

Oman sends condolences to Pakistan on blast victims

The Sultanate of Oman has expressed its sincere condolences to the government and people of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, as well as families of the victims of the blast that targeted a mosque in the city of Peshawar. It also wished the injured a speedy recovery. In a statement issued by the Foreign Ministry, Oman has reiterated its firm stance in condemning all forms of violence and terrorism. **SEE P6**



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F1 TENSIONS WITH FIA SURFACE OVER 'INFLATED PRICE TAG' ROW



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PDO ANNOUNCES NEW PACK OF SOCIAL INVESTMENT INITIATIVES



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THE BEAUTIFUL CANYON ALONG WADI AQABAT AL BAYTAYN



MUSCAT

RARE SURGERY ON ONE-YEAR-OLD BABY

A specialised medical team from the Pediatric Surgery Unit at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital (SQUH) conducted the first surgery of its kind Oman. The surgery involved endoscopic transplantation of ureters from within the bladder of a one-year-old baby girl. The head of the medical team, Dr Zainab bint Nasser al Balushi, Senior Consultant in Pediatric Surgeon, Head of the Pediatric Surgery Unit and Deputy Director-General of the SQUH for Medical Affairs, said that the girl was suffering from frequent urinary infections and reflux of urine from the ureters. **DETAILS ON P2**

BEIRUT

LEBANON TO DEVALUE CURRENCY BY 90%

Lebanon will adopt a new official exchange rate of 15,000 pounds per US dollar on February 1, central bank governor Riad Salameh said, marking a 90-per cent devaluation from its current official rate that has remained unchanged for 25 years. The shift from the old rate of 1,507 to 15,000 is still far off the parallel market, where the pound was changing hands at around 57,000 per dollar on Tuesday. The change will apply to banks, Salameh said, leading to a decrease in the equity of the institutions at the centre of the country's 2019 financial implosion. Analysts expect the shift to have less impact on the wider economy, which is increasingly dollarised and where most trades take place according to the parallel market rate. — **AFP**

INSIDE



JAPAN, NATO PLEDGE 'FIRM' RESPONSE TO THREATS **P6**



THE MIGRATION QUESTION, AND THIN EXCUSES! **P9**



MARITIME HERITAGE FESTIVAL FROM FEBRUARY 3

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism will organise the Omani Maritime Heritage Festival in the Wilayat of Sur from February 3 to 19, with the support of the Oman India Fertiliser Company (OMIFCO) and Oman LNG Company. The Omani Maritime Heritage Festival is aimed at highlighting the historical role of the Wilayat of Sur in the past and present, promoting and introducing maritime heritage and tourism potentials in the Governorate of South Al Sharqiyah, and stimulating tourism in the governorate. **DETAILS ON P2**

In West Bank, Blinken presses for two-state solution

RAMALLAH: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken shuttled from Israel to the Palestinians' West Bank on Tuesday, appealing for an end to resurgent violence and reaffirming Washington's backing for a two-state solution to the decades-long conflict.

Blinken is urging calm on both sides after last week's killing by a Palestinian gunman of seven people outside a Jerusalem synagogue and anger among Palestinians over actions by Israeli forces and settlers in the occupied West Bank.

He took that message into a meeting with Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas in Ramallah, warning all parties against any action that could threaten a two-state solution, with an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

"We've been clear that this includes things like settlement expansion, the legalisation of outposts, demolitions and evictions, disruptions to the historic status of the holy sites, and of course incitement and acquiescence to violence."



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah in the Israeli-occupied West Bank on Tuesday. — **Reuters**

Blinken's first visit since Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu returned to power this month at the head of one of the most right-wing governments in Israel's history comes at a time of extreme tension between the two sides.

He said Palestinians were facing a "shrinking horizon of hope" that needed to change.

Amid rising anger at near-daily raids by Israeli forces in the West Bank, Abbas' Palestinian Authority (PA) suspended its security cooperation agreement with Israel last week after the largest incursion in years.

The operation saw Israeli forces penetrate deep into a refugee camp in the northern city of Jenin, setting off a gunfight in which 10 Palestinians died. **SEE ALSO P7**

14.5% RISE IN CRIMINAL CASES IN 2022

NAMING THE CULPRIT IN MEDIA IS A PUNISHMENT

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Bounced cheques continue to top among the reported crimes in the Sultanate of Oman in 2022 followed by violations of Foreign Residency Law. Overall, the number of criminal cases filed with the Public Prosecution Authority rose by 14.5 per cent to 32,277 in 2022, compared to 2021.

Among reported cases, bounced cheques and Foreign Residency violations represented 14.9 per cent and 11.7 per cent respectively.

At the annual briefing titled 'In the name of society', the Public Prosecution Department revealed there were 6,500 bounced cheque cases, while 5,176 violations of Foreign Residence Law were reported in the country last year.

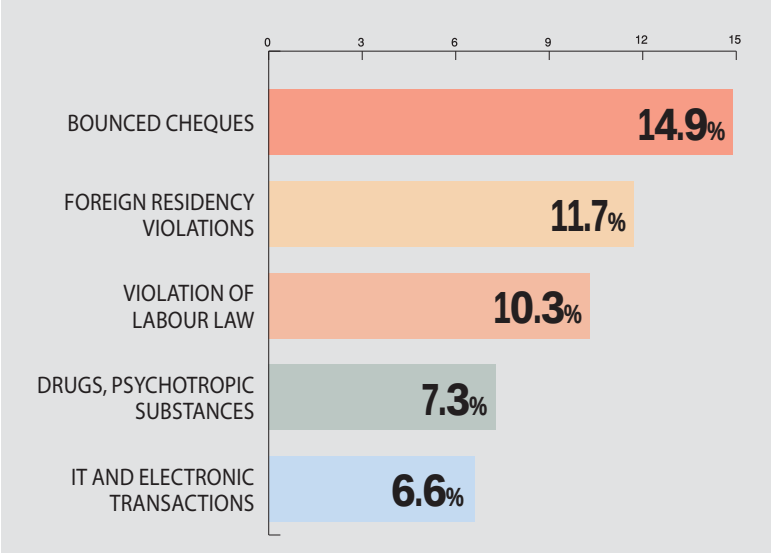
Other crimes included violation of Omani Labour Law (4,557/10.3 per cent), 3,242 offences involving drugs and psychotropic substances (7.3 per cent), 2,911 IT crimes and cases in electronic transactions

(6.6 per cent).

Addressing the gathering, Nasr bin Khamis al Sawa'ee, Public Prosecutor, and Dr Ahmed bin Said al Shukaili, Assistant Public Prosecutor, said 43 money-laundering cases were reported, while the Public Prosecution prepared over 60,000 investigation reports, and issued 150,000 judicial orders. Total recovery stood at RO 12,418,971.

There were 30,543 cases of misdemeanor (increase of 14.7 per cent compared to 2021); and 1,378 cases of felony (9.8 per cent increase). The rate of completion of cases rose to 97 per cent; and cases referred to the courts stood at 19,558.

According to the briefing, in 2022 there were 2,833 cases of violation of Consumer Protection Law (6.4 per cent); 2,730 against human freedom and dignity (6.2 per cent); 2,372 theft and extortion of money (5.3 per cent); 2,362 fraud (5.2 per cent); 2,308 Traffic Law violations (5.2 per cent); 9,368 other crimes constituted 21.1 per cent. **TURN TO P2**



Saudi-Oman Investment Forum to strengthen trade ties

QASIM AL MAASHANI
RIYADH, JAN 31

The activities of the Omani-Saudi Industries Exhibition kicked off on Tuesday evening, in conjunction with the activities of the second Omani-Saudi Investment Forum, which begins on Wednesday, with wide participation from government agencies.

The inauguration was attended by Khalid bin Abdulaziz al Falih, Saudi Minister of Investment, and

Qais bin Muhammad al Youssef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, in the presence of Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidy, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Special Economic Zones and Free Zones Authority, and a number of officials from the public and private sectors, and Omani and Saudi businessmen.

Key government officials, business leaders and economic experts from the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of



Saudi Arabia are due to meet in Riyadh for three days of deliberations aimed at enhancing trade, economic and investment ties between the two brotherly countries.

The interactions will take place as part of the Saudi-Oman Investment Forum, organised by the Omani Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, in cooperation with the Saudi Ministry of Investment. **SEE ALSO P13**



Council of Oman takes part in PUIC meetings



MUSCAT: The 17th Parliamentary Union of the OIC Member States (PUIC), was held in Algiers, People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, on January 26-30. The Sultanate of Oman's delegation was headed by Khalid

bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman of Majlis Ashshura. The delegation comprised members of the Council of Oman. The Sultanate of Oman presided over the meeting of the Gulf group which reviewed the formation of



the PUIC standing committees and the executive committee. The Council of Oman continued as a member of the executive committee. The Arab group held a coordination meeting under the

chairmanship of the speaker of the Council of Representatives of Iraq. The meeting discussed the distribution of the vacant seats in the standing committees, the Executive Committee and Palestine Committee. — ONA

Oman to participate in Sharjah show jumping

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman will participate with 10 riders in Sharjah International Show Jumping Championship, organised by Sharjah Equestrian and Racing Club, United Arab Emirates.

The event, held under the auspices of the International Equestrian Association, takes place at Sharjah Equestrian and Racing Club's grounds from February 2 to 5.

Oman's 10 riders fall in "One Star" and "Juniors" classes.

In the One Star Class, Oman will be represented by Hamoud bin Sultan al Tooqi, Sultan bin Mohammed al Tooqi, Khalid bin Said al Wahaibi and Khalid bin



Darwish al Subhi (all male). In the Juniors Class, it will be represented by Mohammed bin Hamoud al Tooqi, Sultan bin Rashid al Tooqi, Tamim al Mahrouqi, al Yaqeen bint Rashid al Kindiyah (the only female), Nassir bin Fahmi al Harrasi and Haider bin Anwar al Rashid. — ONA

Maritime Heritage Festival in Sur from Feb 3

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, with the support of the Oman India Fertiliser Company (OMIFCO) and Oman LNG Company, will host the Omani Maritime Heritage Festival in the Wilayat of Sur from February 3 to 19. The festival aims to highlight Sur's historical and present maritime heritage, promote tourism in the South Al Sharqiyah Governorate, and stimulate tourism.

The Maritime Heritage Village will be one of the main attractions, showcasing the Wilayat of Sur's rich maritime history. Visitors can expect various components such as a corner dedicated to maritime heritage handicrafts, folklore sessions, a café, theatre for cultural events, folk games, and traditional sea-related performances.

The festival will also feature a simulation of a traditional sea voyage, showcasing the



journey of Omani ships and the mechanism of transporting and loading goods. An Omani

Food Carnival will allow visitors to sample famous Omani and international dishes with a focus

on fresh seafood.

Additional events include surfing, sailing, and fishing

competitions, a symposium on maritime heritage, a traditional boat race, displays of traditional

Omani games and kites, and visits to famous tourist sites in ancient Sur.

14.5% rise in criminal cases

FROM PAGE 1

Speaking to the Observer on the sidelines of the annual press conference, Nasr bin Khamis al Sawa'ee said a research and study wing was formed last year to assess the motive, other circumstances behind the crime as well as the mindset of the offenders.

"We have formed a research team in association with the Ministry of Social Development to study each case separately and work on it is under way. This team will identify various factors behind a crime, including the motive and the mindset of the culprit, and will come out with recommendations which help in reduction of crimes," he said.

KEY POINTS

1) Judgments were issued against employees on charges of negligence in the performance of their job duties

2) There are many fake identifiers on social media with Omani names and tribes, and it has been proved that they broadcast their content from outside the country, and community awareness exists and we count on that

A research and study wing was formed last year to assess the motive, other circumstances behind the crime as well as the mindset of the offenders

3) Naming the culprit in the media and publishing the judgement is an additional penalty and a measure to dissuade potential offenders from doing the crimes

4) The number of murder cases did not increase in 2022 compared to 2021, as the number of cases stood at 13, which is the same in 2021

5) There's not much change in the number of crimes in Oman. Among the governorates, Musandam had the lowest number of crimes and Muscat topped the crime list (13,155) followed by North Al Batinah (5,297), Dhofar (4,228), South Al Batinah (2,749), Al Dakhiliyah (1,873), South Al Sharqiyah (1,563), North Al Sharqiyah (1,354), Al Dhahirah (772), Al Buraimi (698), Al Wusta

(400) and Musandam 188.

The assistant public prosecutor said that the past year witnessed a quantum leap in the history of the Omani judiciary, with the issuance of the Royal Decree No 35/2022 regarding the organisation of the administration of judicial affairs, so it unified the judicial authorities under the banner of the Supreme Judicial Council.

He pointed out that the cases received by the Department of Public Funds and money laundering cases decreased during the past year, reaching 43 cases and has ambitious plans to reduce the number of crimes further.

"The Public Prosecution is looking forward during this year to continue completing the current annual plan and expanding the application of restorative justice within the limits permitted by the law, including activating the issuance of penal orders and community service to facilitate litigants. We are also considering approving a mechanism to shorten the intervals between investigation sessions and employing some modern technologies," the assistant public prosecutor added.

SQUH performs first of its kind surgery



MUSCAT: A specialised medical team from the Pediatric Surgery Unit at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital (SQUH) conducted the first surgery of its kind Oman. The surgery involved endoscopic transplantation of ureters from within the bladder of a one-year-old baby girl.

The head of the medical team, Dr Zainab bint Nasser al Balushi, Senior Consultant in Pediatric Surgeon, Head of the Pediatric Surgery Unit and Deputy

Director-General of the SQUH for Medical Affairs, said that the girl was suffering from frequent urinary infections and reflux of urine from the ureters.

X-ray examination revealed the existence of more weakness in the left kidney compared to the right kidney due to infections and reflux, Dr Zainab explained.

She told Oman News Agency (ONA) that the surgery aimed at diminishing the occurrence of urine infections by 50 per cent.

She noted that the operation took about 4 hours logistically and medically and that the case was monitored for 5 days until the patient's discharge from the hospital, in good health.

The surgery is one of the world's rare operations. Few medical centres could conduct such types of operations. The Sultan Qaboos University Hospital seeks to provide the best healthcare and services to the community. — ONA



Forum calls for stakeholders to foster Arab researchers and innovators

MUSCAT: The Arab Forum on Research and Sustainable Development at its conclusion on Tuesday recommended the devising of action plans to enhance the contribution of institutions, research centres and researchers to Arab developmental issues and enabling partnerships between universities, research centres and production and development companies in Arab countries.

The 9th edition of the forum was hosted by the Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, in cooperation with the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO).

