

HM greetings to Namibia President

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Dr Hage Geingob of the Republic of Namibia on his country's Independence Anniversary. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of good health and happiness to President Dr Hage Geingob. His Majesty also wished the people of Namibia further progress and prosperity. – ONA



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'STREET FIGHTER' PEREZ LEADS RED BULL SWEEP



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OMAN ATTRACTS RO 79M WORTH OF INVESTMENTS IN FISH FARMING SECTOR IN 2022



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AN EDIFICE THAT ENHANCES KNOWLEDGE OF CHILDREN



87% rise in flight traffic through Muscat airport

58% INCREASE IN CIVIL AVIATION AUTHORITY'S REVENUES

VINOD NAIR
[@vinot_nair](#)

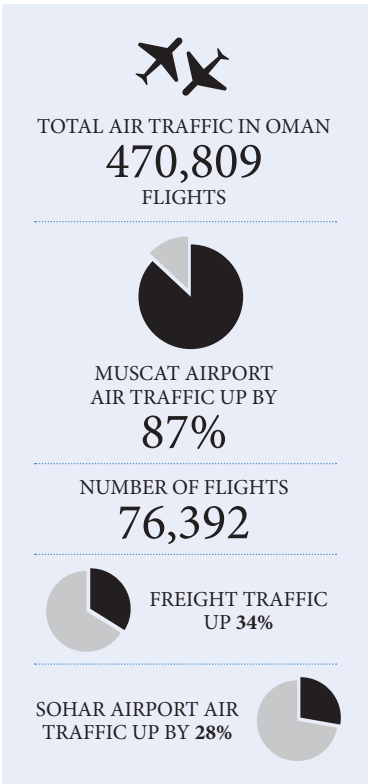
The civil aviation sector has achieved satisfactory recovery rates at all airports of the Sultanate of Oman in 2022 after the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This was revealed by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) on Monday during its media briefing. It also revealed the executive position of the CAA strategic plans, the achievements during 2022, and its plan for 2023.

The aviation sector witnessed a noticeable increase in terms of passenger traffic, freight traffic, and the number of inbound and outbound flights compared to 2021, Eng Nayef bin Ali al Abri, CAA Chairman, said.

He referred to the increase in flight traffic through Muscat International Airport during 2022 by 87 per cent, as the number of flights reached 76,392. The number of passengers also increased by 129 per cent to stand at more than 8,602,000, and freight traffic rose by 34 per cent.

Al Abri said that the total revenues of the CAA during 2022 stood at RO 72,043,292 as



it witnessed an increase of RO 26,430,818 comprising 58 per cent. It also witnessed an increase in the expense rate, which stood at about RO 221,000, comprising 1 per cent compared to 2021.

He elaborated that Sohar Airport witnessed an increase in air traffic during 2022 by 28 per cent, and an increase in the number of

passengers by 122 per cent. Duqm Airport witnessed an increase as well in the number of passengers by 37 per cent, while aircraft traffic decreased by 21 per cent.

Al Abri said that there has been an increase in the number of open skies agreements over 2022, reaching 66 agreements with 122 countries. The total number of flight permits reached 10,962.

CAA chairman further said that among the authority's achievements during 2022 were the adoption of the national plan for aviation safety, the project to install a hydrogen generator, the establishment of a new automatic meteorological station in the Wilayat of Barka, and identifying tsunami risk areas for the cell broadcast system.

Al Abri pointed out that the total air traffic in Oman during 2022 reached 470,809 flights, and the total number of aircraft crossing the Oman's airspace reached 386,391 flights.

He added that the renewed aircraft in Oman during 2022 stood at 83 airplanes, the newly registered aircraft 11, and 83 licenses issued for activities of unmanned aircraft.



Russian President Vladimir Putin with China's President Xi Jinping at the Kremlin in Moscow on Monday. – AFP

Putin 'ready' to discuss China's Ukraine plan

MOSCOW: President Vladimir Putin told his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping on Monday that Russia was open to discussing China's proposals to end the fighting in Ukraine at the start of high-stakes talks in the Kremlin.

"We are always open to negotiations," Putin told Xi, who was on his first visit to Moscow since the start of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine last year.

"We will certainly discuss all these issues, including your

initiatives which we treat with respect, of course," Putin said.

The summit between the Russian president and the Chinese leader comes as China seeks to portray itself as a neutral party in the Ukraine conflict.

Xi's three-day trip also serves as a show of support for Putin. Shortly after landing at Moscow's Vnukovo Airport, Xi said his visit would give "new momentum" to Chinese-Russian ties. **SEE ALSO P6**

Honourable Lady greets on Mother's Day

MUSCAT: Her Highness The Honourable Lady Assayida Ahd Abdullah Hamed al Busaidi, Spouse of the Sultan of Oman, has addressed a message of congratulations on the occasion of Mother's Day, which falls on March 21 every year. The message reads as follows: "A mother represents a symbol of sacrifices and a source of mercy. Her resourcefulness is inexhaustible; awards countless; blessings great; bounties plentiful and status lofty. Allah the Almighty honoured the mother and our Prophet advised us to do the same. It has thus become incumbent on us to take care of the mother, honour her and respect her.

"On the occasion of Mother's Day, we are delighted to send our heartfelt sentiments of appreciation and gratitude to every mother who worked hard to provide a decent, comfortable life to the family. Our greetings to every mother who exerted sincere efforts and remained vigilant in upbringing her children and endured hardships for their wellbeing so that they could become loyal in serving their countries and all of humanity. Happy Mother's Day." – ONA



GDP EXCEEDS RO 44 BILLION

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at current prices increased by 30 per cent by the end of December 2022 to reach RO 44,089.5 million compared to RO 33,909.8 million by the end of December 2021, according to the latest data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and information (NCSI).

This rise is attributed mainly to the surge in oil activities at the end of December 2022 by 61.6 per cent to stand at RO 16,619.7 million compared to RO 10,287.5 million in December 2021.

Non-oil activities rose by 16.9 per cent from RO 24,734.9 million by the end of December 2021 to RO 28,925.9 million by the end of December 2022.

Further, industrial activities went up by 23.5 per cent from RO 6,882.3 million by the end of December 2021 to RO 8,501.9 million by the end of December 2022. — ONA

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■ ROYAL OFFICE MINISTER RECEIVES AMBASSADOR OF SYRIA



MUSCAT: Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received here on Monday Dr Idris Maya, Ambassador of the Syrian Arab Republic to the Sultanate of Oman. During the meeting, the two sides reviewed the march of relations between Oman and Syria. They also touched on joint areas of cooperation and means of enhancing them. Furthermore, the two sides discussed several matters of mutual interest.

SHURA DEBATES DRAFT SOCIAL PROTECTION LAW

MUSCAT: Majlis Ash'shura discussed the draft Social Protection Law referred by the government as a matter of urgency on Monday during an ordinary session held under the chairmanship of Khalid bin Hilal al Maawali.

The Majlis stated that the draft social protection law included many provisions explaining the most important justifications that prompted the design of the social protection system. It said that the new law takes into account the challenges facing the retirement programmes and the current social security system that need to be developed to benefit from best international practices in this aspect.

The chairman of Majlis Ash'shura underscored the importance of unifying efforts and directing capabilities to achieve the public interest, voicing his hope for the presentation of visions



and proposals that are compatible with national goals during the discussion of the draft law.

The draft law contains seven the first of which provides definitions and general provisions while the second chapter deals with the

branches of social protection benefits namely benefit of the elderly, benefit of people with disabilities, the benefit of orphans and widows, childhood benefit and the benefit of family income support.

The third chapter deals with the branches of social insurance namely: the elderly, disability and death insurance, a programme that will substitute the existing retirement programme, the work injury and occupational disease insurance, job security insurance, the sick leave and uncommon leave insurance and maternity leave insurance.

The fourth chapter deals with the saving system, the fifth chapter deals with supplementary programmes, the sixth chapter deals with administrative fines and penalties and the seventh chapter deals with transitional provisions.

The session reviewed the report of the team formed by the Majlis's standing committees which included many observations and proposals on the amendment of some articles of the law. The session listened to opinions and proposals made by the members on the items of the draft law.

National Museum inaugurates 'Oman Gallery' in Nairobi

NAIROBI: The National Museum inaugurated on Sunday 'Oman Gallery' at the Nairobi National Museum in the Republic of Kenya, as an embodiment of the common history and cultural heritage between the two countries.

The gallery, titled 'Oman-Kenya: A Collective Memory', is divided into four main sections, which are: Ancient South Arabian Kingdom, Omani influence at the East African Coast, development of Omani Kingdoms and dynasties, and key Omani personalities at the East African Coast.

Jamal bin Hassan al Moosawi, Secretary-General of the National Museum, said that the opening of Oman Gallery at the Nairobi National Museum comes within the framework of cultural diplomacy pursued by the National Museum, and based on the memorandum of partnership that was signed last year in 2022 at



Muscat.

Al Moosawi added that the exhibited collections focus on the cultural and historical aspects of the Sultanate of Oman and its strong historical relations with the East African coast, which trace their roots back to the first century all the way to the present day. The collection, he said, embodies the impact of Omani integration into the East African coast in terms of economic, social, cultural and

political aspects, which led to the establishment of cities along the East African coast.

On his turn, Said bin Mohammed al Amri, Charge D'affaires of Oman's Embassy in Nairobi said that the inauguration of the gallery is the result of the efforts and the cooperation between the two countries. The move, he added, contributes to boosting the deep rooted bilateral relations by displaying and

preserving mutual heritage.

Oman Gallery celebrates the historical and cultural ties between the Sultanate of Oman and the Republic of Kenya. It offers a glimpse into the various kingdoms and dynasties in Southern Arabia and East Africa, with a reflection on notable Omani personalities.

The gallery includes a collection of selected artefacts, including a compilation of Prose in Marine Sciences "Sufalia, Moa'lakiya and Alttayiya" by the author and copyist Ahmed bin Majid al Saadi dating back to the 16th century. The manuscript provides an in-depth understanding of the sciences of the navigator Ahmed bin Majid al Saadi on the coast of East Africa, In addition to a lithograph depicting Swahili people from the book "Documents on History, Geography and Trade in East Africa" by Charles Guillain dating back to 1857.

SMEs get a boost with strategic OIA partnership



AFRAH AL BALUSHI
@Afrahalbalushia

Six cooperation agreements were signed to develop, sustain and grow the business of small and medium enterprises with companies affiliated with the Oman Investment Authority.

The Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority is working on three broad programmes — Business opportunities allocation; Business opportunity platform and Supplier Registration.

The programmes are in addition to the Development of 'Specialised consulting institutions' in the field of human resources, with a total of six cooperation agreements.

These programmes are to develop, sustain and grow the business of small and medium enterprises registered with the Authority, within the 'In-Country Value' programmes whose importance lies in creating a competitive environment that supports innovation and technology, provides practical and scientific opportunities for national cadres, and provides an opportunity for small and

medium enterprises to exploit investments and develop supply chains.

