, or a small creature exhibition, but whatever its name, it remains a hidden gem among Oman's environmental heritage.

This little corner of Muscat has utilised the Persian 'falaj' system of irrigation for generations to cultivate dates in many family-owned 'nakhals' (date farms). It now proudly showcases an eclectic collection of native and foreign palm trees, farm animals, birds, bees and its latest addition – the Reptile House. Recognised increasingly for its educational value for local schools and families, its achievements were the result of a hard-won battle; a long labour of love.

Maysam bint Saleh bin Sulaiman al Ismailiyah, CEO and co-founder of the project, who studied Environmental Sciences at the Higher College of Technology, Al Khuwair, explained the origins and inspiration behind developing the garden one morning during a tour of the site. Project manager Mohammed al Batashi, having travelled frequently to far-flung places, noticed the absence of beautiful Botanical Gardens in Oman, prompting the initiative to establish one to exhibit indigenous flora and fauna, particularly the date palm. Two years before the pandemic, they acquired the rather neglected small 'nakhal' containing an original beehive in Saad to set up the Gardens. Despite facing numerous hurdles, the project finally opened after the Covid pandemic, showcasing 12 different types of palm species and their various parts: root, trunk, sheath, fibre, frond, inflorescence, and of course, the lush fruit itself. Maysam explained that Bausher experiences a very hot climate owing to its low altitude under the barren mountains, causing dates to ripen too early. However, Palmera benefits from the ancient 'falaj' system, now covered for safety, which serves as an invaluable resource.

The project expanded to include farm animals, most of which roam freely in shady enclosures: goats, a baby donkey for petting, white rabbits, chickens, ducks, and a Koi Fish tank. With an established bee colony on-site, PBG offers unique adult workshops to the public.

On a particular Wednesday morning, a KG2 group of students from Sarooj were on tour, their interaction highlighting the benefits of educating learners from a young age. As they traversed the glades, they had the opportunity to touch the hard shells of hatching turtles, learn how to distinguish between males and females, and even encounter a 150-year-old Giant Tortoise from Prison Island!

The nearby Aviary houses an exotic collection of birds, including two Indian Parakeets, two Canaries, and many Cockatiels. A friendly, cheeky, yet enormous Brazilian Blue-Gold Macaw, the star of the show, greets visitors in the reception, accompanied by four screaming Australian Galah-Cockatoo parrots.

A recent addition and the centre of attention at the farm is an injured 8-year-old Arabian racehorse, "Naif Muscat", from Barka. Fully recovered now, he is exercised and hosed daily, with plans in place to eventually return him.

In June 2023, 19-year-old Mohammed bin Yousef bin Sarhan al Busaidy from Nizwa gained attention for his video post playing with Scorpions. His evident concern for the environment led to an invitation to join the project and help set up the Reptile House. Overcoming his own fear of snakes, he now passionately shares his enthusiasm with the public, showcasing native species such as Arabian, Saw-scaled, Fake-horned, Sandsnake and Carpet Vipers, alongside a Cobra and Cat snakes – all highly venomous. Mice and Hamsters are bred at the centre to feed these snakes.

Palmera is on a mission to educate the public that the ubiquitous grey Wadi Racer is neither venomous nor dangerous and should not be killed but rather protected as they are beneficial for soil health.

A small Egyptian Crocodile from the Nile, a Bearded Dragon from Mexico, a 12-metre-long Python, and a Boa Constrictor are examples of foreign reptiles that children can handle and touch. It was explained that the insect-eating Chameleon changes colour when sick, pregnant, or in danger. The Omani Spiny Tailed Lizard is also on display.

There is a creepy collection of Scorpions and four Tarantulas: two bird eaters, a curly-haired and a black and white foot – not for the faint-hearted, but all safely behind glass!

The Palmera Botanical Garden is open on Sunday to Thursday, from 9 am to 4 pm and can be visited for a small entry fee.