The two-day forum also advised the stakeholders to encourage Arab researchers and innovators and linking them with specialised companies by boosting cooperation between Arab institutions in the field of



education, training and research in a bid to transform scientific innovations into actual national economic projects.

The forum underscored the importance of strengthening the role of the private sector in supporting and financing research and learning about Arab and international experiences that have succeeded in linking research with sustainable development.

Six discussion panels were held on the final day of the forum,

during which prominent local and international researchers were hosted. The panels discussed the role of Arab female researchers in agricultural research, the role of Arab female researchers in engineering and their role in leading Arab institutions and research centres.

The two-day forum aimed to enhance the contribution of institutions, authorities, universities, scholarly research centres, researchers and innovators



in Arab development affairs. It included eight sessions in which 39 working papers were submitted. It also targeted activating partnerships between universities, research and development centres, institutions, production and service companies.

The forum pursued encouraging Arab researchers and innovators and linking them with specialised companies in order to transform their innovations into economic products and projects,

and to enhance communication with Arab scientists abroad and benefit from their expertise in the development of Arab countries.

Further, the forum contributed to strengthening the role of the private sector in supporting, encouraging and financing research in Arab countries, developing Arab scientific publishing tools, manufacturing educational aid tools and supplies, and creating Arabic digital content, in addition to presenting

successful Arab and international experiences.

The forum was a milieu that brought together Arab experts, researchers, institutions and companies with their counterparts at the regional and international levels. It also was an opportunity to attract Arab scientists and experts from inside and outside the Arab world in a bid to contribute to the transfer and localisation of advanced technologies to Arab countries. — ONA

Car-centric planning needs a relook for healthier world

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There is an urgency for the cities to be ready for a healthy and sustainable transition, as health and sustainability are the powerhouses of any economy. By 2050, about 70 per cent of the world's population will live in cities.

Yet, according to Prof Billie Giles - Corti, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, the current situation sees car-centric planning fostering unhealthy and unsustainable lifestyles, exposing residents to environmental stress, causing biodiversity loss and widening inequalities.

She delivered her keynote speech at the Hope Panel organised by GUTech, the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization at the National Museum.

According to her, cities generate 75 per cent of global energy-related emissions and 86 per cent of global CO2 emissions are from higher-income countries.

She said there is a need for more active people for a healthier world. According to Global Status Report (2022) on physical activity, by 2030, there could be 500 million new preventable cases of non-communicable diseases costing \$27 billion annually.

It states that three-quarters will occur in lower and upper-middle-income countries, and 70 per cent of healthcare expenditure in high-income countries will be for treating physical inactivity-related illnesses. Meanwhile, WHO Global Strategy on Health Environment and Climate Change stress the transformation needed to improve lives and well-being sustainably through a healthy environment. She pointed out that Covid-19 highlighted vulnerabilities of city planning, such as crowded

conditions, poor air circulation and ambient air pollution.

It also saw migration to suburbs and regions and rapid health-supportive transformations such as telecommuting, road space reallocated - walking, cycling, commerce and cycling infrastructure.

The professor emphasised livable neighbourhood policy to create walkable neighbourhoods aimed to increase walking, cycling, and public transport use and a sense of community.

Mayor of Tirana, Albania, Erin Veliaj, said the epicentre of the city should be people.

"At the City Square, we asked the children to use the space to play instead of parking cars."

He said that although there was opposition initially, kids enjoyed the space so much that they became advocates for keeping cars away.

"Earlier, the green spaces have become car parking, and the pavements were occupied too. Automobiles had become a status symbol, not just a means of transport. We had to ask the question - why do we build cities? Do we make them for cars? We build cities for people," the mayor noted.

Housing, People and Environment (HOPE) is a platform launched this month to promote a people-centred development approach in planning and designing, focusing on open public spaces to improve quality of life and well-being and examining their interplay with the urban environment.

HOPE seeks to nurture dialogue between scholars, planners and decision-makers with civil society and industry in the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA) to advance the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda beginning in Oman.

North Al Sharqiyah Municipal Council meets

IBRA: The Municipal Council of North Al Sharqiyah Governorate held a meeting on Tuesday under the chairmanship of Shaikh Ali bin Ahmed al Shamsi, Governor of North Al Sharqiyah, chairman of the council.

The meeting discussed the strategy of action of municipal councils and specialisations of the council in accordance with the Municipal Councils Law. Further, deputies were elected for the standing committees of the council.

The meeting resulted in several



recommendations. Moreover, several matters were tasked to the standing committees in order to conduct studies and assess necessary solutions and recommendations. — ONA

CHAMPIONSHIP FOR SHOOTING FLYING TARGETS KICKS OFF



The Omani-Italian Friendship Championship for shooting flying targets kicked off on Tuesday, hosted by the Command of the Sultan's Armed Forces (CoSAF) at the shooting ranges of the international marksmanship unit in Ghala. The championship, which runs till February 3, sees the participation of Oman Shooting Association and the Italian Shooting Federation. The first day included a training programme for using weapons on the shooting ranges of the championship. — ONA

Oman to host semiconductor summit

MUSCAT: Represented by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, the Sultanate of Oman will host the International Semiconductor Executive Summits on February 22 and 23. The summit is due to bring together a large number of companies operating in the field from different countries of the world.

Dr Ali bin Amer al Shaithani, the Ministry's Under-Secretary for Communications and Information Technology, said that the summit is part of the National Programme for Digital Economy and that it keeps pace with a drive to realise the goals of Oman Vision 2040 pertaining to the development of digital economy.

Al Shaithani added that the ministry exerts extensive



efforts to make Oman attractive to investments in the communications and information technology sector. The action includes encouraging international companies specialised in semiconductors and electronic chips to establish

projects in Oman, he said.

This will in turn enhance economic diversification, augment the gross domestic product and provide employment for Omanis, while at the same time localising technology, he observed.

Extensive efforts to make Oman attractive to investments in the communications and information technology sector

Semiconductors have certain electrical properties that make them basic components of computers and other electronic devices. A semiconductor is usually a solid chemical element or compound that conducts electricity under certain conditions, making it an ideal means of controlling electrical current and electrical appliances like telephones, computers, cars and planes, as well as weapons. — ONA

NEW ATTRACTIONS BRING EXCITEMENT TO NIGHTS



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Muscat Nights continues to witness a good turnout despite the cold weather at night, and even the subtle Qurum Natural Park was said to have been visited by over 40,000 people in the initial days.

The activities include the carnival at Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, motor shows at Oman Automobile Association (OAA), lake shows, laser lights at Qurum Natural Park, and large movie screens at Al Naseem Park, taking into account the diverse demographic profile of the visitors to the Nights venue.

The Samurai show at the Omani Automobile Association's Japanese village has been one of the main activities of the Muscat Nights.

"The three-week Muscat Nights have been sweet and short, and I assume it is only a sample of what will be offered in the years to come. As planned by the authorities, I would prefer that all activities should be held at the same place or in the same area, so that at least some have a taste of all activities during one outing. It is not possible for everyone to make two to three evening trips

to the Nights after work," said Mariyam, a schoolteacher from Mabela.

Drone shows at the Qurum Natural Park have been forcing people to park vehicles in the nearby neighbourhoods as it has been one of the key features that are different from the predecessor, the Muscat Festival, which was organised annually in the city between 1998 and 2018.

The Itinerary for Muscat Nights has been nicely curated, targeting the family, child and youth and as per the profile and facilities at each of the venues.

The outdoor cinema concept has been well received as it has been organised to keep in mind the changing interests of the new generation of both crowds, both citizens and expatriates, some of them visiting activities of such kind for the first time in the city.

The photography corners have been well received by visitors to take pictures and record the experiences for the future.

"These programmes are awe-inspiring, especially the heritage village, but some venues have better offerings than others. Organisers might have had their constraints as they were held after a break of nearly two years," Arvind Krishnakumar, who is on a short visit to the Sultanate, said.

المتميّزة للسيارات
Premium Motors

Sultanate of Oman
Consumer Protection Authority

VOLKSWAGEN VEHICLES RECALL CAMPAIGN MODELS TERAMONT 2019-2022

Campaign Date : 01 / 02 / 2023
Campaign Type : Safety Action
Campaign Section : Electrician /
Change Front Door Wiring Harness

Product Description : Volkswagen Vehicles

Description
The event of a side collision, there can be a delay Deployment of the side airbag, thus increasing the risk of injury to vehicle occupants. Opening and closing of the front doors cause small movements of the wiring harness and the contact surfaces of the connectors, which can lead to corrosion of the plug contacts and, as a result, electrical failures.

Action:
If there is fault Logged in Computer, then, wiring need to replace, if no warning then only greasing.

For More Information:
Owners of affected vehicles may contact Premium Motors to book an appointment starting 01/02/2023.

Contact Data:
Premium Motors service center, Ghala, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman.
Tel: 22845112, P.O. Box: 94, P.C: 105
Sunday to Thursday, From 8:00 AM To 5:00 PM





Agreements worth RO 85m signed to offer opportunities to locals

SUHAR: The Office of Governor of North Al Batinah on Tuesday signed agreements to the tune of RO 65 million with Sohar Port Company, Vale and OQ to offer investment opportunities for the locals of the governorate.

The agreements were signed on the sidelines of the Forum for Development and Business Opportunities, organised by Oman Development Bank (ODB) in partnership with the Office of Governor of North Al Batinah and a number of public and private entities.

On his turn, Hamad bin Salim al Harthy, Acting CEO of the ODB, announced the allocation of RO 20 million to provide financing loans to beneficiaries in the Governorate of North Al Batinah this year (2023).



Al Harthy presented a working paper titled “Funding Opportunities Through ODB”. The Governor of North Al Batinah, Mohammed bin Sulaiman al Kindi, announced a prize named “North Al Batinah Governorate’s Award for Entrepreneurship”. The award will be shared by the best entrepreneur and the best institution supporting entrepreneurship.

Meanwhile, Mohammed Abu Bakr al Ghassani, Chairman of the Board of Directors of ODB, pointed out that the bank devised an ambitious programme this year to hold “development and business opportunities forums” in Oman’s governorates in conjunction with their respective governors.

The aim is to establish an appropriate environment for the growth of small and medium enterprises so that they could achieve their target goals, he said.

— ONA

23% rise in Oman crude delivery

DUBAI: Dubai energy exchange announced that the actual delivery of Oman Crude in 2022 rose by 23 per cent to 181 million barrels, compared to 147 million barrels in 2021.

The bourse saw remarkable growth in trading volumes, which reflects traders’ interest in the significance of “Oman futures contract in global oil markets” as an ideal instrument in hedging and managing financial risks, notably during the period of sharp fluctuations in the markets in 2022.

The stock exchange also registered significant increase in the trading volumes of the Oman crude contract for the month of delivery, to the tune of 22 per cent, with the total trading volume rising by 11 per cent. This stems from Oman crude contract’s providing a highly transparent platform for price speculation.

The overall outcome is that Oman crude contract has been endorsed by GCC national oil companies as a benchmark for pricing their exports to Asia.

Raid Al Salami, Managing Director at Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME), said, “These facts confirm the importance of Oman futures contract as a preferred criterion for Sulfur crude oil prices in the Middle East and Asian markets.” — ONA



Dhofar to enhance municipal, tourism services



SALALAH: The Municipal Council of Dhofar Governorate held a meeting on Tuesday under the chairmanship of Sayyid Marwan bin Turki al Said, Governor of Dhofar, Chairman of the council.

The meeting discussed developing municipal and tourism services and establishing road projects in the governorate. It

also touched on standing committees’ action plans on enhancing municipal services.

— ONA

Buraimi Municipal Council reviews progress of projects



AL BURAIMI: The Municipal Council of Al Buraimi Governorate held its meeting here on Tuesday under the chairmanship of Sayyid Dr Hamad bin Ahmed al Busaidy, Governor of Al Buraimi, Chairman of the council.

The meeting reviewed the progress of some of the current projects in the governorate. It also discussed allocating agricultural investment sites in the Wilayat of Al Sinaina.

— ONA

Al Wusta Municipal Council addresses key issues



HAIMA: The Municipal Council of Al Wusta Governorate on Tuesday held a meeting under the chairmanship of Shaikh Mo’thid bin Mohammed al Yaqoubi, Governor of Al Wusta, Chairman of the council.

The meeting touched on a range of topics, namely the progress made in several developmental projects in the governorate, boosting the capacity of Duqm Hospital, reducing ticket prices for flights on SalamAir to and from Duqm, as well as opening direct flights to and from Duqm through Salalah and Sohar airports, among other topics. — ONA



Tender Announcement

Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG invites Bidders to submit their proposal for the below detailed tenders:

Tender No.	Description	Tender Fee (Non refundable)	Tender Purchase Deadline	Clarification Deadline	Tender Submission Date			
TENDER/ 2023/01/ FIN/003	Life Insurance (Refer to Condition #1)	OMR 150	06/02/2023	09/02/2023	16/02/2023			
	Medical Insurance (Refer to Condition #1)							
	Workmen Compensation							
	Money	OMR 30						
	Fidelity							
	Motor Insurance							
	Third Party Insurance	OMR 50						
	Contractors Plans and Machinery							
	Public Liability Insurance							
	Directors and Officers Liability	OMR 80						
	Property All Risks							
	Aviation Liability Insurance							

Bank Name & Account Number
Bank Muscat (0423005687760617)

- The Conditions:**
- Insurance brokers are not allowed to participate in Medical and life insurance policies.
 - Collection of Tenders:** Interested, specialized companies and establishments with CMA and a minimum of 7 years’ experience in the same field. Bidders can collect the tender documents from the procurement department by sending a copy of the payment slip to procurement@almaha.com.om The tender documents will then be sent by email. Working hours 08:00 AM – 03:00 PM.
 - Bank Guarantee:** The bidder should enclose a bank guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for an amount equivalent to (1%) of the tender value, with a validity of (90) Days from the last date of submission and addressed to Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Company SAOG.
 - Offer Submission:** Tender bid should be submitted a sealed envelope and addressed to the **Chairman of Tender Committee**, Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG marked with tender number and subject. Other marks or any reference must not be printed outside the envelope. The exterior of the envelope containing the tender document must not reveal the identity of the bidder.
 - Submission Location:** The bid should be deposited in the tender box at Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing SAOG head office located in Ghala before 01:00 PM on the submission date.
 - Any bid received after the specified date or if it does not meet the conditions will not be considered.
 - Each bid shall be signed and stamped with the signature of the authorized person.
 - Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to accept, reject or cancel the tender without giving any reasons.
 - Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG reserves the right to add or cancel some of the works mentioned in the tender if necessary.
 - Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co SAOG is not bound to accept the lowest bid or any other bid without giving any reasons.
 - For any enquiry email us at (procurement@almaha.com.om) or by calling 24610289/24610287/24610355.