"Cooperation with the Omani Investment Authority is one of the important aspects of improving the business environment and enhancing the local added value by providing space for small and medium enterprises in the range of business and investment opportunities that touch the objectives of the authority to achieve its goals, Mohammad bin Ali al Badri, Assistant Director of the In-Country Value Department at the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority, said.

He added that work is ongoing to improve cooperation across broader scales, represented in accrediting small and medium enterprises with the agency's companies, rehabilitating and enabling them to become the reference basis for local business, which in turn will contribute to enhancing the value of the gross domestic product and providing job opportunities for Omani youth in various economic sectors.

Onsor Technologies enables zSpace with 3D technology

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

Onsor Technologies, a leader in the technology industry, has enabled zSpace, a provider of augmented and virtual reality solutions, with a revolutionary 3D technology that requires no glasses. The companies have partnered to bring this innovation to the world, starting with the US market and then expanding to the Sultanate of Oman and beyond.

This cutting-edge technology allows users to experience 3D without the need for cumbersome glasses, providing an immersive and realistic visual experience that enhances creativity and imagination. Onsor Technologies developed the technology, which features a specially designed screen and cameras that monitor eye movement, creating a 3D image that aligns with the user's field of vision.

The partnership agreement between Onsor Technologies and zSpace was signed on March 20, 2023, at the InterContinental Hotel in Muscat, Oman. The event featured a presentation from both companies and a live demonstration of the device equipped with the new technology.

Onsor Technologies' contribution to this partnership has enabled zSpace to provide an innovative solution to the market.



The technology will improve training processes across various industries, such as oil and gas, manufacturing, and defence, providing a realistic training experience that simulates real-life equipment without the need for 3D glasses. Additionally, the technology will be used to enhance educational and entertainment experiences.

Onsor Technologies is committed to providing advanced solutions that enhance people's lives and make the world a better place. The launch of this new technology demonstrates their dedication to revolutionising the industry and solidifying their position as innovators in the tech world.

With the US market as the starting point, this technology will soon be available in Oman and other countries, providing new possibilities and opportunities across various industries. Onsor Technologies and zSpace are at the forefront of this groundbreaking technology, and their partnership promises to bring further advancements in the future.



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Air bilateral agreement with EU in final stages

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

Boosting air connectivity between the Sultanate of Oman and the rest of the world will be one of the priorities of the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) this year.

Speaking to the Observer, Eng Nayef bin ali Al Abri, Chairman of CAA, said, "Currently, we have 122 bilateral agreements with countries. We are hoping to finish negotiations with the European

Union (28 countries) and ten more pacts within this coming month and during this year." Al Abri said that bilateral talks are under way with the Indian government to increase the capacity and that he is optimistic about a positive outcome.

"The conclusion of the air bilateral agreement especially the EU will benefit the airlines of the Sultanate of Oman and also those respective countries, apart from offering direct air link from the



Eng Nayef bin Ali al Abri, CAA

Sultanate of Oman." Earlier making a presentation, he said one of the major decisions taken in 2022 was that of granting permission to re-operate 737 Max aircraft, which was suspended in 2019 following two fatal crashes.

The revenues of CAA increased by RO 26.4 million or 58 per cent in 2022 while there was a movement of 470,809 flights, and the number of aircraft using the Omani airspace was 386. Among others, the cost to rehabilitate the

southern runway and taxiways of Muscat International Airport has been over RO21 million with the project stated to be completed by the end of this year.

The CEO said that among the most significant projects the authority is currently on is the implementation of the first phase of Musandam Airport Construction (consultation and studies).

There was an increase of 87 per cent in aircraft traffic through

Muscat International Airport in 2022 with 76,392 flights ferrying more than 8,602,000 passengers. The freight traffic also grew by 34 per cent.

Suhar Airport witnessed an increase in air traffic by 28 per cent and an increase in the number of passengers by 122 per cent.

Duqm Airport witnessed an increase in the number of passengers by 37 per cent, while aircraft traffic decreased by 21 per cent.

■ COMMANDER OF UNIFIED MARITIME OPERATION CENTRE VISITS MSC



MUSCAT: Commodore Mishal Jaber al Khalifa, Commander of the Unified Maritime Operation Centre and his accompanying delegation on Monday visited the Maritime Security Centre (MSC). Upon his arrival, the guest was greeted by the Acting Head of the MSC. The guest was briefed on the roles and tasks carried out by the centre in maintaining the safety of the maritime environment. He also toured the centre's facilities and viewed its latest equipment and technologies that are used in carrying out its national duties. – ONA

Oman, Unicef join hands for child safety

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

The Sultanate of Oman, in association with UNICEF, is gearing up for the launch of a new nationwide campaign to promote wellbeing among children. The campaign, which aims to raise awareness through broadcast, print and social media, is led by a Task Force comprising officials from the Ministry of Information, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Development and the National Centre for Statistics and Information, as well as UNICEF. It is part of a broader initiative to encourage positive parenting practices in the country.



Young people are key to the future of our nation and it's vital that they are supported from very early on in life, specifically by safeguarding their rights, ensuring quality social well-being services, and providing those with disabilities adequate social

protection. On these terms, the campaign has been developed in response to an Oman-based study on key behaviours regarding early childhood education, inclusion, and adult supervision. It will focus on reinforcing the learning and social benefits of early childhood

education and raise awareness of the services available to allow more children to enjoy fulfilling lives and their rights in society.

A ratified member of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child since 1996, the Sultanate of Oman is amongst the top-ranking Arab countries in child protection and one of the leading countries that commit to providing children with education, healthcare and adequate protection.

The Ministry of Social Development hotline is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to help eliminate violence against children. To report any child-related incident one can dial 1555, or 1100 for the Child Protection Hotline.

"We are delighted to be working on this myON pilot with the Renaissance team. We feel that myON will help our students to enhance their English competence and love of



reading. We are so impressed with the engagement that has already been shown by our students, teachers and supervisors and feel this will lead to a successful first phase of our partnership," commented Salim bin Mohammed al Kharousi, Director of the Department of Human Sciences Curriculum Development, MoE.

Joan Mill, Group Managing Director of Renaissance International commented, "Renaissance is proud to be working with the Omani Ministry of Education and to mark the start of this exciting programme featuring myON. Oral reading fluency is an essential part of literacy development and growth. During this programme, we look forward to helping teachers across schools better understand the significant benefits of our platform, enabling them to not just monitor the reading progress of their students, but also successfully instil a love for reading overall."

87% rise in flight traffic through Muscat airport

FROM P1

He mentioned that among the most important projects and programmes that the CAA is working on during 2023 are the implementation of the first phase of construction of Musandam Airport project (consultancy studies), the rehabilitation of the southern runway at Muscat International Airport, and the updating of the National Civil Aviation Strategy 2040.

As for air fares, the CAA chairman, told Oman News Agency (ONA) that there are currently some incentives for citizens in domestic flights, such as preferential prices that exist and are applied whether on Oman Air or SalamAir. He hoped that new alliances to be made between Oman Air and SalamAir.

The competition pursued by the CAA represented in the introduction of amphibious aircraft, which would reduce air

fares, he added.

Abdullah bin Rashid al Khadouri, Director General of Meteorology at the CAA, said that "Muzn" programme seeks to upgrade the early warning system, qualify and train the national human cadres technically and scientifically, and raise the efficiency, accuracy and quality of warnings, alerts, meteorological services and early warning.

He added that among the programme's projects are the modernisation of the satellite system, the numerical prediction system, the valley (wadi) overflow prediction project and the installation of Muscat radar, which is expected to be completed in May 2023.

Mubarak bin Saleh al Ghailani, General Supervisor of Air Navigation at the CAA, said that the "Irtiqaa" programme seeks to raise the compliance rate in aviation safety and security indicators.



The programme is concerned with developing air navigation through modernising air traffic management systems and improving air reconnaissance and communications systems, he added.

Hamid bin Ahmed al Barashdi, Director General of Strategic

Planning at the CAA, said that the "Ithmaar" programme aims to enhance the investment field in the civil aviation sector, maximise the benefit from infrastructure and contribute to the gross domestic product.

He mentioned that "Nomu" or "growth" programme is concerned

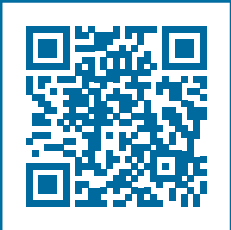
with the national strategy for civil aviation. It aims to review the civil aviation strategy in order to support its alignment with objectives of Oman Vision 2040 and the integrated planning between the components of the sector in a bid to raise the level of operational efficiencies, quality

and traffic growth.

Zahraa bint Saif al Manjiyah, Director General of Support Services at the CAA, said that the "Kafa'aat" or "competency" project aims to build strategic partnerships with public sector institutions and government companies, and to build and develop human capacities in specialised and rare jobs.

On her turn, Munira bint Mohammed al Raisiyah, Director of Information Technology at the CAA said that the "digitisation" programme is concerned with digital transformation in the authority.

There are several strategic objectives of the programme that include raising the ranking of the Sultanate of Oman in evaluating the e-services development index and ensuring the sustainability and continuity of the digital business environment within the authority, she said. **(With ONA inputs)**



R A M A D H A N

DON'T CHANGE DOSAGE WITHOUT DOCTOR'S ADVICE

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
 @AfrahAlBalushia

IN a couple of days, the holy month of Ramadhan is going to start. It raises questions among those who are under medication for some disease or the other. Experts advise not to stop medication and not to meddle with the dose without doctors' consultation.

The Ministry of Health, through the campaign 'I and My Medicine in the month of Ramadhan', is seeking to know how to use medicines in the month of Ramadhan. The programme aims to educate citizens about the correct use of medicines in the blessed month, in order to overcome the negative aspects of using medicine during fasting and to maintain proper health.

The programme also aims to avoid any complications that may result from fasting for people who suffer from chronic diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart diseases.

The pharmacist must also be consulted, as they play a key role in providing personalised advice to patients to ensure that they receive the best information about treatment options and adjustments in dose timing.

Some patients are afraid of using certain medications during the daytime, which in turn affects their fasting. Therefore, it is necessary to recognise that all medications that reach the digestive system, through the mouth, nose, or intravenous injection, invalidate the fast in Ramadhan, and they include: oral medications, pills, and tablets. Oral, intravenous feeding tubes, and nasal sprays.

GENERAL TIPS

There are also general tips for the patients for the safe use of medicines during the holy month of Ramadhan. Medicines that are taken in a single daily dose do not need to be modified. Single-dose medications can be shifted from morning to evening. These modifications must be discussed with the doctor or pharmacist, through which it is possible to assess any risks that may arise due to shifting the dose to the evening, given the accompanying adjustments in sleeping and eating habits.