Al Maha Petroleum Products Marketing Co. (SAOG)
PO Box No: 57, PC: 116, Mina Al Fahal, Sultanate of Oman



Authorities use heavy machinery to clear the rubble and search for victims a day after a suicide blast at a mosque inside the police headquarters in Peshawar on Tuesday. — AFP

Families search for loved ones after Pakistan blast kills 100

PESHAWAR: Distraught relatives thronged hospitals in Pakistan's Peshawar on Tuesday to look for their kin a day after a suicide bombing ripped through a crowded mosque in a heavily fortified area of the city, killing 100 people, mostly policemen.

The attack, in the Police Lines district, was the deadliest in a decade to hit this restive, northwestern city near the Afghan border and comes amid a surge in violence against the police.

No group has claimed responsibility.

"My son, my child," cried an elderly woman walking alongside an ambulance carrying coffins, as rescue workers stretched wounded people to a hospital emergency unit.

At least 170 people were wounded in the blast, which demolished the upper storey of the mosque as hundreds of worshippers performed noon prayers.

Riaz Mahsud, a senior local government official, said the casualty toll was likely to rise as workers searched through the debris just over 24 hours later.

"So far, 100 bodies have been brought to Lady Reading Hospital," spokesman for the largest medical facility in the city, Mohammad Asim, said in a statement.

Authorities say they do not know how the bomber managed to breach the military and police checkpoints leading into the Police Lines district, a colonial-era, self-contained encampment in the city centre that is home to middle- and lower-ranking police personnel and their families.

Given the security concerns in Peshawar, the mosque was recently built to allow police to pray without leaving the area. Defence Minister Khawaja Asif said the bomber was in the first row in the prayer hall when he struck.

The attack is the deadliest in Peshawar since twin suicide bombings at All Saints Church killed scores of worshippers in September 2013, in what is the deadliest attack on Pakistan's Christian minority.

Peshawar sits on the edge of the Pashtun tribal lands, a region mired in violence for the past two decades.

The most active militant group in the area is the Pakistani Taliban, also called Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an umbrella group for sectarian factions opposed to the government in Islamabad.

The TTP denied responsibility for Monday's bombing, though it has stepped up attacks since withdrawing from a peace deal with the government last year.

The bombing took place a day before an International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission arrives in Islamabad for talks on a stalled \$7 billion bailout.

— Reuters

Japan and Nato pledge 'firm' response to threats

TOKYO: Japan and Nato must "remain united and firm" in the face of security threats posed by China, North Korea and Russia's war in Ukraine, Jens Stoltenberg said on Tuesday in Tokyo.

Stoltenberg, secretary-general of the European and North American military alliance, warned that Beijing was keeping a close eye on developments in Ukraine and "learning lessons that may influence its future decisions".

He spoke alongside Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida after the pair held talks as part of a trip to Asia by Stoltenberg aiming to boost ties with democratic allies.

"What is happening in Europe today could happen in East Asia tomorrow.

So we must remain united and firm, standing together for freedom and democracy," he said.

Stoltenberg and Kishida said they were worried by the increasing cooperation they saw between China and Russia.

"We highlight with concern Russia's growing military cooperation with China, including through joint operations and drills in the vicinity of Japan," they said in a joint statement.

The previous day in Seoul, Stoltenberg asked South Korea to step up military support for Ukraine.

But on Tuesday, he praised the "strong position" and "substantial support" offered to Ukraine by Japan. Tokyo has imposed sanctions on Moscow along with its G7 partners, and has taken the rare steps of sending defensive equipment and offering refuge to those fleeing the conflict.

Stoltenberg said he and Kishida also shared concern over North Korea's "provocative behaviour", from nuclear activity to ballistic missile tests.

He said China was "not our adversary" but warned of its growing military presence in Asia "including nuclear weapons, bullying neighbours", as well as spreading disinformation about Nato and Ukraine.

Kishida said Japan would establish an independent representative office for its dealings with Nato as part of efforts to deepen ties.

The country will also consider regular participation in high-level meetings held by the alliance, Kishida added.

— AFP



Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg (L) and Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida shake hands after holding a joint media briefing in Tokyo on Tuesday. — AFP

Australia deploys experts to find lost radioactive capsule

MELBOURNE: Australian authorities on Tuesday sent out more personnel and specialised detection equipment to search for a tiny radioactive capsule missing somewhere in the outback, including a team from the country's nuclear safety agency.

The capsule is believed to have fallen from a road train - a truck with multiple trailers - that made a 1,400 km journey in Western Australia and its loss has triggered a radiation alert for large parts of the vast state.

The Department of Fire and Emergency Services said on Monday that it would take five days to retrace the road train's route. On Tuesday, it said that 660 km had been searched so far.

The hunt involves a slew of government agencies including the Department of Defence, the police and now the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency and the Australian Nuclear and Science Technology Organisation.

The capsule was part of a gauge used to measure the density of iron ore feed that had been entrusted by Rio Tinto Ltd to specialist contractor SGS Australia for packaging and unpackaging. Transport was then subcontracted out to logistics firm Centurion.

Authorities suspect vibrations from the road train caused the screws and a bolt from the gauge to come loose, and then the capsule fell out.

The gauge was picked up from the mine site on January 12 and was unpacked for inspection on January 25 when the loss of the capsule became evident.

Centurion said in a statement that the capsule was dislodged from equipment contained in a crate. The transport crate and pallet were supplied by SGS, a Centurion spokesperson told Reuters by phone.

SGS did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment. Rio has apologised for the loss.

The road train travelled from Rio's Gudai-Darri mine in the state's remote Kimberley region to a storage facility in the suburbs of Perth - a distance longer than the length of Great Britain.— Reuters



A member of the Incident Management Team coordinates the search for a radioactive capsule at the Emergency Services Complex in Cockburn, Australia. — Reuters

DHAKA

\$4.7 billion IMF support for Bangladesh

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved a package worth \$4.7 billion to support Bangladesh's economy, officials said on Tuesday, as the South Asian country is hit hard by global inflation amid Russia's war on Ukraine.

"The approval of the IMF's financial support once again proved that the basic foundation of Bangladesh's macro economy is standing on a strong footing (compared to) that of many other countries," Bangladesh's Finance Minister A H M Mustafa Kamal said in a statement in Dhaka following the IMF approval of the package. The lender will provide Bangladesh with support worth about \$3.3 billion.



SEOUL

Seoul to ease visa curbs for Chinese

South Korea's prime minister suggested on Tuesday that Covid-19 visa curbs on travellers from China could be lifted earlier than scheduled if infections eased in the latter, as the travel and tourism industries hope for a rebound in visitor numbers.

Prime Minister Han Duck-soo said Seoul could consider lifting the limit on short-term visas for such travellers before the end of February if China's tally of Covid infections proved manageable, the Yonhap news agency said.

"If (the situation) is endurable given the PCR Covid-19 test results, the lifting (of restrictions) could be considered earlier," Han said.



AHMEDABAD

Accused in bridge collapse surrenders

The boss of a clock-making company in India, who police said was the main accused in the collapse of a colonial-era footbridge last year that killed 135 people, surrendered before a court on Tuesday, a top police official said.

The 145-year-old suspension bridge in the town of Morbi in the western state of Gujarat was packed with sightseers when it collapsed on October 30, plunging hundreds into the Machchu river below. It had reopened just days before, following months-long repairs.

Police had issued an arrest warrant this month for Jaysukh Patel, the managing director of Orevia Group.





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In brief

■ BUDAPEST



HUNGARY MOST CORRUPT EU MEMBER

Hungary slid to bottom place among EU nations in a corruption index, with graft watchdog Transparency International on Tuesday alleging misuse by “political elites” of state and bloc funds. Hungary has been embroiled in a long running spat with Brussels over corruption and rule of law concerns that have led to the freezing of billions of euros of bloc funding. In a bid to unlock the funds, Budapest committed to a range of legal and anti-corruption reforms, including the set-up of a watchdog that includes a Transparency International staff member. Hungary replaced Bulgaria as the last among EU.

■ MUMBAI



ADANI SECURES \$2.5 BILLION SHARE SALE

Gautam Adani's crucial \$2.5 billion share sale was fully subscribed on Tuesday as investors pumped funds into his flagship firm, despite a \$65-billion rout in the Indian billionaire's stocks sparked by a short-seller's report. The fundraising is critical for Adani, not just because it will help cut his group's debt, but also because it is being seen by some as a gauge of confidence at a time when the tycoon faces one of his biggest business and reputational challenges. Hindenburg Research's report last week alleged improper use of offshore tax havens and concerns about high debt, which Adani denied.

■ PARIS



FRANCE HIT BY NEW WAVE OF STRIKES

Striking workers disrupted French refinery deliveries, public transport and schools on Tuesday in a second day of nationwide protests over President Emmanuel Macron's plan to make people work longer before retirement. Huge crowds marched through cities across France to denounce a reform that raises the retirement age by two years to 64 and which is a test of Macron's ability to push through change now that he has lost his working majority in parliament. On the rail networks, only one in three high-speed TGV trains were operating and even fewer local and regional trains.

Blinken meets Abbas in bid to restore calm



Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas welcomes US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank, on Tuesday. — AFP

RAMALLAH: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited the West Bank on Tuesday on a tour where he is appealing for a halt to violence and reaffirming Washington's backing for a two-state solution to the decades-long conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Blinken is urging calm on both sides after last week's killing by a Palestinian gunman of seven people outside a synagogue in the worst such attack in the Jerusalem area for years. He was set to repeat the message at a meeting with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah. Last week, Abbas' Palestinian Authority (PA) suspended its security cooperation agreement with Israel after the largest raid in years, when Israeli forces penetrated deep into a refugee camp in the northern city of Jenin, setting off a gunfight in which 10 Palestinians died. PA leaders are angry after months of raids by Israeli forces in the occupied West Bank. In January alone, 35 Palestinians have been killed in clashes with Israeli troops, in the

bloodiest month since 2015, while officials say attacks on Palestinian property by Israeli settlers have also increased. Blinken is also expected to highlight US assistance to the Palestinian economy, which is

heavily dependent on foreign aid. Before meeting Abbas, Blinken visited Deir Dibwan, a town near Ramallah that is home to many Palestinian Americans, and met civil society leaders and businesspeople.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, back in power at the head of one of the most right-wing governments in Israel's history, has reinforced troops in the West Bank and promised measures to strengthen

Blinken visited Deir Dibwan, a town near Ramallah that is home to many Palestinian Americans, and met civil society leaders and businesspeople

settlements there, but so far held off from more extreme steps. On Tuesday, Blinken met Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant and discussed cooperation to stop Iran developing a nuclear weapon as well the situation in the West Bank. Hopes of achieving a two-state solution, with an independent Palestinian state based largely in the West Bank alongside Israel, have all but disappeared since the last round of US-sponsored talks stalled in 2014. The Biden administration has said it would re-establish a consulate for Palestinians shuttered by former president Donald Trump, but has yet to say when or where it will be opened. — Reuters

Huge crowds welcome Pope Francis in Congo



Pope Francis is welcomed by residents of Kinshasa he starts his apostolic journey, in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, on Tuesday. — Reuters

KINSHASA: Huge crowds cheered for Pope Francis as he travelled into the Democratic Republic of Congo capital Kinshasa in his popemobile on Tuesday, beginning a visit that will highlight the human cost of decades of conflict in the vast central African country. Francis is the first pope to visit Congo since John Paul II in 1985, when it was still known as Zaire. About half of Congo's population of 90 million are Roman Catholics. Tens of thousands of people lined the route from Kinshasa airport into town, with some breaking away to chase the pope's convoy while others chanted and waved Congolese and Vatican flags in one of the most vibrant welcomes of his foreign trips. At the airport earlier, the 86-year-old pope, who struggles to walk due to a chronic knee ailment, was lowered from his plane, then pushed in a wheelchair onto a red carpet leading to the terminal. Congolese Prime Minister Jean-Michel Sama Lukonde greeted him, then accompanied him inside. “For me, it's the first time

I'm seeing him other than on television. It's a moment of joy,” said Alain Difima, a Catholic priest who spent hours waiting for the pope to land. The pope was heading for the presidential palace for a formal welcome ceremony, then a meeting with President Felix Tshisekedi. Afterwards, the pontiff will give a speech to authorities, diplomats and representatives of civil society. On Wednesday, he will celebrate Mass and meet victims of violence from the eastern part of the country, which is blighted by recurring fighting between rebels from the M23 group and government troops. “I wanted to go to Goma but we can't because of the war,” the pope told reporters during his flight, referring to a city in eastern Congo. Congo has some of the world's richest deposits of diamonds, gold, copper, cobalt, tin, tantalum and lithium, but its abundant mineral resources have stoked conflict between militias, government troops and foreign invaders. Mining has also been linked to inhumane exploitation of workers

and environmental degradation. Eastern Congo has also been plagued by violence connected to the long and complex fallout from the 1994 genocide in neighbouring Rwanda. An estimated 5.7 million people are internally displaced in Congo and 26 million face severe hunger, largely because of the impact of armed conflict, according to the United Nations. The Catholic Church plays a crucial role in running schools and health facilities in the country, as well as promoting democracy. First scheduled for last July, the pope's trip was postponed because he was suffering a flare-up of a chronic knee ailment. Francis will stay in Kinshasa until Friday morning, when he will fly to South Sudan, another country grappling with conflict and poverty. In a first, he will be accompanied for that leg of his journey by the Archbishop of Canterbury, leader of the global Anglican Communion, and by the Church of Scotland Moderator. The religious leaders have described their joint visit as a “pilgrimage of peace”. — Reuters

Brexit gloom prevails on UK's three-year anniversary

LONDON: British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak defended Brexit as a “huge opportunity” on Tuesday, as the UK marked three years since leaving the EU amid economic crisis and a growing public sense of “Bregret”. On January 31, 2020, the United Kingdom ended 47 years of belonging to the European Union and its predecessor, the EEC, soon after Boris Johnson won a resounding election victory for the Conservatives with his promise to “get Brexit done”. An Ipsos poll last week found 45 per cent of people in Britain think Brexit is going worse than they expected. “In the three years since leaving the EU, we've made huge strides in harnessing the freedoms unlocked by Brexit to tackle generational challenges,” Sunak said in a statement released for the anniversary. “I'm determined to ensure the benefits of Brexit continue to empower communities and businesses right across the country,” the prime minister said. Sunak called Brexit a “huge opportunity to deliver” on his priorities of growth, employment and social mobility. The prime minister — who will also mark 100 days in office this week — said the UK had “forged a path as an independent nation with confidence” and “that momentum hasn't slowed”. He said this included Europe's fastest vaccine rollout, trade deals with 70 countries and “taking back control of our borders”. The statement came as Sunak faces numerous challenges, with thousands of UK workers taking strike action over pay that has been outpaced by soaring inflation. The cost-of-living crisis has hit millions and inflation has soared above 10 per cent. While saving the over-stretched state-funded health service (NHS) was a keystone



A pro-Brexit supporter smiles as he poses on Parliament Square, on Brexit day, in London, Britain, on January 31, 2020. — Reuters file photo

of the Brexit campaign, NHS workers including nurses and ambulance staff are now striking over pay and working conditions. Brexit, which was in part a backlash against the free movement of people and goods across the EU, has led to restrictions that have hit food supplies to the UK and made it harder to hire foreign workers. Yet the numbers of migrants making the dangerous Channel crossing to claim asylum in the UK reached a record level of 45,000 last year. The UK has also seen a period of political instability, with three prime ministers last year. Sunak did not mention the problems in Northern Ireland surrounding post-Brexit trading agreements that have led to months of negotiations between London and Brussels and paralysed self-government in Belfast. There are no celebrations planned to mark the anniversary and in Scotland, where most voted to stay in the EU, opponents planned a torchlit procession through Edinburgh. “Today's Brexit anniversary marks three years of political mayhem and economic calamity,” a columnist wrote in left-wing broadsheet *The Guardian*. — Reuters

Pandemic continues to be important to novelists



Sandhya Rao Mehta

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

2022 was a promising year for fiction, with overall book sales rising by 9 per cent, according to Publisher’s Weekly, 60 per cent of which was in fiction. A quick survey of this rise shows young adult fiction rising by 35 per cent and adult fiction by 25 per cent.

Already by early 2020, novels on pandemics were sought out and offered as lockdown readings. Popular among them were Camus’ ‘The Plague’, the Italian ‘Decameron’ and Ahmed Ali’s ‘Twilight in Delhi’.

Intriguingly, the pandemic continues to be at the centre of much of the fiction written last year. At times dystopic but often hopeful, the pandemic has given endless opportunities for fiction writers to deal with a world which

came to the brink of disaster but also showed human resilience.

Among popular fiction, Jodi Picoult’s ‘Wish you were here’ is a moving novel about a character’s journey of self-discovery on finding herself alone on an island. There is also ‘Covid Chronicles: A Comics Anthology’ edited by Kendra Boileau and Rich Johnson that capture pandemic moments like working from home or the social inequalities that the lockdown brought out.

Award winning novelists were not far behind in using the pandemic as a background to their novels. Orhan Pamuk’s ‘Nights of Plague’, for example is a historical fiction about a fictional Ottoman island in the early 20th century

DESPITE DIFFERING OPINIONS, IT’S LIKELY THAT WRITERS WILL CONTINUE TO FEATURE THE PANDEMIC IN THEIR WORKS

where the plague gives rise to simmering factional rivalries. Although set in the past, the novel works with current social and political divisions. Adding the pandemic to this mix only creates a strange sense of contemporary relevance.

A respectable companion to

Pamuk’s novel is Isabel Allende’s ‘Violeta’. This novel traces the life of Violeta del Valle who lives between two pandemics. Told in the form of letters, the novel outlines the life of a woman who has seen major social events in her lifetime.

Moving on, Paul Harding’s ‘This other Eden’ and Margaret Atwood’s ‘Old babes in the wood’ use the stark realities of the pandemic to weave stories of human suffering and endurance, making it very difficult for us to forget the dark days of the last three years.

There is much that has already been diagnosed about the pandemic. ‘The premonition’ by Michael Lewis and ‘Vaxxers’ by Sarah Gilbert and Catherine Green both retrace the steps of the early

days of the pandemic to show a struggling and upended world and the race to find a cure. The misinformation, the scepticism and the hope are all well developed in both books which are still relevant today as most of the issues remain with us.

The jury is still out on whether the pandemic should be used as a prop for future fiction. Some argue that not everybody likes to be reminded of the painful few years spent in isolation, but others suggest that it is impossible to ignore this dramatic event in the 21st century. Either way, writers are likely to continue to use the pandemic as an important background for fiction and non-fiction for some time to come.

Climate disinfo surges online

False information about climate change flourished online over the past year, researchers say, with denialist social media posts and conspiracy theories surging after US environmental reforms and Elon Musk’s Twitter takeover.

“What really surprised us this year was to see a resurgence in language that is reminiscent of the 1980s: phrases like ‘climate hoax’ and ‘climate scam’ that deny the phenomenon of climate change,” said Jennie King, head of civic action at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a London-based digital research group.

Popular topics included the false claims that CO2 does not cause climate change or that global warming is not caused by human activity, said Climate Action Against Disinformation (CAAD), a coalition of campaigners, in a report.

“Let me expose what the climate scam is actually all about,” read one of the most-shared tweets, cited in another survey by US non-profit Advance Democracy, Inc (ADI).

“It is a wealth transfer from you — to the global elite.”

TWITTER DISINFO

An analysis of Twitter messages — carried out for AFP by two computational social scientists at City, University of London — counted 1.1 million tweets or retweets using strong climate-sceptic terms in 2022.

That was nearly twice the figure for 2021, said researchers Max Falkenberg and Andrea Baronchelli. They found climate denial posts peaked in December, the month after Tesla billionaire Musk took over the platform.

Use of the denialist hashtag #ClimateScam surged on Twitter from July, according to analyses by CAAD and the US-based campaign group Center For Countering Digital Hate (CCDH).

For weeks it was the top suggested search term on the site for users typing “climate”.

CAAD said the reason for that was “unclear”, though one major user of the term appeared to be an automated account, possibly indicating that a malignant bot was churning it out.

ADI noted that July saw US President Joe Biden secure support for a major climate spending bill — subject of numerous “climate scam” tweets — plus a heatwave in the United States and Europe.

Climate denial posts also peaked during the COP27 climate summit in November.

BLUE-TICK DENIERS

A quarter of all the strongly climate-sceptic tweets came from just 10 accounts, including Canadian right-wing populist party leader Maxime Bernier and Paul Joseph Watson, editor of conspiracy-theory website InfoWars, the City research showed. CCDH pointed the finger at Musk, who reinstated numerous banned Twitter accounts and allowed users to pay for a blue tick — a mark previously reserved for accredited “verified” users in the public eye. — AFP

No one’s crying for Jenin



Badr al Abri

The writer is interested in rapprochement and understanding. He is the author of *The Jurisprudence of Terrorism*

The West Bank city of Jenin is the economic powerhouse of Palestine and one of the oldest cities in the region. A city that is mentioned in the three monotheistic religions. Jenin refugee camp was set up in 1953 following the Palestinian Catastrophe (Nakba).

The name of Jenin camp was associated with the humanitarian tragedies of today’s world, the tragedies of children, women and the elderly. It was a tragedy of humankind regardless of their faith, identity or race.

Among the bitterest of these tragedies was the Jenin massacre that took place on April 11, 2002. These humanitarian catastrophes reoccur with the latest of which occurred at the end of last week resulting in the Jerusalem operation.

This is no longer a national or religious cause but rather a humanitarian issue. Hence, the whole world should move to safeguard humanity there.

They are human beings like us. Do they not deserve the right to security, justice and dignified life like other people?

I do not want to be too emotional but such tragic events and recurring massacres, emotions prevail over reasoning and that is logical as bloody events displace the mind and substitute it by emotion as everybody becomes obsessed with the killing of others as if we are living in a forest and not a human world.

Essentially, the religions do not call for the killing or persecution of the different ones.

Religions contain some texts that, when construed literally and superficially, will change the world into a place where people kill each other and there will be bloodbaths in the name of the religion.

Once I visited Compassionate DFW in Dallas and met with its chair Charles Barker, a Protestant Christian.

He founded it out of the belief that in one way or another we should feel the pain of others and dispose of egoism and remember that many people are deprived of the basic human rights and that we should lend them a helping hand.

We had already lost the battle of hatred, which has become ubiquitous among people, however we should not surrender to despair but keep on confronting hatred and replace it with



An elderly Palestinian man mourns the death of a relative killed during an Israeli raid on a refugee camp in Jenin. — AFP

IT IS EASY TO WRITE AN ARTICLE OR ISSUE A STATEMENT CONDEMNING THE MASSACRES SO AS

love and peaceful coexistence.

The religious texts, particularly the Old Testament, were a cause for struggle and hatred among people. Still religions also carry the ideas of love and peace.

The old religious texts either call for struggle and hatred or love and peace.

The religious texts that call for hatred and struggle were dedicated to the past and are not valid for our present time whereas the love and peace texts are meant for the contemporary era.

The Old Testament is teeming with texts that urge the believers to murder others including women and children. So did the New Testament: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” — Matthew 10:34.

The Holy Quran says: “And when the sacred months have passed, then

kill the polytheists wherever you find them and capture them and besiege them and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush.

But if they should repent, establish prayer, and give zakah, let them [go] on their way. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.” — Surah At-Tawbah, Verse 5.

These books are the shapers of the collective mind of the four religions of this calamitous region namely: Samaritanism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

We should be aware that these are procedural verses that are linked to a specific time and place and not absolute verses and should be fathomed within a certain historic context.

The employment of the religious text to justify murder is not confined to the Jews but also Christians specially the Catholics and Protestants sometimes on the pretext of the arrival of a Savior and other times on the allegation that Jesus will emerge triumphant from the battle of Armageddon to assume full terrestrial authority.

Presently, we are in dire need of more reason.

It is easy to write an article or issue a statement condemning the massacres so as to be on the same wavelength with others while relaxing at home with your family.

In the meantime, people are being slain and displaced and suffering from cold and hunger. This is why nobody is crying for Jenin and Palestine.

Towards a low carbon economy

Shifting weather patterns resulting from climate change is one of the major challenges of our time. So there is no ambiguity about the need for collective and multilateral action to combat greenhouse gas emissions to avert a global disaster.

The 13th edition of the Emissions Gap Report 2022 by the UN Environment programme provides an overview of the difference between where greenhouse emissions are predicted to be in 2030 and where they should be to avert the worst impacts of climate change.

According to the report Closing Window – Climate, the international community is falling far short of the Paris goals, with no credible pathway to 1.5°C in place. Policies currently in place point to a 2.8°C temperature rise by the end of the century.

“The window is closing! The world is not on track to reach the Paris Agreement goals and global temperatures can reach 2.8°C by the end of the century to avoid a global catastrophe”, the report emphasises.

The report finds that only an urgent system-wide transformation can deliver the enormous cuts needed to limit greenhouse gas emissions by 2030: 45 per cent compared with projections based on policies currently in place to get on track to 1.5°C and 30 per cent for 2°C.

At the same time, the Sixth Assessment Report of the UN Intergovernment Panel on Climate Change, to be released in March 2023, provides an overview of the state of knowledge on the science of climate change.

The report points out that approximately 3.3 to 3.6 billion people live in contexts that are highly vulnerable to climate change.

“If global warming transiently exceeds 1.5°C in the coming decades or later, then many human and natural systems will face additional severe risks, compared to remaining below 1.5°C”, it warns.

Global human-caused emissions of carbon dioxide (CO2) would need to fall by about 45 per cent from 2010



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WITH STRUCTURAL REFORMS AND TRANSFORMATIVE POLICIES, THE SULTANATE OF OMAN HAS ALREADY LAID THE GROUNDWORK FOR A LOW CARBON ECONOMY AND SHIFT TO LOW-EMISSION SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PATHWAYS

levels by 2030, reaching ‘net zero’ around 2050. This means that any remaining emissions would need to be balanced by removing CO2 from the air.

With structural reforms and transformative policies, the Sultanate of Oman has already laid the groundwork for a low carbon economy and shift to low-emission sustainable development pathways

The Oman leadership has stepped up its efforts in advancing its expertise and methodologies to better manage the climate change risks over the past years.

The adaptation efforts are underway, and the status of adaptation planning is still at a nascent stage.

The government’s carbon control target plan is rooted in the Oman vision 2040 and the National Energy Strategy to support a gradual transition to a low carbon economy and an energy matrix that significantly powers carbon emissions by 2030. The massive deployment of renewable energy and the deepening of energy efficiency actions are the pillars of the 2030 carbon control plan in the Sultanate of Oman.

According to the EY MENA Climate Change Readiness Index, which measures the readiness of the six GCC countries as well as Egypt and Jordan, Oman’s CO2 emissions per capita fell by 16 per cent during the 2015-2020 period.

Significantly, this comes in line with the country’s ambitions to become a low-carbon economy and reach a net-zero emissions target by 2050.

In the GCC region, reveals the report, Oman recorded the second biggest reduction in per capita emissions from 2015 to 2020, only behind the UAE which managed to reduce its CO2 emissions per capita by 35 per cent during the same period.

Compared to 2015, the reference year for the Paris Climate Agreement, emissions per capita have fallen in five of the six GCC countries, as shown by the EY report.

Qatar saw a small uptick in emissions per capita.

SORTING CLAY POTS



A potter sorts clay flower pots inside a kiln at a factory in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, on Tuesday. – AFP

The migration question, and thin excuses!

Perhaps it’s an unusual subject to write about as a long-time “migrant worker” myself, but it is a subject that is never far from the news. The pictures of thousands of people fleeing economic or political privations in their home countries are often in the headlines – in Mexico, the English Channel, Spanish enclaves in Morocco, or adrift in the Mediterranean.

Many of the most economically developed countries have an ageing population, and can only sustain growth through importing labour, year after year.

The USA has thrived on immigration for two hundred years, Germany famously opened its doors to “guest workers” to fuel its growth in the 1980s, and others like the UK and France, Italy and Japan are increasingly dependent on a supply of working-age immigrants.

The influx of hundreds of thousands of new workers and families provokes a strange mix of political reactions.

On the one hand, politicians stir up anxiety about “economic migrants”, while on the other, businesses beg for increasingly open borders and a more flexible labour market.

The public policy responses are often contradictory as a result: Those who voted for the UK to close its borders to Europeans probably didn’t intend for them to be replaced by new arrivals from India, Bangladesh and



Alex Brown

GOVERNMENTS ARE LEFT TO REGULATE COMPETING INTERESTS, AND BALANCE THE NEEDS OF ITS YOUNG PEOPLE, THE PREFERENCES OF BUSINESS

Nepal, but that is the reality.

The GCC has a more transparent and clear system, led by employer needs. But it is also a strange situation as the population is mostly young, while the migrant labour market is proportionally the biggest in the world.