Similarly, Dr Hamood Sawafy, Buraimi University, says, "It is clearly important to consult with your medical doctor before making any changes to your medication regimen during the holy month of Ramadhan. Generally, if you are taking prescription medications, it is important to consult with your doctor to discuss whether any adjustments need to be made to the

dosing schedule during the fasting holy month. It is also advisable to time your medication doses to coincide with iftar or Suhoor for convenience. Additionally, if you are taking over-the-counter medications or supplements, be sure to check with your healthcare provider about any restrictions during fasting hours"

For medicines that are taken twice daily, the morning dose can be taken before the pre-dawn meal and the evening dose after Suhoor. For medications that are taken in three or more daily doses, it should be discussed for the possibility of changing the medication with a doctor and using other dosage forms such as extended-release forms, or switching to two doses per day.

CHANGE IN DOSAGE

According to Dr Rohil Raghavan, Burjeel Hospital, "Medicines ideally should be taken up on a case to case basis. For example, diabetic patients need to meet a physician to consider a change in dosage during the holy month. For those who are taking medicines for pain, need to re-evaluate the timings in which they are taken."

All must always remember the tolerance and ease of the religion of Islam, as it is permitted to break the fast in the case of a patient whose fasting is a reason for increasing his illness, delaying his recovery, or a reason for bringing him trouble and it is possible for him to fast what missed on other day.

Dr Viresh Chopra, Oman Dental College, says, "Ramadhan is a warm, community celebration that involves a month of fasting and worship with a goal to improve the spiritual and physical state and to fortify the relationship with God. Caring for patients who celebrate the month of Ramadhan represents a unique undertaking for healthcare professionals, including pharmacists."

"Individuals on chronic medications should adjust medication schedules so they can be taken between the evening meal of Iftar (sunset) and the morning meal of Suhoor (dawn). But this should strictly be done with the advice of their doctor. For medications taken multiple times during the day, recommended strategies include choosing long-acting formulations (e.g., sustained release) or changing dosing regimens to once or twice daily. Pharmacists also have a big role to play when providing over the counter drugs. While serving patients who observe fasting during the holy month of Ramadhan, pharmacists should give special consideration to the safety of fasting and address required changes in pharmacotherapy and lifestyle to avoid potential hazards of fasting," he says.





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MoSD minister reviews projects in Al Dhahirah

MUSCAT: Dr Laila bint Ahmed al Najar, Minister of Social Development, met with Najeeb bin Ali al Rawas, Governor of Al Dhahirah, and members of the Municipal Council during her visit along with the accompanying delegation of ministry officials to Al Dhahirah which comes in continuation of the field visits of the minister to the various governorates of Oman.

During the meeting, the ministry's programmes approved during the 10th Five-Year Plan were reviewed, in line with Oman Vision 2040.

They also reviewed possible areas of cooperation benefiting from the ministry's services, and enhance the partnership between various institutions.

During the visit to the

headquarters of the General Directorate of Social Development in Al Dhahirah, Dr Laila met with the staff from the various departments and divisions of the Directorate, and discussed the efforts and actions undertaken in the Directorate, which reflects positively on the ministry's performance, urging facilitation and simplification of procedures for auditors.

During her tour along with an accompanying delegation at the Al Wafa Center for the Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities in Ibri, and meeting with its administrative and rehabilitation staff, they were briefed on the efforts and actions it provides for the groups to serve different disabilities and ages.

The Minister of Social Development also met with



the heads of Omani women's associations and representatives of professional associations and charitable teams in the wilayats.

The meeting also stressed the importance of empowering women legally, economically, culturally, and in other fields, which will benefit the women's associations.

Proposals for the development and support of professional associations and charitable teams supervised by social development committees were also discussed, and ways of cooperation, coordination, integration and empowerment between social development departments, Omani women's associations, professional associations, charitable teams, zakat committees and other agencies and institutions in the governorate were also discussed.

Project to monitor change in salinity of groundwater executed

SALALAH: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources is implementing a project to measure the salinity of groundwater in 1,159 wells distributed along the Al Batinah coast and the Salalah Plains.

The project monitors the change in water salinity periodically every five years to see the extent of the impact resulting from the interaction between fresh and salt water.

The ministry has started implementing the project in the Governorate of Dhofar, while it will be implemented in the governorates of North and South Al Batinah in the months of May and June.

Work on the project will be completed during July in the Governorate of Muscat.

During the third quarter of this year, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources will analyse field and laboratory results and draw maps that show the extent of seawater overlap and the effect of salinity on agricultural ranges in the aforementioned governorates.

It is worth noting that the project aims to protect water wealth and develop its resources, whether quantitative or qualitative, and confront the phenomenon of seawater overlapping in the coastal parts.

RAFO recruits graduate



MUSCAT: The Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) celebrated the graduation of new batch of soldiers at the Military Parade Field at Adam Air Base, under the auspices of Mohammed bin Nasser al Rasbi and in the presence of Air Vice Marshal Khamis bin Hammad al Ghafri, Commander of the Royal Air Force of Oman.

The celebration began with the performance of the military salute to the guest and the playing of the peace of honour. The chief guest inspected the front row of the graduates, after which the graduates presented a military parade with a slow march accompanied by military musical instrumentals of the music of the Royal Air Force of Oman.

The chief guest later presented the honorary prizes to the recipients in appreciation of the results they achieved. Soldier Salem bin Mohammed bait Katheer bagged the first place at the general level of the course, and Soldier Nabel bin Imad Anbar bagged the first place in the military infantry, while Soldier Khalid bin Khalifa came first in shooting light weapons contest. — ONA

Winners of RGO musical contest feted



MUSCAT: The Royal Guard of Oman (RGO) celebrated the conclusion of the 2023 Saraya Musical Performances Competition, under the auspices of Major General Salim bin Ali al Hosani, RGO Commander.

During the ceremony, the chief guest watched a visual presentation about the stages of the competition and the musical performances that were presented by the teams taking part.

Major General Salim handed over the prizes to the musical groups which bagged the first places at the end of the competition.

The level of prize distribution included the general level, military bands, bagpipes and

drums competition, military infantry competition, and the individual competitions.

First Sergeant Mohammed bin Naseeb al Batahari won the first place at the general level, while Sergeant Major Moaz bin Bashir al Nubi bagged the first place in the formations of the musical performances.

The establishment of this competition comes with the aim of enhancing the technical levels of the Royal Guard of Oman's musical bands, and enhancing the capabilities of the participants, enabling them to compete in regional and international musical competitions and performances. — ONA

Clubs competition for cultural creativity ends in Nizwa

AMAL AL RIYAMI
NIZWA, MARCH 20

The Department of Culture, Sports and Youth in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, represented by the Cultural Creations Team, recently celebrated the conclusion of the cultural creativity competition of the clubs involving Al Dakhiliyah and Al Wusta governorates for the year 2022-2023 at the Nizwa Cultural Centre.

The ceremony was under the auspices of Ahmed bin Salim bin Shams al Hajri, Director General of Nizwa Industrial City (Madayn), in the presence of Ahmed bin Mohammed al Harrasi, Director of the Department of Culture, Sports and Youth in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. The celebration was also attended by general directors, departments of government agencies, and club



youth committees.

The ceremony began with an introduction by Afnan bint Khalfan bin Masoud al Mayahiyah. She spoke about the programme and its importance to various groups of society.

The ministry seeks to activate

the cultural role of clubs through a set of programmes and activities that touch the aspirations of young people. These activities help build knowledge and develop creative skills.

Mohammed bin Hamiar al Rashdi, head of the work team,

explained the importance of the competition for the target age groups. The activities were divided into 10 fields from cultural, literary, technical, innovation, and performing, to visual arts.

Al Rashdi also talked about the stages of the competition, which

passes through three main stages at the level of the club, then the governorate, and the Sultanate of Oman.

The head of the work team also mentioned that the number of participants in the governorate reached 1,671 male and female participants.

A short video was shown on how the competitions are implemented at the club and governorate levels. Which gave a wonderful impression of the efforts made and the talents involved in various fields.

Poet Hamad al Mazrouei, who won first place at the governorate level, presented a poem, while Al Munther al Khasibi, winner of the interior and central governorates, provided sports commentary. A chanting and musical performance followed.

The Director General of

Nizwa Industrial City (Madayn) honoured the winners at the level of Al Dakhiliyah and Al Wusta governorates in all areas of the competition.

In sports commentary, Al Munther bin Salim al Khasibi from Al Bashaer Club bagged first place. In the field of popular poetry, the winner was Hamad bin Said al Mazrouei from Al Hamra Club, the winner in the field of chanting was Al Baraa bin Ahmed al Sayadi from Bahla Club, and the winner in the field of music was Khaled bin Ali al Qasimi from Bahla Club. Cultural competition (Omani women) winners were Ghuson bint Hamoud al Amriyah, Ashwaq bint Ahmed al Fahdiah and Bayan bint Zayed al Amriyah from Izki club.

In theatre, the play by Bahla Club got first place and second place by Nizwa Club.



■ SPRING FESTIVAL OF NOWRUZ



A woman jumps over a bonfire during a rally to celebrate Nowruz, which marks the arrival of spring, in Istanbul, Turkiye. – AFP

Japan PM says India ‘indispensable’ in ensuring free Indo-Pacific

NEW DELHI: Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Monday called India vital to ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific after talks with his counterpart.

Speaking in New Delhi after meeting Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Kishida laid out plans for billions of dollars in investments in infrastructure and other sectors across the region.

“I have described Japan’s plan to develop a free and open Indo-Pacific. To achieve this, India is an indispensable partner,” Kishida said.

“Japan will strengthen coordination with the US, Australia, UK, Canada, Europe and elsewhere. Of course, India is indispensable.”

Japan is boosting military spending and is carrying out more joint exercises with other countries, including India, which has also



Japan’s Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (L) shakes hands with his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi after attending a joint media briefing at the Hyderabad House in New Delhi. – AFP

deepened defence cooperation with Western nations.

In June, Kishida had said Japan would help train 800 maritime security personnel and provide at least \$2 billion to other countries to buy patrol boats and build up infrastructure as part of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)

strategy. Kishida said on Monday that FOIP’s scope would expand to include new areas like climate change, cybersecurity and food security.

It would also direct public and private capital worth \$75 billion towards Indo-Pacific infrastructure by 2030.

Kishida’s visit came less than a fortnight after Modi hosted his Australian counterpart Anthony Albanese for talks that also covered worries about China.

Kishida added that he had invited Modi and the leaders of other countries in the region — including South Korea, Indonesia and Vietnam — as well as Brazil to a G7 summit in May.

India currently holds the rotating presidency of the Group of 20, which also includes China and Russia.. — AFP

Xi arrives in Moscow to discuss Ukraine conflict

MOSCOW: Xi Jinping hailed his landmark visit to Moscow on Monday as giving “new momentum” to Chinese-Russian ties ahead of talks with Vladimir Putin on Beijing’s proposals to stop the fighting in Ukraine.

The summit between the Russian president and the Chinese leader comes as China seeks to portray itself as a neutral party in the Ukraine conflict.

Landing at Moscow’s Vnukovo Airport, Xi was greeted by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Chernyshenko on a red carpet as a military brass band played the countries’ anthems, Russian state media showed.

“I am confident the visit will be fruitful and give new momentum to the healthy and stable development of Chinese-Russian relations,” Xi was quoted by Russian news agencies as saying shortly after landing.

“In a world of volatility and transformation, China will continue to work with Russia to safeguard the international system with the UN at its core,” he said.

Xi described China and Russia as “good neighbours” and “reliable partners” and said the two would work together to defend “true multilateralism”.

The two leaders are due to discuss China’s 12-point position paper on the Ukraine conflict, which includes a call for dialogue and respect for all countries’ territorial sovereignty.

“One way or another, issues raised in plan for Ukraine will be touched upon during the negotiations. Comprehensive explanations will be given by



China’s President Xi Jinping walks past honour guards during a welcoming ceremony at Moscow’s Vnukovo airport. – AFP

President Putin” of the Russian position, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Putin and Xi are set to have an “informal” one-on-one meeting and dinner.

Putin has welcomed Beijing’s statements on Ukraine as being indicative of a willingness to play a “constructive role” in ending the conflict.

A day before Xi’s arrival, a defiant Putin went to the Russian-held Ukrainian city of Mariupol — his first visit to territory captured from Kyiv since Moscow’s forces pushed across the border in February 2022.

Beijing said on Monday the ICC should avoid what it called “politicisation and double standards” and respect the principle of immunity for heads of state.

The court should “uphold an objective and impartial stance” and “respect the immunity of heads of state from jurisdiction under international law”, foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin told a regular briefing.

The solution to the Ukraine conflict, he added, remained “dialogue and negotiation”.

Beijing and Moscow have drawn closer in recent years under a partnership that has served as a diplomatic bulwark against the West.

“No single country should dictate the international order,” Xi wrote in a Russian newspaper article published on Monday.

“China has all along upheld an objective and impartial position based on the merits of the issue, and actively promoted peace talks,” he added. — AFP

Donor conference seeks to rally quake aid for Turkiye, Syria

BRUSSELS: Aid organisations urged international donors at a funding conference in Brussels on Monday to step up their support for the victims of the devastating earthquake that hit Turkiye and Syria last month.

The catastrophic 7.8-magnitude quake flattened entire cities, killing more than 50,000 people across southeastern Turkiye and parts of war-torn Syria.

Millions were displaced and a preliminary estimate from the United Nations says the damage in Turkiye alone could amount to more than \$100 billion.

The United Nations Development Programme warned

earlier this month about the poor level of response to a call made in mid-February for urgent funding.

One aid group, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), called on donors to at least ensure that the UN’s emergency appeal for \$1 billion for Turkiye and \$397 million for Syria are fully funded.

The UN says the appeal for Turkiye has so far only been 16 per cent fulfilled, while the figure for Syria stands at 72 per cent.

“Over a month since the earthquake, the situation in affected regions remains desperate,” said Tanya Evans, IRC country director for Syria.

“With many homes damaged



The President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen speaks during an International Donors Conference at the EU headquarters in Brussels. – AFP

or destroyed, many people are left with no choice but to sleep in overcrowded and under-resourced collective shelters,” she said.

The European Union, which is hosting the conference in coordination with Turkiye’s government, has said it plans to make a “significant pledge”

for further relief, recovery and reconstruction.

It has urged the rest of the international community to commit funds “in line with the scale and magnitude of the damage”.

Germany has said it will double its support for the quake victims to 240 million euros, and France promised an additional 12 million euros.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has admitted “shortcomings” in the government’s initial response, will address the meeting via video link.

International rescue teams and aid flowed quickly to Turkiye. UN

investigators say the area became the “epicentre of neglect” as the warring factions and hesitancy by the international community held up desperately needed aid.

“Syria deserves the world’s solidarity and support,” said Fabrizio Carboni, Middle East director for the International Committee of the Red Cross.

“Despite these staggering needs, which have deepened after the February earthquake, our work in Syria is heavily underfunded,” he said.

The donor conference in Brussels is open to countries from the Middle East and across the globe. — AFP

SHORT TAKES

ASTANA

Kazakh ruling party wins

Kazakhstan’s ruling Amanat party won 53.9 per cent of the vote in Sunday’s snap parliamentary election, official data showed on Monday, giving President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev carte blanche to reform the oil-rich nation in line with his social justice objectives.

No opposition parties ran in the election.

Observers from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe said reforms made ahead of



the vote addressed some of the democracy watchdog’s prior recommendations and “increased choice for voter” although further changes are needed.

BANGKOK

Thai parliament dissolved for crunch election

Thailand dissolved its parliament on Monday to clear the way for an election in May, a vote set to reignite a long-running power struggle between a military-backed establishment and a political movement that has dominated elections for two decades.

King Maha Vajiralongkorn endorsed a decree to dissolve parliament, according to an announcement in the Royal Gazette on Monday, ahead of an election that must be held within



45 to 60 days.

No date has been announced, but two sources with knowledge of the matter earlier on Monday told Reuters the vote would be on May 14.

MOGADISHU

Africa drought could lead to 135 deaths a day

The record drought sweeping the Horn of Africa may lead to 135 deaths a day in Somalia between January and June this year, the health ministry said in a study.

Monday’s study used a statistical model to estimate that up to 135 Somalis could lose their lives to drought-related causes every day during the first six months of this year.

The study was commissioned by Unicef and WHO and carried out by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine



and Imperial College London. “We are racing against time to prevent deaths and save lives,” said Mamunur Rahman Malik, WHO representative to Somalia.



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In brief

■ LONDON



UK MINISTER FACES HOSTILE RETURN AFTER RWANDA TRIP

One of Britain's most senior ministers came under fire on Monday for laughing uproariously in front of a future migrant camp and asking for tips on interior design during a trip to Rwanda.

Home Secretary Suella Braverman was also criticised for taking only right-leaning media outlets on the weekend trip, refusing access to the BBC's London reporters and more liberal newspapers that have attacked her plan to resettle asylum seekers in Rwanda. Britain's Conservative government is seeking to outlaw asylum claims by all illegal arrivals and transfer them to "safe" third countries.

■ BERLIN



OBAMA TO SPEAK IN BERLIN ON MAY 3

Former US president Barack Obama plans to come to Berlin on May 3 for a discussion that is part of a European tour, the German daily Tagesspiegel reported on Monday.

Obama, 61, will appear at the Mercedes-Benz arena in the capital. The arena has a capacity of 17,000. The newspaper said it is the co-organiser of the public event. According to the arena's website, the former president will speak about "the power of leadership, an equal society, and the responsibility of us all on how to deal with unprecedented times." The former president is expected in Zurich on April 29 and in Amsterdam on May 1, the paper said.

■ NAIROBI



KENYA OPPOSITION CALLS FOR PROTESTS

Kenya's veteran opposition leader Raila Odinga called on Monday for weekly protests, as clashes erupted between police and supporters demonstrating over the country's cost-of-living crisis. "Every Monday there will be a strike, there will be a demonstration," he told crowds of chanting followers in Nairobi.

"Are you ready?" he said to cheers from his supporters. Odinga had called on Monday's demonstrations against the government of President William Ruto in protest at soaring prices of basic goods in Kenya and what he said was last year's "stolen" election. The opposition leader narrowly lost his fifth tilt at the presidency.

Macron's govt faces 'moment of truth' over pension reforms



Unionists gather in front of an entrance to the CETCO cleaning services centre, during strike action, near Le Havre, northwestern France, on Monday. — AFP

PARIS: President Emmanuel Macron's government faces two motions of no confidence in the National Assembly on Monday after it bypassed the lower house to push through a deeply unpopular overhaul of the pension system that will raise the retirement age.

Violent unrest has erupted in several cities including the capital, Paris, and trade unions have promised to intensify their strike movement, leaving Macron to face the most dangerous challenge to his authority since the "Yellow Vest" revolt. "It's not a failure, it's a total train wreck," Laurent Berger, head of the moderate CFDT trade union told newspaper Liberation.

Monday's no-confidence votes look unlikely to pass, but the result could be tight. A successful no-confidence vote would fell the government and kill the legislation, which is set to raise the retirement age by two years to 64.

Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire on Sunday called the votes "a moment of truth" for the government.

To bring down the government, Macron's opponents require the support of a majority of the 577 lawmakers, in an alliance that would need to span from the hard left to the far

Violent unrest has erupted in several cities including the capital, Paris, and trade unions have promised to intensify their strike movement, leaving Macron to face the most dangerous challenge to his authority

right. Senior officials from the conservative Les Republicains (LR) party have said they will not get behind the no-confidence motions. But there are rebels among their ranks.

One of them, Aurelien Pradie, who was removed from his post as number 2 in the party over his opposition to the pension legislation, said about 15 LR lawmakers were ready to back the tripartisan motion.

Le Monde calculated that at least 26 LR lawmakers would need to back the motion for it to succeed.

Even if the motions flop, Macron's failure to find enough support in parliament to put his pension system overhaul to a vote has undermined his reformist agenda and weakened

his leadership, observers say.

"The government would remain in place, although it would be significantly weakened, while social protests against the reform would likely continue for some weeks, which could negatively affect the French economy," Barclays said in a briefing note.

An Elabe opinion survey showed two-thirds of French people wanted the government to fall, underlining the public perception challenges Macron faces ahead.

Other surveys showed his own popularity falling to its lowest since the 2018/2019 Yellow Vest uprising, a revolt which started as a grassroots protest movement against higher diesel taxes but morphed into a broader anti-Macron rebellion.

"This is perhaps the last democratic moment for the Assembly to make the government think twice," said Frederic, a Paris resident who preferred not to give his family name.

Rolling strikes at refineries entered a 13th day. Production at the 240,000 barrels-per-day (bpd) Normandy refinery and the 119,000 bpd site at Feyzin was reduced as a blockade on shipments left storage tanks near full. — Reuters



Smoke billows from a brick factory chimney on the outskirts of Prayagraj, India. — AFP file photo

UN 'survival guide' report a stark warning on climate

PARIS: Devastating climate impacts are hitting faster than expected as the world teeters on reaching the 1.5 degree Celsius warming limit in a little over a decade, the UN said on Monday.

Temperatures seen in recent years have stoked destructive storms and flooding, crop-wilting heatwaves and deadly droughts.

But generations to come will look back on the hottest years of the 2020s as relatively cool, even if planet-warming fossil fuel emissions drop quickly, the UN's climate advisory panel said in a key report.

The 36-page "summary for policymakers" — a synthesis of six major reports since 2018 from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) — is a brutal reminder that while humanity has the tools to prevent climate catastrophe, it is still not putting them to use.

The world is currently set to reach 1.5C above pre-industrial levels — considered a safer limit to warming — in the early 2030s, which will ratchet up the severity of impacts in the near future.

But it's not too late to turn things around, the head of the IPCC said, describing the report as a "message of hope".