The dynamite rate of growth in the 1970s and 1980s made this essential, but it has also created a structural legacy. Young people in the GCC cannot find jobs.

The main reason is that they now have to compete with lower pay, and perhaps a more malleable and dependent worker who is under complete control through the sponsorship system.

It is a well-known problem to the authorities, but a difficult policy to get right: keeping proper accountability on one hand, while not taking away the livelihoods of citizens who benefit on the other: many citizens make an additional income, or even a good living, from being “sponsors” of migrant workers.

The question of how to get more young GCC nationals employed is probably the most important and vexing to all their governments. Businesses can be forced to employ more locals but this is always unpopular and has other negative externalities: inefficient duplication of jobs, ill-feeling against employees who



Migrants wait to disembark from a Spanish coast guard vessel, in the port of Arguineguin, in the island of Gran Canaria, Spain. – Reuters

are made to feel like a burden or a tax, and a lack of training and investment in the careers of nationals. Companies also complain that there is a shortage of skilled employees, and every country competes for specialised and experienced talent.

But in reality, over 98 per cent of migrant workers in the Gulf are unskilled or semi-skilled. Few speak Arabic, or much English, have qualifications or even a driving licence.

But while their pay is low and employers prefer a worker who is under 24-hour control, the local national has a hard time to compete. This also has

a deep impact on efficiency and competitiveness: companies have little incentive to mechanise and industrialise to more efficient process when labour is so artificially cheap.

So, the government is left to regulate these competing interests, and balance the needs of its young people, the preferences of business – right or wrong – and the interests of all the families who subsidise their own lives by sponsoring others.

There have been successes: forty years ago, banking was a multi-national sector. Now it is 99 per cent localised. Telecom, oil and gas, even customer service is

now highly localised – and better for the consumer because of it. According to the NCSI (official Oman statistical body), there are over 40,000 jobs in the retail sector. I am always amazed to walk into a luxury store in a big mall and find an employee who doesn’t know the product, speaks poor English and no Arabic.

Perhaps starting with the biggest and most up-market outlets, retail should be the next sector to benefit from high localisation.

The youngest generation, even of school leavers now, are confident with English thanks to globalised social media, they have realistic expectations about what having a job means, and they are queuing up to work.

One supermarket said that they have a waiting list of hundreds to work on the checkout. I hope others will open the doors soon: migrant labour will always be needed, but nationals need jobs and the excuses in some sectors are getting very thin.

From the girl who served my wife’s breakfast sandwich, the man who arranged my home broadband (and the other who installed and tested it), to the helpful ladies in the bank today, I was glad they were all Omani.

I hope next time I go to buy a watch or a waffle, there will be a young Omani ready to help.

sport

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F1 TENSIONS WITH FIA SURFACE OVER ‘INFLATED PRICE TAG’ ROW



PARIS: Formula One is never more than a chicane away from an unseemly spat as last week’s surfacing of tensions between the sport’s custodians the FIA and its owners Liberty Media demonstrated F1 is basking in a resurgence of popularity, fuelled by the exploits of its leading actors Lewis Hamilton and Max Verstappen, adrenaline-sapping wheel-to-wheel racing, and an expanding fanbase driven in part by the success of Netflix’s fly-on-the-pitlane-wall series “Drive To Survive”.

Yet purported Saudi interest in adding F1 to its growing sport-portfolio beyond LIV Golf and the Premier League has triggered a row that threatens to act as a damaging backdrop to the 2023 season just weeks away from the opening race in Bahrain.

It was a tweet from FIA president Mohammed Ben Sulayem on Monday that ignited Liberty Media’s indignation.

‘UNACCEPTABLE’

Ben Sulayem described as “an inflated price tag being put on F1” a report in Bloomberg that Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund (PIF) had tried and failed to buy F1 for \$20 billion.

Despite respected F1 media outlet motorsport.com suggesting a Saudi bid was “wide of the mark”, Ben Sulayem’s intervention sparked an angry response from Liberty Media.



The Colorado-based company, which took over the sports’ commercial rights holder for \$4.4 billion in 2017, called Ben Sulayem’s comments “unacceptable”.

A letter seen by various media to the FIA said the remarks “overstep the bounds of both the FIA’s remit and its contractual rights”.

It came with a threat - that the FIA “may be liable” for any damage to Liberty’s value.

One senior paddock source quoted by motorsport.com suggested the letter spelt “open warfare” between the sport’s rulers and its commercial rights holder.

In his Twitter posts, Ben Sulayem, a former rally driver who succeeded Jean Todt as president of the FIA in 2021, wrote that “any potential buyer is advised to apply common sense, consider the greater good of the sport and come

with a clear, sustainable plan - not just a lot of money”.

He added: “It is our duty to consider what the future impact will be for promoters in terms of increased hosting fees and other commercial costs (in the event of any such sale)”.

Liberty hit back in what the BBC called “a dramatic escalation in the strained relationship between F1 and the FIA that has been evident during Ben Sulayem’s

13-month presidency”.

In blunt terms, Liberty told him to stop meddling in affairs which did not concern him.

EXCLUSIVE RIGHTS

The letter, drafted by F1’s chief legal officer, pointed out that under the 100-year contract, F1 has “the exclusive right to exploit the commercial rights in the FIA F1 World Championship”.

“The FIA has given

unequivocal undertakings that it will not do anything to prejudice the ownership, management and/or exploitation of those rights,” it added.

And it sent a clear message to the Saudis or any other potential suitor that the FIA has no jurisdiction over an eventual sale.

“The circumstances in which the FIA would have any role in a change of control of the F1 group are very limited.

“Any suggestion or implication to the contrary, or that any potential purchaser of the F1 business is required to consult with the FIA, is wrong”.

The week’s clash, whilst by far the most serious, comes after a series of rifts between the two bodies since Ben Sulayem assumed his role as the sport’s regulator in chief.

Among these was the FIA’s handling of the last lap drama of the 2021 season in Abu Dhabi where Verstappen controversially ended up champion over Hamilton, an apparent initial blocking of more sprint races this campaign, and the publishing of the record 23-race calendar without F1’s knowledge.

The row has evoked memories of the stand off between Bernie Ecclestone, F1’s former ring master and the FIA under Jean Jean-Marie Balestre in the 1980s.

Whatever happens, F1 followers will be hoping the flames are doused on this particular issue. — AFP



Faizan Abdullah, Nalinda Prasad, Eameen Habib and Pathum W of Glam Homes Properties.

Glam Homes edge past OCT Ruwi, Khalsa United win

MUSCAT: Glam Homes edged past OCT Ruwi by 3 wickets in the Oman Cricket League A Division match powered by Khimji Ramdas and Khalsa United CT beat Mordern Muscat Mountains by 17 runs in the C Division powered by Credit Oman SAOC.

In a high octane A division season this year, it was the match for the race of the prize.

Glam Homes Properties put OCT Ruwi to bat first. OCT Ruwi started off steadily with Mohammed al Balushi (95 of 114; 12x4,3x6) steering them along with Muzaffar Mohammed and Shoaib al Balushi helping OCT Ruwi create a base to set a good total. Wasim al Balushi's pinch hitting in the death overs helped OCT Ruwi post a mammoth total of 267-6 in 50 overs. Nalinda Prasad (3-33) was the key armer for Glam Homes in their bowling.

In reply, Glam Homes' openers Arbaz Qureshi and Pathum W helped them get off to a start they needed to be in the race. However,

quality bowling spells from Zubair al Balushi (2-58) and Nawed al Balushi (2-44) brought the game to life as Glam Homes fell five down in 30 overs at 132 runs. Faizan Abdullah (55 off 53b; 4x4,1x6) and Eameen Habib (51 off 44b; 5x4,1x6) stood tall and dominated the OCT Ruwi bowlers to get their team across the line and register victory in the 48th over. Glam Homes went on to top the table with one game to go.

In C division, Khalsa United CT posted a target of 172-6 in 20 overs for Mordern Muscat Mountains courtesy Sushil Kadam's (66 off 49b; 6x4) supported by Usman Asghar's pinch hitting to post a par-score. Sidhi Suman (2-27) was the key bowler for the Mordern Muscat Mountains.

In reply, Syed Arfan (54 off 40b; 4x4) and Pradeesh Kumar (41 off 36b; 4x4) carried the innings for the Mountains but fell short by 17 runs. Usman Asghar bagged 2 wickets to ensure victory for Khalsa United CT.

Banchero sparks Magic over Sixers

DONCIC NETS 53 FOR MAVS IN PISTONS ROUT

LOS ANGELES: Paolo Banchero led a second-half fightback as the Orlando Magic overturned a 21-point deficit to upset the Philadelphia 76ers 119-109 on Monday.

Banchero, the number one pick in last year's draft, scored 29 points from 11-of-22 shooting, with nine rebounds and three assists to give Orlando another notable win after last week's defeat of league-leading Boston.

In other games across the NBA on Monday, Luka Doncic returned from injury with a 53-point bang as the Dallas Mavericks routed the Detroit Pistons 111-105, while Stephen Curry dropped 38 points for Golden State as the Warriors downed the Oklahoma City Thunder 128-120.

In Portland, Damian Lillard's 42 points led the Trail Blazers to a 129-125 win over the Atlanta Hawks. Dejounte Murray finished with 40 points for Atlanta.

In Philadelphia, Magic rookie Banchero was backed with scoring support from German brothers Franz Wagner and Moritz Wagner, who combined for 41 points as Orlando silenced the home crowd with a second-half scoring blitz.

Philadelphia, who dropped to third in the Eastern Conference standings after the loss, led by 21 points midway through the second quarter and appeared poised for a comfortable victory.

But Orlando erupted after the break with a 42-point third quarter to edge into the lead and then closed with a 19-8 run in the fourth to seal the victory.

Moritz Wagner finished with 22 points off the bench while younger brother Franz added 19.



Orlando Magic's Paolo Banchero (5) dunks the ball against the Philadelphia 76ers during the second quarter at Wells Fargo Center. – USA Today Sports



Dallas Mavericks' Luka Doncic (77) looks to move the ball past Detroit Pistons' Bojan Bogdanovic (44) during the second half at the American Airlines Center. – USA Today Sports

Markelle Fultz had a double-double with 12 points and 10 assists while Wendell Carter Jr. also cracked double-figures with 12 points.

Joel Embiid led the Sixers scoring with 30 points while James Harden and Tobias Harris had 17 points apiece.

"I'm so proud of these young men," Orlando coach Jamahl Mosley said of his team afterwards.

"The way that first half started -- we were hanging our heads a little bit. But we pulled ourselves together at half-time and talked about our belief system and what we're capable of doing, and we showed up.

"It shows growth and that they're learning from their experiences -- they find a way to bounce back, find a way to believe in each other."

'HE FIRED US UP'

Banchero said Mosley had rallied the locker room at half-time.

"He fired us up," Banchero said. "Just told us we need to play better, play harder, that we're a very good team we need to act like it."

Sixers coach Doc Rivers had few complaints after his side's defeat, describing Orlando as worthy winners.

"I thought from near the end of the first quarter, they played harder, faster, tougher, more physical," Rivers said. "I think they deserved to win." Orlando continue to languish near the bottom of the Eastern Conference, with 20 wins against 31 defeats.

In Dallas, Doncic bagged the fifth 50-point game of his career with another virtuoso performance to lead the Mavericks to victory over Detroit. — AFP

ISC badminton tourney on February 3 and 4

MUSCAT: Indian Social Club (ISC) in association with Purshottam Kanji Exchange Oman will be conducting Badminton open Championship 2023 at their premises. The tournament, will be played at the ISC multi-purpose hall as full day event on February 3 and 4.

Apart from Indian players,

this year's participation expected from various other nationalities including Iran, Philippines, Pakistan, UK and Oman.

In the men's category, there will be open events in singles and doubles in addition to the events restricted to members only. The open events will see young talented players from across Oman.

Similarly, women's category will also have an open event both in singles and doubles.

In addition to the above, there will be veterans, mixed doubles, boys and girls events.

According to organisers, shuttlers are making their mark on ISC courts and this has led to a surge of interest in the sport, taking it from just a game played

during holidays to a serious sport at a competitive level. Cash prizes and trophies will be given away to the winners during grand finale.

Registration is still open for the open categories and those who wish to register may contact Indian Social club at 24701347 or Saji Abraham – Sports Secretary at 99419007.

Bank Muscat presents Green Sports field in Jalan Bani Bu Ali

MUSCAT: Bank Muscat, the leading financial institution in the Sultanate of Oman, has announced the opening of the Al Qabas Sports Team's field in the Wilayat of Jalan Bani Bu Ali. The event was held under the auspices of Sheikh Nasser Said Salim Al Sinani, Director of Culture, Sports and Youth, South A'Sharqiyah, in the presence of Sami Mohammed al Kindi, Regional Manager – South Sharqiyah and Majed Mohammed al Ghailani, Head of the Al Qabas Sports Team and a number of team members.

On this occasion, Sami Mohammed said: "Bank Muscat is delighted to inaugurate the Al Qabas Sports Team's Green Sports field, which was implemented by the bank as part of its pioneering role in CSR. We appreciate the efforts and would like to congratulate the Al Qabas Sports Team's management for the successful the implementation



of this project. There is no doubt that the new field and facilities will greatly contribute to the team's overall growth and success as well as bring about greater community bonding. We take this opportunity to wish them all success for the future."

Majed Mohammed thanked the bank for the completion of

the artificial turf system, which was implemented through Bank Muscat's Green Sports programme. Pointing out that the new sports field will now be used to organise different sports, social and cultural activities and events, he affirmed that the team would continue to work hard to develop the capabilities and talents of its

members. He also emphasized the team management's keenness to contribute strongly to local sports in Oman.

Youth sports teams who would like to apply for Green Sports assistance this year may note that the bank will be accepting applications for the 2023 edition of Green Sports till February 18,

2023. More details are available at: <https://techgurusales.com/greensports/green-stadium-participation-form-terms.aspx> and applications can be submitted online using a computer, a tablet or a mobile phone. In case of any queries about the submission process, teams may email GreenSports@bankmuscat.com,

or call 24768595 / 24801200 / 24801625 for more details.

Bank Muscat's Green Sports programme is one of the leading CSR programmes in Oman, which provides support to local sports teams as part of the bank's efforts to develop sports infrastructure in Omani sports and provide green spaces throughout the Sultanate of Oman.

The scope of support under the Green Sports programme include installation of artificial turf or natural grass on sports fields, floodlighting and water-desalination systems. On the occasion of the programme's 10th anniversary in 2021, the bank increased the number of annual beneficiaries to 20 teams annually. The Green Sports programme has so far benefitted 163 teams and over 50,000 team members across Oman and a further 20 teams will receive Green Sports support in 2023.