"We have know-how, technology, tools, financial resources — everything needed to overcome the climate problems we have known about for so long," Hoesung Lee said in a video interview.

"What's lacking at this point is a strong political will to resolve this issues once and for all."

In response to the report, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said wealthy countries aiming for carbon neutrality in 2050 or beyond should speed up their goal to as close as possible to 2040 in order to "defuse the climate time bomb."

"Humanity is on thin ice — and that ice is melting fast," the United Nations chief said in a video message as the IPCC experts group issued its latest report, which he likened to "a survival guide for humanity."

The IPCC made clear that the benefits to society and the world economy of capping global warming under two degrees Celsius outweigh economic costs.

This is true even without accounting for all the rewards of avoiding climate damages, which range from the health impacts of air pollution to reduced crop yields.

Week-long negotiations in Interlaken, Switzerland — which went two full days into overtime — were bogged down by fights over language about fossil fuels, by far the main driver of warming.

The report comes as the world has scrambled to shore up energy security following Russia's attack of Ukraine, with countries in Europe and Asia turning to heavily polluting coal.

Greenhouse gas emissions from existing fossil fuel infrastructure will be enough to push the world beyond 1.5C, without the use of emerging technology to capture and store the carbon pollution, the IPCC said. — Reuters

Finland happiest country, kindness in Ukraine grows: UN

HELSINKI: For the sixth year running, Finland was named the world's happiest country in an annual UN-sponsored index on Monday that saw acts of kindness grow in Ukraine despite the Russian war.

With thousands of lakes and near endless forests, the Nordic country is known for its extensive welfare system, high trust in authorities and low levels of inequality among its 5.5 million inhabitants.

While Ukraine's ranking improved from 98 to 92 this year, despite the Russian war, its overall score fell from 5.084 to 5.071, on a scale of zero to 10.

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, an editor of the report, said



A man visits the Alley of Heroes at a cemetery in Kharkiv, on Monday. — AFP

there had been an "extraordinary rise in fellow feeling across Ukraine" despite what the report

called a "magnitude of suffering and damage in Ukraine" since the 2022 attack. Last year "benevolence

grew sharply in Ukraine but fell in Russia," the report found, referring to acts like helping strangers or making donations.

The report also cited a "much stronger sense of common purpose, benevolence and trust in Ukrainian leadership" than after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.

Northern Europe once again dominated the top spots -- with Denmark in second place followed by Iceland.

Israel occupied fourth position, up five spots from last year.

While the same countries typically top the list each year, Baltic countries are rising rapidly towards Western European levels, the authors said. Knocking France off the 20th spot, Lithuania became

the only new country in the top 20 with Estonia in at number 31, up from 66 in 2017.

War-scarred Afghanistan, which has occupied the bottom spot on the table since 2020, saw its humanitarian crisis deepen since the Taliban government took power in 2021 following the US-led military pullout.

The World Happiness Report, first published in 2012, is based on people's own assessment of their happiness, as well as economic and social data. The report considers six key factors: social support, income, health, freedom, generosity, and absence of corruption.

It assigns a happiness score based on an average of data over a three-year period. — AFP

The joy of anticipation...

The week before Ramadhan begins there is a special energy. There is a silent mode of happiness in people's hearts. There are preparations which go on well in advance, but now it is more intense and it is predominantly in the mind too. It is a mixture of memories, nostalgia, the feeling of goodness, moments of sharing, eating together, shopping and most importantly praying and seeking peace within.

One would say why couldn't all this happen in other months too?

Muslims across the globe unanimously, if health permits, will be fasting and breaking it at the same time depending on time zones. The control on food also has an impact on the mind and temperament. Besides, there are extra prayers enriching experience of meditation and focus. That's what it is - millions of people would be focusing together for the whole month.

A friend explained how excited she is to receive the month. It is a month of goodness she said, "Because we have to think about others." It is almost a moral duty to find people who are in need. We love giving gifts to our loved ones, but is it not beautiful to provide for strangers.

Ramadhan is a month of blessings because it is a month when everyone can practice gratitude. The more we give the more we gain. Not just in comfort but in mind - the sense of contentment that no amount of wealth can guarantee.

The month is an immense opportunity to reflect and understand why intentions are so important. Actions can be mechanical in the sense of just following traditions, but to sit back and think why it has been prescribed to do the deeds listed out for the most beautiful month of the year is enriching on its own. Everything becomes meaningful.

"What is beautiful is that we are urged to help anyone and everyone, no matter where they are from," my friend said added, as we continued to discuss.

This month is holy because this is when the Holy Quran was revealed.

This is why people take time and have the opportunity to perform special prayers and read the holy book. And especially men take time to spend time at the mosques at night to pray. The rest of the year we are busy contemplating, judging and planning



Lakshmi Kothaneth @lakshmioman

The writer is a senior journalist and a radio anchor

RAMADHAN IS A MONTH OF BLESSINGS BECAUSE IT IS A MONTH WHEN EVERYONE CAN PRACTICE GRATITUDE

and here comes one month to cleanse our mind and body by refraining from food for the prescribed hours and keeping away from negative thoughts and actions through out. Surely these experiences are lessons in understanding the immense importance of intentions in our minds and sacrifice as well.

Throughout the year we are in a rush to learn new things ranging from skills to latest trends. But now here is a month to dive deep within ourselves to understand and ask the question, 'Who am I?'

"Each year I learn and experience something new," my friend said.

That is the beauty of the month, the process of fasting can be challenging but it is the benefits that people remember.

What the experts also reminds us is that while we gain health with fasting, let us not waste it with feasting. What the month teaches us is also about balancing whether it is wealth or food or time.

Because if you have been busy with appointments, deadlines and travelling, now is the time for togetherness with family members and relatives, and all age groups.

Lifestyle will change for the next four weeks. The working timings will change but the ones who are entrusted with physical labour will continue with their intensity, the farmers will continue to do their work, doctors and nurses will have to attend the patients and teachers have to give lessons with patience. Many young ones will enter the first year of fasting and learn the value of water. Most importantly everyone will enjoy the unique feeling of giving.

In other words it is a wonderful opportunity for everyone to experience.

Then of course the question remains can we sustain what we experienced and learned?

Why go that far?

We can enjoy the moment first.

There is excitement in the air - families would want new decor in their homes, tailors will get busy and kitchens will work overtime.

But the essence of the month is moderation as per the scholars.

Most importantly there could be a new you at the end of it all!

And could that be the excitement and joy of anticipation that is prevailing in the air currently?

It is time for yet another beautiful journey.

A SCENIC AREA



This photo shows people watching blossoming rapeseed flowers at Xinghua Qianduo scenic area in Taizhou, in China's eastern Jiangsu province, on Monday. – AFP

Waking up to the world's water crisis

JOYEETA GUPTA, QUENTIN GRAFTON, AROMAR REVI

The world is becoming accustomed to the drip-drip of catastrophic headlines following each new climate-driven disaster. Increasingly frequent and severe heatwaves are causing wildfires in California and widespread coral die-offs in Australia. Unprecedented floods have wreaked havoc in Pakistan, Germany, China, and New Zealand. Drought in the Horn of Africa is causing famine for millions. And this list could go on.

The common element underlying all these cataclysms is water. From the forced shutdown of nuclear reactors in France to the heavy snowfall that covered large swaths of North America in December, or the recent cholera outbreak in Lebanon, we are witnessing the symptoms of a mounting global water crisis – either too much, too little, or too dirty.

Yet water remains mostly absent from global discussions. While concerns about the geopolitical order, climate change, and the Covid-19 pandemic have understandably been in the spotlight, water is rarely discussed outside the context of humanitarian responses to local, national, or transboundary floods or droughts. This is a major blind spot: In the World Economic Forum's 2023 Global Risks Report, nine of the ten biggest risks for the next decade have a

THE FORCED SHUTDOWN OF NUCLEAR REACTORS IN FRANCE, THE HEAVY SNOWFALL THAT COVERED LARGE SWATHS OF NORTH AMERICA IN DECEMBER, AND THE RECENT CHOLERA OUTBREAK IN LEBANON ARE ALL SYMPTOMS OF A MOUNTING GLOBAL WATER CRISIS

water-related component.

For at least the last 5,000 years, human communities and civilisations have deliberately regulated water in order to survive. Even today, many people see water as a gift from God – or, in more secular terms, as a key part of a universal cycle that demands our respect and appreciation. However, in most places where water is "controlled" through dams and pipes, and made safe and available around the clock, we have come to take it for granted. And when concerns about access to safe water or exposure to extreme weather events are raised, they are generally ignored or treated as a low priority.

This apathy is no longer tenable. The injustices associated with water-driven disasters are growing, and the global water cycle itself is changing. Human freshwater use has exceeded blue-water capacity (rivers, lakes, and aquifers), creating huge risks for everyone and the planet's ecosystems. Around 20 per cent of global water consumption for irrigation now comes from overuse of groundwater sources, and about 10 per cent of the world's food trade comes from non-renewable groundwater.

Climate change is amplifying these challenges. Global warming

increases demand for water as temperatures rise and as water requirements for food increase with the decline in relative air humidity. By 2070, two-thirds of the world's land mass will experience a reduction in terrestrial water storage, and the land area subject to extreme hydrological droughts could more than double to 8 per cent. Southwestern South America, Mediterranean Europe, and North Africa are all projected to suffer unprecedented and extreme drought conditions by 2050.

The UN 2023 Water Conference in March – the first such gathering in almost a half-century – must mark a turning point in our relationship with water and the water cycle. Only



Drought in the Horn of Africa is causing famine for millions.

by fundamentally re-examining our relationship with water, re-valuing its many uses, and treating it as a local and global common good can we achieve a safe and just future.

As the lead experts at the Global Commission on the Economics of Water, we see three areas that require transformation. First, we must consider the entire water cycle and how it is connected with biodiversity, the climate, human well-being, and ecosystem health – all key factors in socioeconomic and ecological prosperity. That means "connecting the dots" and promoting resilient relationships between water and food, water and energy, and water and the environment.

Second, water and the water cycle must be governed as global common goods. The ongoing proliferation of water crises calls for a new economic framework based on a systems approach to the water cycle, societies, and economies. We must develop a better understanding of existing "lock-ins" (including property rights, bilateral treaties, and corruption) and other structural challenges that impede water reallocation for the common good.

Moreover, an inclusive interdisciplinary framework – with a portfolio of new instruments and metrics – is needed to manage the systemic risks associated with the water cycle and its alteration by humans. Creating such a framework must begin by acknowledging water's central role in driving economic, socio-cultural, and environmental change.

Lastly, we must bring everyone into the decision-making process – starting with marginalised communities – to develop new strategies for properly valuing water. When nature and freshwater are not valued in the marketplace, we still pay a price for their misuse, which increases dramatically when we cross planetary boundaries.

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Red Bull Racing's Mexican driver Sergio Perez celebrates after winning the Saudi Arabia Formula One Grand Prix at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit in Jeddah. – AFP

‘Street fighter’ Perez leads Red Bull sweep

VERSTAPPEN FIGHTS BACK TO TAKE SECOND

ALONSO FINISH THIRD AFTER ‘PENALTY CONFUSION’

JEDDAH: Red Bull’s Sergio Perez flexed his street circuit muscles with dramatic effect on Sunday by storming to victory ahead of team-mate Max Verstappen at the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix.

While the top two were clear cut, the next two places remained in confusion long after the race had finished with Fernando Alonso first stripped of third place and then reinstated in the early hours of Monday morning.

Perez, a 33-year-old Mexican, came home 5.355 seconds clear of the defending double world champion as Red Bull reeled off a masterful one-two triumph, the Dutchman having stormed through the field from 15th on the grid.

Verstappen also clocked the fastest lap of the race on the final lap to retain his lead of the embryonic drivers’ championship, snatching it back from Perez as they duelled at high speed.

It was Perez’s fifth career win having previously triumphed in Monte Carlo and Singapore to earn his reputation as a ‘street fighter’.

“It turned out to be tougher than expected,” he said. “The safety car tried to take the victory from us again here, but not this year! The team did a great job. Now we must keep pushing.”

Verstappen was eliminated from qualifying after a drive-shaft failure.

“It wasn’t easy to get through the field,” he said. “We settled for second so it’s a good recovery in the end.”

Two-time world champion Alonso finished a stirring third on track for Aston Martin to claim a 100th podium finish on his record-extending 357th start.

That place was initially taken from him. He had received a five-second penalty for starting outside his grid position. When he tried to serve it during a pit stop, stewards ruled a jack had touched the car too soon and they hit Alonso with a 10-second penalty.

SAUDI ARABIA GP RESULTS

- 1. Sergio Perez (MEX/Red Bull) 1hr 21 min 14.894sec, 2. Max Verstappen (NED/Red Bull) at 5.355, 3. Fernando Alonso (ESP/Aston Martin-Mercedes) 20.728, 4. George Russell (GBR/Mercedes) 25.866, 5. Lewis Hamilton (GBR/Mercedes) 31.065, 6. Carlos Sainz (ESP/Ferrari) 35.876, 7. Charles Leclerc (MON/Ferrari) 43.162, 8. Esteban Ocon (FRA/Alpine-Renault) 52.832, 9. Pierre Gasly (FRA/Alpine-Renault) 54.747, 10. Kevin Magnussen (DEN/Haas-Ferrari) 1:04.826

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP STANDINGS (AFTER TWO OF 23 RACES)

DRIVERS

- 1. Max Verstappen (NED) 44 pts, 2. Sergio Perez (MEX) 43, 3. Fernando Alonso (ESP) 30, 4. Carlos Sainz Jr (ESP) 20, 5. Lewis Hamilton (GBR) 20, 6. George Russell (GBR) 18, 7. Lance Stroll (CAN) 8, 8. Charles Leclerc (MON) 6, 9. Valtteri Bottas (FIN) 4, 10. Esteban Ocon (FRA) 4

CONSTRUCTORS

- 1. Red Bull 87 pts, 2. Aston Martin 38, 3. Mercedes 38, 4. Ferrari 26, 5. Alpine 8, 6. Alfa Romeo 4, 7. Haas 1, 8. Williams 1, 9. AlphaTauri 0, 10. McLaren 0

George Russell rose to third for Mercedes.

But Aston Martin requested a review and showed stewards videos of similar incidents that went unpunished. Stewards accepted that it was not clear the offence had broken Formula One rules and lifted the punishment.

Alonso was back to third followed by the two Mercedes cars of Russell and Lewis Hamilton.

Next were the Ferraris of Carlos Sainz and Charles Leclerc, who started 12th. Esteban Ocon and his Alpine team-mate Pierre Gasly occupied the next two places.

The race began under dazzling floodlights at the Jeddah Street Circuit in balmy conditions, ideal

for spectators, drivers and cars.

Alonso dream start

Alonso made the best start, from his incorrect position too far to the left of his grid slot, as he surged past Perez to lead into turn one.

He was unable to retain it for long and was passed by Perez at turn one at the start of lap four. By then, he had been given a five-second penalty for his starting spot error.

Behind them, Leclerc, on soft tyres, began his climb from 12th and reached seventh by lap eight as Verstappen climbed from 15th to 10th while Russell and Stroll settled into third and fourth.

After an unexceptional start, Hamilton, one of only two drivers on hard tyres while the majority took mediums, was warned for weaving on the straight.

By lap 11, Hamilton was eighth, trapped between Leclerc and Verstappen.

The Dutchman passed Hamilton on lap 12 while Perez reeled off another fastest lap to pull three seconds clear of Alonso.

On lap 18, yellow flags waved as Stroll obeyed a team order to stop his Aston Martin on the track - resulting in a full safety car deployment and a rush to pit for Perez, Alonso, Russell, Verstappen and Hamilton.

Despite attempting to serve his penalty during the pit stop, Alonso stayed second behind Perez. Hamilton, sixth, was the only front-runner on mediums while the rest took hards. Verstappen showed great pace as he pressed Russell, breezing past him for third on lap 24. When he passed Alonso, he had gone from 15th to second before half-distance.

With 10 laps remaining, Verstappen said his drive-shaft, which had caused his exit from qualifying on Saturday, was “running a bit rough”.

He was pacified by the team as was Perez who complained of a “long brake pedal” before the final fast laps were completed. — AFP

Alcaraz routs Medvedev for Indian Wells title

INDIAN WELLS: Spain’s Carlos Alcaraz swept past Daniil Medvedev 6-3, 6-2 on Sunday to win the Indian Wells ATP Masters 1000 and secure his return to number one in the world.

US Open champion Alcaraz ended Medvedev’s 19-match winning streak, denying him a fourth title in as many tournaments to ensure he will supplant Australian Open champion Novak Djokovic atop the rankings.

“It feels amazing to lift the trophy here, to recover the No. 1,” Alcaraz said. “I would say this has been the perfect tournament.”

Alcaraz, 19, claimed his third Masters 1000 title and joined compatriot Rafael Nadal as the only players to win at least three as a teenager. Nadal won six before turning 20.

He was unstoppable on Stadium Court, breaking through what he’d called the “wall” of Medvedev’s formidable defences. — AFP



Rybakina beats Sabalenka to claim crown

INDIAN WELLS: Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina beat a misfiring Aryna Sabalenka 7-6(11), 6-4 on Sunday to claim the Indian Wells title and avenge her loss to the Belarusian in the Australian Open final.

Rybakina, playing in her first WTA 1000 final, saved three set points in the opening frame and was never really tested in the second where she cruised to a victory that will send her to a career-high seventh in the rankings. The triumph in the California desert was the fourth career WTA singles title for the 23-year-old Rybakina and her first against second seed Sabalenka in five attempts.

“It’s actually the first time it went my way (against her) so we’ll see, hopefully we are going to play many more finals,” Rybakina said during the trophy presentation before Sabalenka stepped in and joked: “I’ll make sure it was the last one.”

Rybakina, who beat defending champion and world number one Iga Swiatek to reach the final, dropped serve when Sabalenka landed a forehand lob just inside the baseline for a 3-2 lead followed by



a routine hold that gave the Belarusian control.

But the Kazakh 10th seed did not back down and immediately held at love to steady the ship before Sabalenka handed back the break with an untimely double fault that levelled the match at 4-4 from where the duo remained on serve to force a tie-breaker. — Reuters



Fagor FCC emerged A Division champions.

Fagor FCC claim A Division T20 title

MUSCAT: Fagor FCC beat Orient Travels by 21 runs in the final of the A Division T20 tournament powered by Khimji Ramdas.

Winning the toss and opting to bat first, Fagor FCC's Chirag Mandaviya (48 off 47b; 1x4,3x6) and Sultan Ahmed (43 off 30b; 6x4) notched up a partnership of 68 runs for the third wicket, setting them up for a big total.

However, tight spells and picking wickets at regular intervals courtesy Tanveer Rana's 3-38, Tauseef Ahmed's 2-13 and Mudassar Qayyum's 2-28 restricted Fagor FCC to 147-9 in 20 overs.

In reply, Orient Travels kept losing wickets in clusters holding them back to gain momentum to chase down the par-score set by Fagor FCC. Syed Amir Ali's (45 off 27b; 5x4,2x6) blitz got Orient Travels close to the target but couldn't take them over the line falling short by 21 runs. Fagor FCC's Aneermon claimed 3-16 while Charles Jacob picked 3-29 to ensure the title for them.

Fagor FCC claimed the A Division 50 over title as well.

Speaking on Fagor FCC's successful run this year, Parameswaran Shankar, captain

of Fagor FCC, said, "Our team has been brilliant in both formats, in all the departments of the game. We have played as a unit and showed aggressive intent throughout the tournament.

"Our players were up to the challenges thrown to them at any circumstances resulting in our success to beat strong sides. Our team composition relies on experienced players who understand the game and it's crucial situations and have contributed for the winning cause. To be winners in both format is certainly an achievement and unique record we all will cherish for a very long time. On behalf of Fagor FCC and it's management, I thank all the players and our cordial sponsors for our feat."

The post-match prize distribution ceremony was graced by Arvind Venkatramani, Chief Finance Officer – Khimji Ramdas Infrastructure along with Duleep Mendis, Chief Development Officer – Oman Cricket. Duleep Mendis presented Chirag Mandaviya of Fagor FCC with the Man of the Match Award and Arvind Venkatramani presented Fagor FCC with the winners trophy followed by the runners-up trophy to Orient Travels.



Orient Travels finished runners-up.

New Zealand demolish Sri Lanka to sweep Test series 2-0

WELLINGTON: New Zealand claimed victory against Sri Lanka by an innings and 58 runs on Monday to secure a 2-0 Test series whitewash despite a late fightback from the visitors.

Sri Lanka notched just 164 in their first innings and were asked to follow on after the Black Caps declared at 580 in Wellington. They were then bowled out for 358.

"It was nice to get the win finished off, especially as the weather forecast wasn't great, which is part of the reason why we asked for the follow on," said New Zealand captain Tim Southee.

"It's been a pleasing few weeks in the whites with a number of guys stepping up at different times," he added with New Zealand on three straight Test wins including last month's thrilling victory over England to level that series 1-1.

New Zealand stuck to their task after Dhananjaya de Silva launched a fightback on Monday, passing 3,000 Test runs before being caught on 98, missing a 10th Test century.

The home seamers had already sniffed victory when they broke his



76-run partnership with debutant wicketkeeper Nishan Madushka, who was caught just before the tea break.

The loss of de Silva signalled the end of the resistance — Sri Lanka lost their last three wickets for 40 runs as the tail-enders were picked off.

Southee and New Zealand

seamer Blair Tickner did most of the damage with three wickets apiece.

After Sri Lanka resumed the day on 113-2, New Zealand's pace attack offered no respite in the first over of Monday as Matt Henry's delivery saw Kane Williamson catch Kusal Mendis on 50.