Real start favourites at Club World Cup in Morocco



Real Sociedad's goalkeeper Alex Remiro (R) dives for the ball during the Spanish league match against Real Sociedad in Madrid. – AFP

RABAT: One of the last Club World Cups in its current format begins on Wednesday in Morocco, where Real Madrid will be favourites to continue Europe’s dominance of the much-maligned Fifa competition.

Fifa President Gianni Infantino announced on the sidelines of the World Cup in Qatar in December that an expanded Club World Cup is planned from 2025.

The bigger competition, which would feature 32 teams, has been a controversial pet project of Infantino’s for some time. A 24-team Club World Cup, involving eight European sides, had been due to take place in China in 2021 only to be put on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic.

World football’s governing body is yet to reveal any further details of the plans, but global players’ union FIFPro has already complained of Infantino making the announcement “unilaterally without seriously consulting... with the players”.

For now, the Club World Cup limps on with just seven teams, including the six continental champions.

After five consecutive editions in the Middle East it returns to Morocco, which hosted the tournament in 2013 and 2014, and Real will be expected to become the 10th consecutive European winners.

Real, the reigning European champions, have claimed the title four times, including in Morocco in 2014.

Real will enter in the semifinals on February 8 and will play in Rabat against either Concacaf champions Seattle Sounders, Egyptian giants Al Ahly or New Zealand’s Auckland City, the



Real Madrid’s Karim Benzema celebrates scoring their second goal with Eduardo Camavinga, Luka Modric and teammates during the Copa del Rey Quarterfinal against Atletico Madrid at Santiago Bernabeu on January 26. – Reuters

champions of Oceania.

If they win, Carlo Ancelotti’s side will advance to the final on February 11.

MOROCCAN HOPES

The other semifinal will see last

year’s Copa Libertadores winners Flamengo take on either Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia or home hopes Wydad Casablanca.

Widely dismissed as an irrelevance in Europe, the competition is considered far

more prestigious in the rest of the world, a chance for their best sides to pit themselves against giants like Real.

Brazilian clubs have won the Club World Cup four times, most recently through Corinthians in

2012. Wydad will be hoping to become the first African club to triumph.

The host nation is always represented, but Wydad also won last year’s CAF Champions League, and so Al Ahly — the



Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti

team they beat in the final — have been invited to take part as well.

Walid Regragui led Wydad to that continental title before taking Morocco on a historic run to the World Cup semifinals in Qatar.

“It’s nice for Morocco — particularly after the World Cup we had — for people to see that there’s football here, there are fans, and there are beautiful stadiums. It’s going to be fantastic for our country,” Regragui told Fifa.com

The competition kicks off on Wednesday when Al Ahly — the record 10-time African champions who have finished third at the last two Club World Cups — play Auckland City in Tangier.

The tournament will see a refereeing first after the International Football Association Board, the sport’s lawmakers, approved a trial that will allow fans in the stadium to hear officials explain decisions taken after VAR reviews. — AFP

Orascom Development names new CEO for Oman destinations

MUSCAT: Orascom Development Holding announces yesterday the appointment of Wael al Lawati (pictured) as the new Chief Executive Officer of Muriya Tourism Development, including the award-winning destinations, Jebel Sifah and Hawana Salalah.



In support of Orascom Development's ambition to be a pre-eminent, multi-national developer, Al Lawati will be responsible for setting the business agenda for the Group's Oman destinations, including leading the overall strategy in alignment with Orascom Development's strategy, facilitating delivery against the annual business plans and instilling best practices throughout these destinations.

He will be an integral member of Orascom Development's Executive Committee, reporting directly to the Group CEO, Omar el Hamamsy.

Omar el Hamamsy, Group CEO of Orascom Development, said, "I am pleased to welcome Wael al Lawati as our new CEO of Muriya and leading our destinations in Oman. I am

confident that Wael will bring a unique perspective and strong track of delivering results to our team. His passion for the industry and ability to lead a team will open a new chapter of growth for our Oman destinations, Jebel Sifah and Hawana Salalah."

Al Lawati brings a wealth of experience and proven track record of delivering results in tourism, real estate, and other sectors. As a seasoned Omani National, he has held several other leadership positions including CEO of Oman Tourism Development Company and founder of The Wave Muscat.

More recently, he served as Chief Operating Officer for a real estate advisory and spearheaded international growth at DAMAC Properties.

Five startups selected for CBO's fintech accelerator programme

MUSCAT: The Central Bank of Oman and Omantel, the leading provider of integrated telecommunication services in the Sultanate of Oman, have joined hands to deliver a six-month accelerator programme dedicated to nurturing and empowering fintech start-ups.

The accelerator programme seeks to support innovative fintech start-ups through the challenges of the highly competitive fintech industry through mentorship, training, networking, and fundraising support.

The programme targets promising, high-potential local start-ups with fintech solutions in debt-based crowdfunding, buy now pay later, microfinancing and ROSCA system, a rotating savings and association system.

The five start-ups selected for the accelerator are Al Jumaeiah, an application that helps create, manage and organise different jamaeiahs (groups) on a single platform; Hal Capital, a Shariah-compliant embedded fintech offering alternative financing products and services to SMEs and individuals; TasHeel Financial Solutions that provides



financial ease to clients through a Buy Now Pay Later solution; Wadiaa, an equity-based crowdfunding and peer-to-peer lending solution for start-ups and SMEs; and Zumr Fintech which provides micro financing opportunities by encouraging the habit of saving.

HH Sayyidah Ghada al Said, Senior Manager, Omantel Innovation Labs, said "It has been a pleasure to work with the Central Bank of Oman to create a valuable fintech programme for the local start-up ecosystem that combines the expertise of

Omantel and the Central Bank of Oman.

The partnership leverages our shared vision and strengths to contribute to the growth of fintech start-ups in the country and we look forward to doing our part in accelerating these promising start-ups."

Ghada al Kharousi, Acting Manager at the Innovation Department, Central Bank of Oman, said, "Fintech is vital to the future of the Sultanate of Oman's financial sector, and we are committed to supporting fintech start-ups in the country.

We are delighted to be working with Omantel on this programme that we believe will be a catalyst for accelerating fintech start-ups in Oman."

In addition to receiving free desk space at the Omantel Innovation Labs, a 1,100 sqm facility in the heart of the Omantel Headquarters at Madinat Al Irfan, selected start-ups will also gain access to a network of over 100,000 investors, corporates and mentors and will be eligible for perks worth over \$250,000 in cloud computing, legal services, accounting and other areas.

Suhol Al Fayha bolsters distribution fleet with Isuzu trucks from OTE

MUSCAT: Underscoring Isuzu's enduring appeal as the commercial truck of choice of cargo transporters around the world, OTE Group – exclusive distributors of the famed brand in the Sultanate of Oman – celebrated recently the delivery of a fleet of Isuzu reefer trucks to a leading Omani distributor of fresh farm produce.

In all, nine trucks comprising a mix of Isuzu F and N Series vehicles were handed over at a ceremony held at the Hormuz Grand Hotel.

Receiving the keys to the brand new fleet were high-level executives of Suhol Al Fayha, by far the biggest importer, distributor and grower of fruits and vegetables in Oman.

Taking centrestage at the event was the neatly arrayed line-up of Isuzu's 3.5-tonne capacity NPR 81H refrigerated trucks, as well as 13-tonne capacity FVR-34



refrigerated trucks, emblazoned with Suhol Al Fayha's new brand colours.

Representing Suhol Al Fayha at the handover event were Abdul Vahid, Managing Director, Abdul Jabbar, Chairman, and Executive Directors Jasim Jabbar, Mohammed Savad, Jahfar Jabbar, Jabas Jabbar and Mohammed Sajid. Present from OTE Group

were Girish Vinayak Bhide, General Manager and Vikrant Handa, Senior Manager.

Acclaimed globally as dependable workhorses by cargo transporters, Isuzu's N and F series trucks are indispensable to any business's goal of ensuring the timely, reliable and efficient distribution of consumer products, particularly perishables.

Vodafone, Ericsson complete test for standalone 5G voice and data services

MUSCAT: Vodafone in Oman and Ericsson have carried out the first successful test call that will pave the way for the commercial introduction of 5G standalone voice and data services for Vodafone subscribers in Oman.

Oman's first successful Voice over New Radio (VoNR) proof of concept call over a standalone 5G network is part of Vodafone and Ericsson's ongoing project to develop a highly efficient and reliable nationwide standalone network – allowing for high-quality, seamless voice and data services.

Using Ericsson dual-mode 5G Core and Ericsson IP Multimedia Subsystem (IMS) technology, the proof of concept showed the potential of the mobile network to enhance speech quality across the country.

It also demonstrated the capability of Vodafone's network to enable 5G-specific voice and



Stelios Savvides

communication services for both consumers and enterprises, using an experimental terminal, which will subsequently be replaced by commercial terminals made by Vodafone's partners.

Unlike non-standalone 5G networks, standalone 5G networks do not build on existing 4G networks and technology, instead pairing 5G radios with a cloud-native 5G core network – allowing for flexibility and speed to meet current and future customer demands.

Stelios Savvides, Vodafone's Technology Director in Oman, says: "As we continue to push



Abdullah al Balushi

boundaries as an innovation leader in Oman, this successful VoNR proof of concept call is a milestone in our mission to enhance our 5G capabilities and deliver superior user experiences."

Abdullah al Balushi, Country Manager of Ericsson Oman, says: "We are confident this latest VoNR achievement will open doors to new business models and use cases and help Vodafone Oman deliver high-quality voice services and immersive experiences across the country. Through Vision 2040, Oman is embarking on a new phase of growth."

Own a Kia Pegas with season of winning benefits

MUSCAT: Now own a Kia Pegas and be a winner with Kia! On offer is a chance to win a brand new Kia Niro Hybrid Electric Vehicle and comprehensive service up to 50,000 kms, 1 year insurance and cash gift. (Conditions apply. Please visit Kia showroom for details.)

The Pegas is the right companion for those looking for their first car or even those in search of a second car to make the most of anywhere they go. The Pegas is equipped with a range of features, technology and space for fun journeys.

The Pegas is equipped with an efficient 1.4-liter MPI (multi-point injection) gasoline engine, which

produces maximum output of 94PS at 6,000rpm and maximum torque output of 13.5 @ 4,000 rpm. It offers an impressive fuel-efficiency of 17.8 Kms/L.

Giving the Pegas its stylish appeal is the sculpted body panels and bold character lines which are complemented by a striking colour palette and a carefully-balanced sedan silhouette. The Pegas' profile is enhanced with a chrome radiator grille, body colour bumper and door handles, body colour outside mirrors, side repeater lamp in outside mirror, halogen lamps, 14" steel wheel, front fog lamp and rear fog lamp. Viewed from the side, the profile



of the Pegas gives it a finely-balanced silhouette.

Its definitive character lines give the impression of motion, even while it sits stationary.

The interiors of the Pegas contribute to making every journey special. The centre fascia has been designed to enhance ease-of-use, with many of the

car's functions controlled with clear, ergonomic buttons. Adding appeal to the interior of the Pegas is power windows, front console centre armrest with storage box, driver's seat adjuster, manual air conditioning, Radio and Bluetooth.

The Pegas is also immensely practical for storing luggage. The trunk has a capacity of 475 litres, enough to store up to three golf bags, or a couple of large suitcases. As the trunk lid opens, illumination within the trunk also reveals any smaller items that could be forgotten.

Furthermore, the Pegas is equipped with an array of safety

features, including four airbags, Electronic Stability Programme (ESP), Anti-Lock Braking System (ABS), Tyre Pressure Monitoring System (TPMS) and Keyless Entry System.

The Pegas is also equipped with rear parking system and steering audio control. Customers looking to own a

Kia can visit any showroom and experience a Kia. The campaign will end on January 26, 2023 (Conditions apply). Reliable International Automotive (RIA), the distributor for Kia in Oman provides a rewarding ownership experience for customers.



No new regulation on crypto laws until 2024



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The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK.

The UK will not introduce fresh laws on regulating the cryptocurrency industry until at least 2024, according to City minister, Andrew Griffith.

Recent turbulence in the sector, including the collapse of crypto exchange FTX in November, has led to calls for regulation to come faster.

On regulation, Ripple Labs' (a leading provider of crypto solutions for businesses) head of Europe, said recently what really matters is having a clear regulatory framework so that all the players know the rules of the road and can innovate accordingly and uncertainty is the biggest threat to innovation.

Griffith told MPs on 10 January that while he would meet with crypto firms this year, the government is "not going to be legislating in 2023" beyond previously announced rules.

This latest move risks the UK falling further behind in rolling out rules targeting the nascent sector. The European Union has steamed ahead, agreeing the wide-ranging Markets in Crypto Assets regulation, which is set to come into force this year.

However, the UK is still drawing up its own regime. The government's Financial Services and Markets Bill includes some laws relating to crypto, including giving the Financial Conduct Authority more powers to regulate the sector and making it harder for crypto firms to advertise.

The government is set to release a consultation on regulating the crypto industry, as well as stablecoins, in the coming "week, not months", Griffith said.

Scottish National Party MP Alison Thewliss said: "In the absence of any actual legislation or regulation on this, you still have the prospect of people in the UK putting

money into things like FTX and being absolutely unprotected." Griffith defended the strategy of consulting over the course of 2023.

He said it was "with a view of getting the regulation right. (Crypto) is an immature market.

It is very broad." "We're talking about use on one level by central banks, by wholesale operators who operate purely in the wholesale market, and at the other end extreme consumers and either their use cases and their desire to speculate on a new emerging technology."

However, Griffith did hint at the scope of future regulation, saying the European Union's MiCA covers "some but not all of the areas that we would aspire to cover" such as decentralised finance.

"We have the opportunity to potentially be a bit more agile in how we tackle some of those same underlying purposes." UK crypto regulation will "try and mirror the previous regime" in broader financial regulation, he added.

"If something is a means of payment then we look to regulate it as a payment. If something is a speculative investment then it would fall into that particular bucket."

He said it would also include "things like having transparency regimes, reporting, protection against market abuse and a self-dealing and proper trust-based custody. Those are all things that one would aspire to for example on a crypto exchange that are already mirrored on exchanges for other assets."

In April, the then-chancellor Rishi Sunak said he wanted the UK to be a global crypto hub. Asked whether the government was still committed to the plan, Griffith said: "Our objective is to seek for the UK to be the home for a well-regulated technologically advanced financial system and there is absolutely room for this technology within that."