The visitors were in danger of

folding at 116-4 soon after when Angelo Mathews also walked having added just two runs from 44 balls. De Silva slowed New Zealand's momentum in a partnership of 126 alongside Dinesh Chandimal in the first session, which ended when Tickner had Chandimal caught on 62 just before lunch. — AFP

Omantel Schools League to conclude today

SPORTS REPORTER

MUSCAT, MAR 20

Under the auspices of Major General Khalifa bin Ali bin Nassr al Siyabi, Assistant Inspector General of Police and Customs for Administrative and Financial Affairs, the final match of Omantel Schools League will take place at the Royal Oman Police Stadium in Al Wattayah on Tuesday. The match will kick off at 6:15 pm.

The closing ceremony will be attended by Dr Abdullah bin Khamis Ambusaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education for Education and chairman of Oman Schools Sports Association besides presence of Majid bin Said al Bahri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Education for Administrative and Financial

Affairs and top dignitaries.

The quarterfinals and the semifinals witnessed great excitement, and most of the matches were decided by penalty kicks. The tournament also produced a large number of talents that will have a great importance in the future in the domestic clubs and the national teams.

On the other hand, as part of the accompanying events for Omantel Schools league, three sports festivals concluded on Monday. These festivals targeted female students in Al Seeb, Al Amerat and Bausher with participation of more than 300 students.

The Omantel Schools League is under the organisation of OSSA with the support of Omantel, with the participation of 12 teams representing educational directorates and private schools.



Al Qudra emerge champions in karate championship

MUSCAT: Al Qudra Karate Club claimed the overall title in the sixth open championship of the Karate Pioneers Academy, concluded at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher on March 18.

Ali Main Karate Club became the runners-up while The Champ club came third. The closing ceremony was held under the auspices of Saleh bin Mohammed al Zakwani, Member of the State Council and Chairman of the Omani-British Friendship Association, and in the presence of Salem bin Hamad al Mahrouqi, Chairman of the Oman Karate Committee and Sheehan Mohammed Bahrami, President of the JSKA Organisation for Asia in kata and kumite.

The two-day competition witnessed the participation of 335 male and female players representing 27 clubs, academies and private centres from nine

countries including the Sultanate of Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Yemen, Sudan, Iraq, Iran and United Kingdom.

The championship was supervised by Karate Pioneers Academy Chairman Al Shaihan Ahmed bin Saeed al Zakwani. The competitions were managed by an elite group of international, Asian, continental and national referees.

On the sidelines, a lecture was held on March 16 in the auditorium of the complex, for the coaches to introduce the tournament system, its conditions, and technical matters related to the coach's communication with his players during the bouts within the competition ring.

The competitors were divided according to age groups and weights in kata and kumite, which were determined by the organising committee of the tournament.



At the end of the ceremony, the chief guest honoured the referees, the organisers, the medical staff and the sponsoring companies for this

tournament, which are the Omani Qatari Telecommunications Company (Ooredoo), Al Bashaer Meat Company, Al Meera and

Muscat Daily.

Then, medals were presented to male and female players who secured the top three positions in

each of the competing categories. The chief guest handed over the cups to the first three clubs in the general standings.

The Al Qudra Karate Club were presented the champions cup while Ali Main Karate Club claimed the runners-up trophy and The Champ club took the third-place trophy.

In conclusion, the president of the Karate Pioneers Academy handed memorial shields to the chief guest, the Oman Karate Committee chief as well as to the head of the GSKI Asia.

Al Shaihan Ahmed expressed his gratitude, appreciation and respect to all referees, organisers and participating club staff including administrators, coaches, players and parents of players for their fruitful cooperation for the advancement of karate sport in the Sultanate of Oman.

OMAN POST SECOND WIN IN ASIAN CUP BEACH SOCCER

OMAN BEAT KUWAIT TO REACH QUARTERS

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

The Oman beach soccer team achieved their second successive victory after defeating Kuwait 5-1 on Sunday at Jamtim Arena in Pattaya, in the second round of Group D competitions in the 2023 AFC Beach Soccer Cup in Thailand.

With this win, the Omani team secured their qualification to the quarterfinals and took the lead in the group standings with six points from two matches. Kuwait and Palestine are tied for second place with three points each, while Kyrgyzstan are yet to earn any points.

The Omani team entered the game with a strong lineup consisting of Younis al Owaisi as goalkeeper, Mishaal al Araimi, Khaled al Araimi, Yahya al Mreiki, and Abdullah al Souti.

Yahya al Muraiki scored the first goal in the first minute, followed by an equaliser by Kuwait's Omar al Rouqi in the fifth minute.

In the second half, the course of the match changed when Sami al Balushi managed to score the second goal in the eighth minute with a wonderful scissor-cut shot. Two consecutive goals by Khaled al Araimi followed in the 13th and 14th minutes via direct free kicks, which the Kuwaiti



national team goalkeeper Omar Darwish was unable to block. Then, Abdullah Masoud

concluded the series of goals for the Omani team with a fifth goal in the 28th minute.

In another Group D clash, Palestine won against Kyrgyzstan 3-2 during the second match on

Sunday at the same stadium. The top two teams from each of the four groups will qualify for

the quarterfinals, with matches to be held on March 22 and 23. The final match will take place on March 26.

TALIB HAILS TEAM PERFORMANCE

After the match, Talib Bin Hilal, coach of the Omani national beach soccer team, expressed satisfaction with the team's performance. He stated: "It was a good match. We showed up well and were able to achieve the victory that qualified us for the second round. We fought to win and missed many chances, but the performance was good, and this is positive."

Talib also highlighted the team's collective performance and the importance of all players. He said: "I do not distinguish between one player and another, all players are equal and perform collectively, and this is one of the secrets of our superiority."

Looking ahead to the next match against Palestine, Talib acknowledged the team's strength but remained optimistic about their chances. "The Palestinian national team is distinguished, but I cannot predict the result. Tomorrow we will start our preparations, and of course, the tactics will differ. We strive to top the group."

Talib also added that all teams that reach the quarterfinals are potential title contenders.

Exciting competitions conclude horse racing season in Barka

WALEED AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

The horses 'Ramaz Muscat', 'Tayel', 'Soultrain Dubai', 'Al Mostafaz' and 'Ruken Al Reaf' emerged winners in the main rounds of the final race of the season 2022-23 at Al Rahba horse racing track in Barka.

The event was organised by Royal Court Affairs represented by the Royal Horse Racing Club under the auspices of Dr Khamis bin Saif al Jabri, Chairman of Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit.

The final race included five rounds, four of them allocated to purebred Arabian horses and one round to purebred horses.

In the first round, Sohar Port Race for purebred Arabian horses for a distance of 2000 metres, Muscat Stable's 'Ramaz Muscat' snatched the title after an intense competition. Ibrahim al Hinai rode 'Ramaz Muscat', trained by Hamad al Saeedi. The second place was achieved by 'Kashmir' owned by Khamis al Abri, jockeyed by Moanis al Siyabi and trained by Mohammed al Mahrooqi. The horse 'SSR' finished third, owned by Salim al Rashidi, rider was Anas al Siyabi and trained by Khaled al Maliki.

In the Salalah Port Race for purebred Arabian horses for 2,000 metres, "Tayel" won the honours owned by Mohammed al Maamari. Moanis al Siyabi rode 'Tayel', trained by Marwan al Balushi. Sultan al Sunaidy's 'Dajlanour', ridden by Abdul Rahman al Farsi, won the second place. Hussein al Sunaidi was the trainer. 'RB Double Down', owned by Shaikh Mohammed al Balushi,



came third. Al Mutasim al Balushi was the rider with Sultan al Balushi as the trainer.

In the Khasab Port race for purebred crossbred horses (thorough bred) for 2,000 metres, 'Soultrain Dubai' claimed the honours, owned by Said al Balushi, with Anas al Siyabi as the rider and Saud al Balushi as trainer. 'Kalrand' came second, owned by Taher al Khalili, with Amer al Rasbi as the rider and Hussein al Sunaidy as the trainer. Salem al Rashidi's 'Raver', ridden by Issa al Balushi and trained by Khaled al Maliki, finished third.

ROYAL CAVALRY TOP SEASON AWARDS

In the Duqm port race for purebred Arabian horses for 2,000 metres, Musabeh al Maamari's 'Al Mostafaz' came on top, ridden by Maicon de Souza and trained by Hussein al Sunaidy. Ahmed al Sulaimi's 'El Starr' came in second, ridden by Moanis al Siyabi and trained by Mohammed al Mahrouqi. Hamza al Taei's 'Shaddad', ridden by Ahmed al

Siyabi and trained by Mohammed al Hajri, finished third.

In the Sultan Qaboos Port Race for purebred Arabian horses for 1,600 metres, Abdullah bin Ali al Maamari's 'Ruken Al Reaf' took the title. It was ridden by Adam al Balushi and trained by Nibras al Siyabi. Royal Cavalry's 'SSR Ghazwan' claimed second place with Al Mutassim al Balushi the rider under the coaching of Fahd al Hajri. Sultan al Maliki's 'Hakeem Al Reef' came third. It was ridden by Mohammed al Balushi in supervision of Abdullah al Maliki.

At the end, the chief guest crowned the winners of the first places.

The Royal Cavalry won the title of the best horse owner, while their trainer Fahd bin Abadi al Hajri got the best trainer award after achieving the highest winning rate in the season. Al Mutasem bin Saeed al Balushi, knight of the Royal Cavalry, won the award for the best knight of the season.

ANDY JALIL
LONDON, MARCH 20

Arsenal eased to a convincing 4-1 win over Crystal Palace putting themselves eight points ahead of Manchester City, who have a game in hand, in the race for the Premier League title.

With a break for international matches coming up, Arsenal manager, Mikel Arteta, hopes his players will return fit before their next league match, against Leeds, on April 1. He said: "They must really look after themselves in this period and that they come back with the same mindset and hunger from before to go into Leeds which is the only important game right now."

He added: "Touch wood, but I want to think positive. They're going to have to play games. We are in contact with all of them, they know how to look after themselves and hopefully it will all work out. It's not a secret, if we want to maintain that level we have to give more.

"Just make sure every single day they do the right things, eat the right things, live the right way. It's not a coincidence they behave consistently the way they do. That's why they can perform at the level they do."

Arsenal went on the attack from the start but Crystal Palace were resolute and defended well for almost the first half hour. They were unlucky not to take the lead in the 11th minute when Wilfred Zaha hit the bottom of the post to see the ball rebound off the goalkeeper and go for a corner.

It wasn't long before Arsenal went into the lead when, in the 28th minute, Bukayo Saka crossed to Gabriel Martinelli on the left



Bukayo Saka celebrates a goal.

and the Brazilian unleashed a fierce left foot shot into the net. With 13 goals, the 21-year-old forward is Arsenal's top scorer.