He added: "Clearly, recent events since April 2022 have highlighted vulnerability." However, he maintained that it would be "wrong for the UK not to be forward-leaning in seeking to make the most of the opportunity" of blockchain technology, pointing to potential applications within the existing financial system such as tokenising assets and central bank digital currencies.

were signed yesterday, January 31, at an official ceremony held under the auspices of Shaikh Rashid bin Ahmed al Shamsi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Social Development.

To enhance the availability of high-quality medical services across Oman, PDO signed an agreement with the Ministry Of Health to fund the construction of the Emergency and Accidents unit in Maqshan Health.

To encourage the adoption of sports and healthy lifestyles in Oman, PDO is funding the construction of a 2-km walk path with planted trees and solar lights

BUSINESS REPORTER MUSCAT, JAN 31

Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) has committed to support a host of new projects totalling more than \$2.1 million, which will benefit communities and boost sustainable development across the Sultanate of Oman.

The initiatives include commitments in the key areas of health, community infrastructure development as well as enhancing the education sector. 10 Memorandums of Collaboration (MOCs) confirming these commitments

Sustainable manufacturing is smart manufacturing

BUSINESS REPORTER MUSCAT, JAN 31

Manufacturers from across the Sultanate of Oman are invited to attend Tejarah Talks first session of 2023, 'Sustainable Manufacturing: Smart Manufacturing' where the topic for discussion is the incorporation of environmentally friendly practices into business operations.

Scheduled for 7:30pm on Wednesday, February 15, at Zain Auditorium, Omantel Head Office, Airport Heights the evening's discussions will be moderated by HH Sayyid Dr Adham al Said, Managing Partner, The Firm while the panel includes Harsha Shetty, CEO, Jindal Shadeed, Mazin al Rubaiee, Marketing Manager, Oman Aluminium Rolling Company and Haider al Zaabi, Co-founder Mays EV.



Speaking ahead of the event, organiser, Maymuna al Adawi (pictured), Director, Oman Business Forum & Public Private Partnerships at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry & Investment Promotion said: "Today, a growing number of Omani manufacturers are treating sustainability as an important objective in their strategy and operations to increase growth and global competitiveness. In fact, this trend has gone well beyond companies who have traditionally positioned themselves as green

and now includes small as well as medium-sized Omani manufacturers."

According to Al Adawi, one of the key benefits of sustainable manufacturing is the ability to cut energy usage and waste.

"By implementing sustainable business practices, Omani manufacturers can reduce their carbon footprint, become energy efficient and decrease overhead costs. This not only helps protect the environment but also saves companies money on energy bills."

Noting the commitment to net-zero targets of more and more Omani manufacturers, Al Adawi said: "Businesses with a robust sustainable record tend to have a stronger corporate brand value, attracting employees and investors and performing better financially through greater focus on innovation, operational

efficiency and risk management.

Conversely, businesses that fail to act on sustainability issues can potentially risk losing investor interest, as well as alienating consumers and top-notch talent, especially among Oman's younger generations.

Today's business landscape is increasingly complex and consumer expectations around sustainability will only continue to rise. It is clear that manufacturers who fail to meaningfully incorporate sustainable practices into their operations and supply chains will suffer in the long-run."

Tejarah Talks is organised by Oman Business Forum in association with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry & Investment Promotion and generously supported by Jindal Shadeed, the Ministry of Culture, Sports & Youth, Omantel and OmanFM.

Abraj, EDO collaborate to advance onshore oil and gas services

BUSINESS REPORTER MUSCAT, JAN 31

Abraj Energy Services SAOG (under transformation) Oman's leading provider of oil and gas field services, has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Energy Development Oman (EDO) to develop services related to oil and gas extraction operations.

The partnership will see Abraj provide an expanded range of services to EDO's affiliates, including Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), further strengthening the long-standing relationship between the two entities.

The MoU was signed by Eng Saif al Hamhami, CEO of Abraj Energy Services and Eng Mazen bin Rashid al Lamki, CEO of EDO.

With the aim to ensure the long-term, sustainable security and supply of energy-related services in Oman, the collaboration serves to boost the contribution of national drilling champion Abraj to the country's oilfield services sector, as well as encourage the implementation of alternative energy solutions.

Eng Saif al Hamhami, CEO of Abraj Energy Services, added, "Abraj has a 16-year service legacy in Oman, and we are delighted to take our partnership with EDO to new heights. We continue to explore and build upon our solutions to offer our clients best-in-class services and this agreement aligns with Abraj's strategy to enhance its market position within the drilling sector and capitalise on new opportunities underpinned by sustainable and cleaner operations."



Energy Development Oman's strategy aims to achieve in-country efficiencies and pursue new growth opportunities within Oman's energy sector, with a vision to achieve growth through global partnerships and create a sustainable future for energy in the Sultanate of Oman. PDO, EDO's largest affiliate, serves as Oman's largest oil and gas exploration and production company and is Abraj's largest client.

Mazin al Lamki, CEO of EDO, said, "We are pleased to partner with a national champion such as Abraj on a project that will serve to add to the Sultanate of Oman's rich natural reserves, strengthen our energy security and co-create employment opportunities domestically. Abraj's innovative and efficient solutions will complement EDO's energy efficiency plans and sustainability goals and we look forward to building upon our long-running collaboration."

MSX formally joins Tabadul platform

FROM PAGE 13

Today, we are witnessing a milestone that underscores our commitment to expand regional relationships and foster collaboration and connectivity between the region's markets

.Our aim is to enhance liquidity, facilitate trading and deepen the overall capital markets."

He added: "We look forward to working closely with our partners at BHB and MSX to expand investment tools and to add additional financial markets under the Tabadul platform, allowing the region's capital markets to grow and complement each other's financial ecosystems."

Shaikh Khalifa bin Ebrahim al Khalifa Chief Executive Officer of Bahrain Bourse commented: "We are pleased to welcome Muscat Stock Exchange to the Tabadul platform.

The platform is a major step towards enhancing capital market competitiveness in the region, as it links markets together and seeks to provide more investment options for investors, given the increased appetite of international institutional investors. We look forward to onboarding other markets on Tabadul to further develop the platform and support sustained growth of markets."

PDO announces new pack of social investment initiatives

BUSINESS REPORTER MUSCAT, JAN 31

Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) has committed to support a host of new projects totalling more than \$2.1 million, which will benefit communities and boost sustainable development across the Sultanate of Oman.

The initiatives include commitments in the key areas of health, community infrastructure development as well as enhancing the education sector. 10 Memorandums of Collaboration (MOCs) confirming these commitments

were signed yesterday, January 31, at an official ceremony held under the auspices of Shaikh Rashid bin Ahmed al Shamsi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Social Development.

To enhance the availability of high-quality medical services across Oman, PDO signed an agreement with the Ministry Of Health to fund the construction of the Emergency and Accidents unit in Maqshan Health.

To encourage the adoption of sports and healthy lifestyles in Oman, PDO is funding the construction of a 2-km walk path with planted trees and solar lights



in the Wilayat of Izki, which 60,000 people will be benefited In line with the Company's commitment to boost the education sector

within its concession area, PDO signed an agreements to construct two science labs in Abu Mudhabi and Shumookh schools in the

Wilayats of Haima and Duqm, Also to fund the construction of a sports hall for Mawred School In the Wilayat of Adam.

More than 1,000 students in the three schools will benefit from these facilities.

PDO External Affairs and Value Creation Director Eng Abdul-Amir bin Abdul-Hussein al Ajmi said: "We are thrilled to kick off the year by following PDO's long-standing practice of supporting local communities through investments in sustainable development projects. This is just the first of many initiatives we will take this year to create a better

future for our communities."

In addition, PDO has signed two agreements for the Wilayat of Maqshan, one to provide funding for the purchase of vehicles for the Environment Authority in the Wilayat and another to provide additional funding for three public Majlis in the same area.

Moreover, PDO signed agreements to support four NGOs, including Ihsan Association in Batinah South Governorate, Omani Women's Association, Al Noor Association for the blind in the Wilayat of Nizwa and Omani Association for the hearing impaired.

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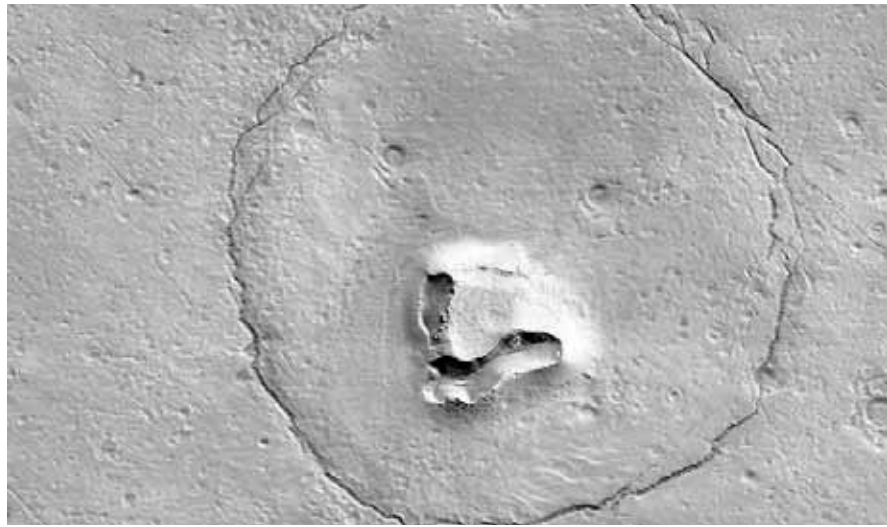
The beautiful canyon along Wadi Aqabat al Baytayn

Wadi Aqabat al Baytayn is located after Samayil on the way to Nizwa. Seeing the entrance to the wadi many times and every time he passes the said road, this adventure finally had the chance to explore what was to be found in this less-known canyon... **P20**

Is there life on Mars? Maybe, and it could have dropped its teddy

YOGI, PADDINGTON and Winnie the Pooh, move over. There's a new bear in town. Or on Mars, anyway. The beaming face of a cute-looking teddy bear appears to have been carved into the surface of our nearest planetary neighbour, waiting for a passing satellite to discover it.

And when the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter passed over last month, carrying aboard the most powerful camera ever to venture into the Solar System, that's exactly what happened. Scientists operating the HiRISE (High Resolution Imaging Science Experiment), which has been circling Mars since 2006, crunched



the data that made it back to Earth, and have now published a picture of the face. "There's a hill with a V-shaped collapse structure (the nose), two craters (the eyes), and a circular fracture pattern (the head)," said scientists at the University of

Arizona, which operates the kit. Each one of the features in the 2,000-metre (1.25-mile)-wide face has a possible explanation that hints at just how active the surface of the planet is. "The circular fracture pattern might be due to the settling of a

deposit over a buried impact crater," the scientists said. "Maybe the nose is a volcanic or mud vent and the deposit could be lava or mud flows?" HiRISE, one of six instruments aboard the Orbiter, snaps super-detailed pictures of the Red Planet helping to map the surface for possible future missions, either by humans or robots. Over the last ten years, the team has managed to capture images of avalanches as they happened, and discovered dark flows that could be some kind of liquid. They've also found dust devils twirling across the Martian surface, as well as a feature that some people thought looked a lot like Star Trek's Starfleet logo. One thing they have not found, however, is the little green men who were once popularly believed to inhabit the planet. — AFP

READ

THE INHERITANCE GAMES

BY JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

Avery Grambs tries to figure out why an inheritance from a stranger was bestowed upon her.



MUSIC

Musicians with Iraq's National Band for Musical Heritage perform during a concert marking the 100th anniversary of the death of Iraqi composer Mullah Uthman al Mawsili, at the National Theatre in Baghdad. — AFP



FASHION

A model presents a creation by designer Imane Ayissi as part of his Haute Couture Spring/Summer 2023 collection show in Paris, France. — AFP





After drought, winter rains revive Iraq's famed marshlands

BLACK BUFFALOES WADE through the waters of Iraq's Mesopotamian marshes, leisurely chewing on reeds. After years of drought, winter rains have brought some respite to herders and livestock in the famous wetlands.

Listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site, the marshes were parched and dusty last summer by drought in the climate-stressed country and by reduced flow from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers due to dams built upstream in Turkey and Iran.

Winter brings seasonal rains, offering relief in marshes like those of Huwaizah — which straddles the border with Iran — and Chibayish, located in nearby Dhi Qar province.

Among the reeds of Chibayish, buffalo farmer Rahim Daoud now uses a stick to punt his boat across an expanse of water.

"This summer, it was dirt here; there was no water," said the 58-year-old. "With the rain that has fallen, the water level has risen."

Last summer, AFP photographers travelled to the Huwaizah and Chibayish marshes to document the disappearance of large portions of the wetlands, observing vast expanses of dry and cracked soil dotted with yellowed shrubs.

In October, an official in the impoverished rural province of Dhi Qar said that in the previous six months, 1,200 families had left the marshes and other agricultural areas of southern Iraq and more than 2,000 buffaloes had died.

SCORCHING SUMMERS

Iraq has faced three consecutive years of severe drought and scorching heat, with temperatures regularly exceeding 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit) during the summer of 2022.

"There is a gradual improvement," Hussein al-Kenani said after the recent rains.

Kenani, who heads the governmental centre in charge of protecting the wetlands, said rainwater collected in canals and rivers has been redirected to the marshes.

"The water level in Chibayish's



swamps has increased by more than 50 centimetres (20 inches) compared with December and by more than 30 centimetres for the Huwaizah swamps," Kenani said.

In July, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization deplored the "unprecedented low water levels" in the marshes, highlighting "the disastrous impact" for

more than 6,000 families, whose buffaloes and livelihoods were being lost.

The relief of rainfall early this month was welcomed by the UN agency, which noted in a statement that in the Chibayish region "salinity levels decreased" to the point where people and animals could again drink the water.

"This has had a great positive impact, especially on buffalo herders," it said.

While the crisis has been relieved for now, there are fears about the longer-term fate of the threatened wetland habitat.

"There is not enough water coming from the Turkish side," said Jassim al Assadi, head of environmental group Nature Iraq, who added that Iraq's dams upstream from the marshes "do not have an adequate and sufficient reservoir for the rest of the year".

"The rains alone are not enough," he said, voicing fears about another looming "problem next summer". — AFP

FASHION

Gucci's challenge: reigniting heat while boosting timeless appeal



SABATO DE SARNO, newly appointed by Kering to reinvigorate its prized Gucci brand, needs to spark heat with a new direction, analysts say - a delicate task, given the emphasis executives have also put on the label's timeless appeal.

De Sarno, a senior fashion designer from Valentino, is tasked as creative director with reviving the fortunes of the brand that accounted for two-thirds of Kering's profits in 2021.

An emphasis on classics was a priority outlined by executives at the company's investor presentation last year, and Gucci has recently revived its bamboo-handle model handbag from 1947, as well as its over-the-shoulder Jackie bag from 1961.

But analysts say De Sarno will also have to generate buzz with hot new styles — a strategy that has traditionally served the brand well, compared to the path taken by some rivals that focus more strongly on signature classics, especially handbags.

"The future of Gucci is not to become another (Louis) Vuitton, Chanel or Hermes, but to nurture its fashion content to drive customers back to the brand," said Antoine Belge, analyst with Exane BNP Paribas.

Kering declined to comment on its strategy for the brand.

The group had been under pressure to quickly appoint someone to the top creative job at Gucci following the abrupt departure in November of Alessandro Michele.



The flamboyant designer, who was a favourite of Harry Styles and Lady Gaga, had overseen a period of soaring growth in 2015-19, with eccentric, gender-fluid designs.

However in recent quarters Gucci has lagged rivals including Hermes and LVMH's top brand Louis Vuitton, with its performance in the key Chinese market becoming a source of concern for investors amid Covid-19 lockdowns.

For Bernstein analyst Luca Solca, Gucci needs to make a strong statement to return to the centre stage. "Gucci has to be over the top in order to thrive," said Solca.

Analysts welcomed Kering's choice of a seasoned but relatively unknown designer, noting that previous creative director Michele did not have a public profile when he was appointed in 2002.

"Another bold choice that may work well again," said Jefferies analyst Flavio Cereda, though he cautioned that the director's task was not "straightforward this time".

Among challenges cited by Cereda is potential turmoil as Gucci brings on an outsider while the previous designer's teams are still in place, and the time it will take for the market to understand a new direction from the label.

De Sarno will show his first Gucci collection in September in Milan. His experience at Valentino suggests a "less eccentric aesthetic" than Gucci's previous designer, noted Carole Madjo of Barclays.

The designer rose through Valentino's ranks after his arrival in 2009 to become fashion director overseeing both the men's and women's collections, working closely with chief designer Pierpaolo Piccioli.

Now, "all eyes will be on de Sarno's talent and creativity, and how he can collaborate with the merchandising team at Gucci," said Caroline Reyl, head of premium brands at Pictet Asset Management.

Creative directors are particularly scrutinised when a brand is in a transition, she said.

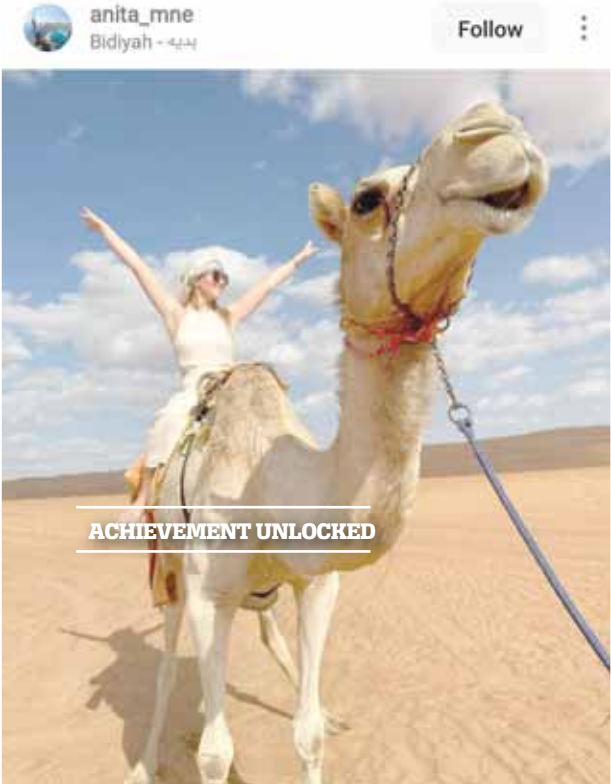
The announcement of his appointment came ahead of Kering's Feb. 15 earnings release, which will likely show the label's fourth-quarter sales saw one of the more pronounced slowdowns among the world's top fashion labels due to coronavirus disruptions in China.

Kering's share price was mostly flat on Monday, down 0.1 per cent at 13:33 GMT. — Reuters



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AROUND THE WORLD

LIFESTYLE

Ai Weiwei launches new exhibit, says still trying to understand studio demolitions



DISSIDENT ARTIST AI Weiwei on Monday said the Chinese state's razing of his studios still fails to make "any sense" to him, as he launched his first design-focused exhibition, due to open in London in April.

Ai's love of artefacts and traditional craftsmanship will be at the heart of the show which will feature hundreds of thousands of objects collected by the Chinese artist since the 1990s — from Stone Age tools to Lego bricks.

The pieces will be laid out on the floor in five "fields" to be seen in the context of "China's rapidly changing urban landscape", London's Design Museum said.

Among them will also be thousands of fragments from Ai's porcelain sculptures which were destroyed when the bulldozers moved in to dismantle his studio in Beijing in 2018.

Ai, who has lived in Europe since 2015, remains perplexed by the destruction of his studios — another in Shanghai was reduced to rubble in 2011.

"Still it doesn't make any sense why they have to do it... they just wanted to do something to punish me," he told the launch of his Making Sense exhibition in a pre-recorded interview from his studio in Portugal.

"But punish me for what? As an artist they're punishing the individualism, they (are) punishing the freedom of speech," he continued.

"They are punishing anybody trying to make a question or argument about their legitimacy."

He has previously spoken of gentrification of whole neighbourhoods and the pushing out of migrant workers as possible reasons for the demolition.

- Loss of cultural memory -

The son of a poet revered by former communist leaders, 65-year-old Ai is perhaps China's best-known modern artist and helped design the famous "Bird's Nest" stadium for Beijing's 2008 Olympics.

But he fell out of favour after criticising the Chinese government and was imprisoned for 81 days in 2011 and eventually left for Germany four years later.

Design Museum chief curator Justin McGirk said the destruction of the studios and the loss of cultural memory was "very much one of the themes of this show".

The studios were demolished "by the state as a kind of punishment for his activism", he said.

"The tension between handmade and industrial made is really the change that's happened in China over the last 30 years, the tremendous scale of urbanisation and development, which brought with it a lot of destruction a lot of devaluing of history, a lot of wiping away of traditional streetscapes and architectures," he added.

Objects due to go on display include 1,600 Stone Age tools, 10,000 Song Dynasty cannon balls retrieved from a moat and donated Lego bricks which the artist began working in 2014 to produce portraits of political prisoners.

Ai said that although "in one sense we are more advanced" now, humans were losing touch with the way things are made.

"We lose the emotions, the whole sensitivity, the whole touch, the texture, the smell, the shape of things made by hand," he said.

The exhibition will also feature a number of large-scale works installed outside the exhibition gallery.

They include a piece entitled "Coloured House" featuring the painted timber frame of a house that was once the home of a prosperous family during the early Qing Dynasty (1644-1911).

The exhibition will run from April 7 to July 30. — AFP

MUSIC

Youth symphony vies for a Grammy with debut album



WHEN THE NEW York Youth Symphony recorded its debut album during the pandemic's dark early days, violinist Jessica Jeon was just 12 years old.

Now she and her fellow musicians are competing against some of the world's elite orchestras, including the famed Los Angeles and Berlin Philharmonics, to take home the Grammy award for best orchestral performance — the first time a youth orchestra has ever made it into the category.

"What a cool experience to have — this is my first time ever, like, recording in a studio," Jeon, now 14, said after a rehearsal. Confronted with the pandemic-forced cancellations of the symphony's customary performances at Carnegie Hall, music director Michael Repper decided to organise a recording experience for his students instead — something to mark their accomplishments despite the halt in live performance.

It was no easy feat: pandemic restrictions meant recording could only happen in smaller groups, meaning the young artists had to wear headphones and use a click track for cues, and the different parts were later synchronised.

"It was a funny story to tell my teachers, why I had to miss school a couple of days to record," said 17-year-old bassist Gregory Galand.

Recording in small groups is atypical for orchestras, but the health crisis demanded creativity while ensuring that no one contracted Covid-19 (no one did, Repper said).

"I'm very proud that we were able to engineer a way of making it happen despite the pandemic. It was a fantastic experience," the 32-year-old conductor said.

And the Grammy nomination? A cherry on top.

Noelia Carrasco, a 19-year-old cellist, is now studying music at New York University.

She called finding out that she was a Grammy nominee "so surreal."

"I had to re-read that, like twice, because I didn't really process it the first time," she said.

"It's just amazing."

- 'A BIG HONOUR' -

The untitled album was produced by Grammy winner Judith Sherman, who this year is nominated as well, as classical producer of the year.

In the wake of the 2020



police murder of George Floyd and the mass uprising that followed, the symphony decided the album would include pieces by Black composers — it features Florence Price, Valerie Coleman and Jessie Montgomery.

"I thought that it would be really important to highlight works by Black composers and works that address systemic racism from the perspective particularly of Black women," Repper said.

Violinist Jeon said that as a person of colour herself, playing music by historically under-represented composers "really strengthened my connection to the repertoire."

"I always grew up only listening to Mozart, Bach, Beethoven... all white men," she said. "And I

think that I never really grew up knowing a composer of colour."

Phoebe Ro, a 19-year-old viola player, called it "a big honour" to learn the pieces and record them.

She said Coleman's "Umoja: Anthem of Unity" was particularly meaningful.

"To be able to come back together, especially during the time of isolation, and to play and reflect the message... of unity — it was a really big honour to perform that," said Ro.

ART

Heirs sue Guggenheim over Picasso sold to flee Nazis



When Karl and Rosi Adler fled the Nazis in 1938 they sold a Pablo Picasso painting to fund their escape. Now, their descendants are suing to get it back.

Heirs of the Adlers, who were German Jews, have filed a lawsuit against New York's Guggenheim Museum, where the artwork has hung since 1978.

The plaintiffs say they are the rightful owners of Picasso's 1904 oil on canvas "Woman Ironing," and estimate it to be worth between \$100 million and \$200 million.

The Guggenheim is fighting the claim, describing it as "without merit," with the case appearing to be heading for a civil trial.

The suit, filed in a Manhattan court on January 20, says Karl Adler bought the painting in 1916 from Heinrich Thannhauser, a Jewish gallery owner in Munich.

At the time, Karl, who ran a leading leather manufacturing company, and Rosi were living "a prosperous life" in Baden-Baden, in southwest Germany.

After the Nazis came to power in 1933, they were persecuted and lost their business and financial assets.

They fled Germany in June 1938, and lived in the Netherlands, France and Switzerland while awaiting permanent visas for Argentina.

To obtain short-term visas for the European countries, the Adlers in October 1938 sold "Woman Ironing" to Thannhauser's son, Justin, who had left Germany for Paris.

They received \$1,552 (worth \$32,000 today) for the oil on canvas, nine times less than the \$14,000 that Adler had it valued at six years earlier.

The plaintiffs argue this is evidence the painting was sold under duress.

"Thannhauser was well aware of the plight of Adler and his family, and that, absent Nazi persecution, Adler would never have sold the painting when he did at such a price," reads the complaint.

Thannhauser gifted his art collection, including "Woman Ironing," to the Guggenheim following his death in 1976.

The Guggenheim said the complaint "strikingly fails to acknowledge" that the museum contacted the Adlers' son before taking ownership.

"(He) did not raise any concerns about the painting or its sale to Justin Thannhauser," the statement added.

In 2014, Thomas Bennigson, the grandson of another Adler child learned that his grandmother may have once owned the painting.

His lawyers corresponded with the Guggenheim for several years before demanding the work's return in June 2021, according to the lawsuit.

Bennigson's complaint — which lists other distant relatives, several Jewish organisations and non-profits as co-plaintiffs, was made under America's Holocaust Expropriated Art Recovery Act.

The 2016 law provides victims of Nazi persecution and their heirs the opportunity to recover works of art seized by the Nazis.

The Guggenheim said it takes restitution claims "extremely seriously" but insists it is the "rightful owner."

The museum said Adler's sale to Thannhauser "was a fair transaction between parties with a longstanding and continuing relationship" and occurred while both men were "outside of Nazi Germany." — AFP

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WEDNESDAY | FEBRUARY 1 | 2023

The beautiful canyon along Wadi Aqabat al Baytayn



By Khaled H Abdul Malak

Every time I passed by the entrance of Wadi Aqabat al Baytayn after Samayil on the way to Nizwa, I thought "Next time I will have to explore this canyon".

However, it took me many years before I finally got the chance to do it.

It was in May 2013 that I first attempted to explore the place in the company of Ahmed al Jabri. We reached the entrance of the wadi after less than a one-hour drive from Muscat, we parked our car off the highway and prepared our bags with our climbing gear, food and drinks and started walking towards the enigmatic wadi.

Looking from a distance, we had the impression that it would be difficult, but once we got closer, we realised that it was quite easy.

We saw the remaining walls of an old settlement just at the entrance of the canyon. After a short walk involving bouldering, we got to a very steep rocky slope that we climbed without any ropes. We reached a small pool that we managed to avoid by doing a traverse and climbing further up. I set up an anchor at the top of a short climb to make it easier the next time I'd come with my family.

Then we progressed on a second-long rocky steep ramp after which we reached a small waterfall and had to set up a second anchor to be able to go further. At this point, we had to climb out of the canyon as we were blocked by another waterfall.

Soon after we reached the wadi bed and managed to progress a few hundred metres before being obstructed by another waterfall. It was then that we decided to go back to our car as the sky got darker and we did not want to take any chances or risk getting blocked in the wadi in case it started to rain.

The next day I went to the wadi with my family. It was full of rainwater and I said to myself that Ahmed and I made a wise decision by leaving the canyon the day before. This time I set up a new anchor at the second waterfall and baptized the drop "Happy birthday" as it was my daughter's birthday and she was the first one to abseil down the waterfall.

In the middle of the second ramp, we stopped for lunch in the shade of a shallow cave. There, a swallow had built his nest on the cave's roof with mud.

A few months later, I went back with climbers Darryl and Joanne and my good friend Ahmed and managed to push through a few more hundred metres of the canyon after overcoming two other waterfalls.

In the future, we decided to try to find a way to reach the top of the mountain from where we could have a fantastic view of the Ghubra Bowl (wadi Mistal) and come back down through the canyon bed.

While returning to the car that day we came across Hilal al Rashdi, a herder who had his goats grazing in the mountain. He told us that there was an easier way to reach the top of the mountain. That made me look forward to a new adventure in the wadi!