With a couple of minutes left before half-time, the Gunners doubled the lead. Saka collected the ball from Granit Xhaka's shot across the goal and exchanged passes with Ben White before slamming in a shot inside the far post.

The game seemed to have been put beyond the visitors when, ten minutes after the break, Xhaka received a through pass from Leonardo Trossard and drove in Arsenal's third goal. Palace might have got a glimmer of hope when they pulled a goal back in the 63rd minute with Jeffrey Schlupp scoring after Martin Odegaard was unable to clear from a corner.

Palace then missed a chance in the 71st minute when Zaha shot just wide of the far post. Arsenal had brought on substitute Kieron Tierney who produced an excellent low cut back in the 74th

Premier League			2022	2023
Standings				
	Points	played		
1 Arsenal	69	28	●●●●●	
2 Man City	61	27	●●●●●	
3 Man Utd	50	26	●●●●●	
4 Tottenham	49	28	●●●●●	
5 Newcastle	47	26	●●●●●	
6 Liverpool	42	26	●●●●●	
7 Brighton	42	25	●●●●●	
8 Brentford	42	27	●●●●●	
9 Fulham	39	27	●●●●●	
10 Chelsea	38	27	●●●●●	
11 Aston Villa	38	27	●●●●●	
12 Crystal Palace	27	28	●●●●●	
13 Wolves	27	28	●●●●●	
14 Leeds	26	27	●●●●●	
15 Everton	26	28	●●●●●	
16 Nottingham F.	26	27	●●●●●	
17 Leicester	25	27	●●●●●	
18 West Ham	24	26	●●●●●	
19 Bournemouth	24	27	●●●●●	
20 Southampton	23	28	●●●●●	
Last match				
● Won ● Drawn ● Lost				
● Champions League (C1)				
● Europa League				
● Relegation				
AFP				

minute from which Saka hit his second goal of the match, taking his season's tally to 12.

Two days before the match Palace sacked their manager Patrick Viera for poor results. The club have now played 12 league games without a win. Paddy McCarthy, their Under-21s coach took charge, he said: "The boys gave it their all and I can't fault their effort. I definitely believe they have more than enough to get themselves out this situation."



Oman crude slumps to \$70.35 per barrel

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

The price of Oman crude declined a further \$4.58 per barrel on Monday to settle at \$70.35 per barrel (for delivery in May 2023) in trading on the Dubai Mercantile Exchange (DME).

Over the past seven days, Oman crude lost more than 15.80 per cent of its value, tracking losses suffered by international crude benchmarks on concerns that a crisis confidence in the banking sector could trigger a recession and cut demand.

On March 13, the marker price of Oman Crude Futures Contract (OQD) was \$82.46 per barrel in trading on the DME platform. The price of the Omani benchmark has fallen by around \$12.11 per barrel since then.

Meanwhile, Reuters reported that international oil prices dropped on Monday to their lowest level in 15 months amid worries that dangers to the global banking industry may trigger a recession that would reduce demand for gasoline and ahead of a probable increase in US interest rates this week.

Brent crude futures for May settlement fell \$2.32, or 3.2%, to \$70.65 a barrel at 0710 GMT. The contract earlier declined to as low as \$70.56, its lowest since December 2021.

Last week, Brent fell nearly 12%, its biggest weekly fall since December. US West Texas Intermediate crude for April delivery was at



\$64.59 a barrel, down \$2.15, or 3.2%. It earlier fell to \$64.51, also its lowest since December 2021. The contract declined by 13% last week, its biggest weekly drop since last April.

The April contract will expire on Tuesday and the more actively traded May futures was also down 3.2% at \$64.81 a barrel.

The slide in oil comes despite a historic deal which will see UBS, Switzerland's largest bank, buying the country's No. 2 lender Credit Suisse in an effort to stop a banking crisis from spreading.

Following the announcement, the US Federal Reserve, European Central Bank and other major central banks pledged to enhance market liquidity and support other banks.

"The market focus is on current banking sector volatility and the potential for further rate hikes by the Fed," said Baden Moore, National Australia Bank's head of commodity research.

"The upcoming Opec meeting is another potential catalyst on the outlook for the market. Further downside risk to prices increases the probability Opec reduces production further to support prices," Moore added, referring to the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries.

AI adoption key to Oman's digital economy growth strategy

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

The Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology (MoTCIT) hosted a conference at Crowne Plaza Muscat OCEC yesterday to promote the large-scale localisation of next generation Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to help advance Oman's digital economy objectives.

The forum was held under the auspices of Dr Khalifa bin Abdullah al Barwani, CEO of the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

In a remarks to the *Observer*, Dr Ali al Shidhani, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology for Communications and Information Technology, said the emphasis on AI and advanced technologies is one of the executive programmes of the National Program for the Digital Economy.

"The symposium's goal is to familiarise the attendees with the latest generation of AI, also known as generative AI and inventive AI. Of course, the most well-known of its applications, ChatGPT, has brought about a very significant information revolution in the field of economics, as well as disruptive innovative in the corporate and education sectors. We hope the forum for the attendees to be able to harness the powerful potential and opportunities associated with these AI tools."

Various presentations during the forum will review, among other



things, the need for introducing legislation to support the use of such modern technologies, highlight the most significant technologies that use generative AI and opportunities for their use, highlight investment opportunities through platforms that are based on new AI, and outline recommendations to support the broader uptake of these technologies.

According to Hassan bin Fida Hussain al Lawati, Head of the National Program for Artificial Intelligence and Advanced Technologies, the world is moving quickly to take advantage of AI to perform tasks previously done solely by humans. AI tools can also be used to unlock new value from data.

"The National Digital Economy initiative will help contribute to boosting the contribution of the digital economy from 2 per cent of

GDP in 2021 to 10 per cent in 2040.

Additionally, the initiative aspires for Oman to hold top positions globally in all of the digital economy metrics tracked by the Oman Vision 2040, including the e-government development index, the network readiness index, and the readiness index for the future of production.

The programme also includes a collection of medium-term executive initiatives, including the infrastructure programme, the digital industry initiative, the e-commerce initiative, the artificial intelligence initiative, the advanced technologies initiative, and the space initiative," Al Lawati explained.

The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, he said, has begun working on the executive program for artificial intelligence and

advanced technologies. This is being crafted with the support of experts from the public and private sectors, academics, and entrepreneurs specialised in those fields, he noted.

The new generation of AI uses machine learning algorithms that create new data from an existing data set.

These algorithms use statistical techniques to learn patterns in the data and then use those patterns to create new data that is similar to the original.

Several platforms that use the current generation of artificial intelligence, such as ChatGPT, Dall-E-2 OpenAI, and other platforms that use generative algorithms, have lately emerged in numerous fields, including image creation, natural language processing, music composition, and game development.

Oman attracts RO 79 million worth of investments in fish farming sector in 2022

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

The Sultanate of Oman has attracted RO 79 million worth of actual investments for six fish farming projects last year, Dr Abdulaziz bin Said al Marzouqi, Director General of Fish Resources Development of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources said in a speech during the technical workshop on selecting and studying the management of sites designated for aquaculture in the Regional Commission for Fisheries (RECOFI), which was held in Muscat recently.

Dr Al Marzouqi said that Oman endeavours to make the farming sector one of the main pillars of food security system. Through the joint efforts of Oman Investment Authority, represented by Fisheries Development Oman, and the private sector, currently there are 3 productive projects and another 12 projects under construction and incorporation.

The total fish farming production from farms in



Oman in 2022 reached 3,469 tonnes, with a value estimated at RO 7.33 million, a 90 per cent increase from 2021 fish farming production.

Meanwhile, Dr Ahmed al Mazroui, Secretary of the Regional Commission for Fisheries and Senior Officer for Fisheries and Aquaculture at the Regional Office of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations in Cairo, explained the important role that fish farming plays in providing food security for countries by increasing fish production and providing fish continuously and

regularly.

"Fish farming meets the needs of markets and consumers, in addition to its role in raising the contribution of the total fisheries sector and in providing job opportunities," he said. "The global production of fish farming has evolved upward from 7.8 million tonnes in 1980 to 114.5 million tonnes in 2018, and is close to producing natural fisheries, and even exceeds it if we add the contribution of seaweed farming, which is growing," he added.

Commenting on fish farming in the region, Dr Al Mazroui

Spatial planning and identifying suitable sites for aquaculture is very important. It is not limited to the selection of sites, but it is necessary to organise and manage these sites in a comprehensive and sustainable manner. This includes setting goals, setting the legal framework, determining the absorptive capacity and implementing environmental studies, as well as training and capacity building.

said, "Production from fish farming in the Sultanate of Oman has doubled from about 1,300 tonnes in 2020 to more than 3,000 tonnes in 2022, and it is on the rise.

Production in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has also increased to nearly 100,000 tonnes in 2020, and it is hoped, based on the plans set, that production will increase significantly by the end of this decade and reach 970,000 tonnes in 2029. The Islamic Republic of Iran leads in production, with more than 1.25 million tonnes in 2020."

As for the importance of

identifying suitable sites for aquaculture, Dr Al Mazroui said, "Coastal areas are important for many sectors besides fish farming, such as fisheries, tourism, ports, maritime transport, submarine cables and other economic activities.

Hence, spatial planning and identifying suitable sites for aquaculture is very important. The matter is not limited to the selection of sites, but it is necessary to organise and manage these sites in a comprehensive and sustainable manner. This includes many measures, including setting goals, setting the legal framework, determining the absorptive capacity, and implementing environmental studies, as well as training and capacity building.

He added that the fish farming working group in the region is aware of the importance of this issue at an early stage, and it was set as one of the priorities in an effort to build a sustainable fish farming sector that complements the rest of the economic activities of the region.

Oman Fisheries files lawsuit against ex-staff



QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

Oman Fisheries Company, a subsidiary of Fisheries Development Oman (FDO) — part of Oman Investment Authority (OIA), has announced the filing of a lawsuit in a local commercial court against a number of former members of the company's executive management.

The announcement came in a filing to the Muscat Stock Exchange (MSX) on Monday.

"Such legal proceedings were taken due to reasons relating to violations of the provisions of fair and legitimate competition and the provisions regulating the work of executive management disclosed in the Omani Commercial Companies Law as well as the Business Code of Conduct during the period of their employment," said Haitham bin Mohammed bin Ali al Fannah, Chairman.

Oman Fisheries, a publicly-traded company, will seek financial compensation if successful in its lawsuit, the Chairman stated. "Such procedures were required in order to preserve the interests of the shareholders, the company, as well as the rights of third parties," he added.

Tibiaan Properties, Al Tamman Real Estate sign pact to develop ‘Ajwaa’

MUSCAT: Tibiaan Properties and Al Tamman Real Estate Company, a subsidiary of Muscat Overseas Group, have signed a contract to develop and market the first commercial development of its kind in the Dhofar Governorate specifically in Al Saada area, Salalah. This project will include commercial units dedicated to various activities such as office spaces, retail spaces, restaurants, cafes, etc. This cooperation comes into place to deliver premium projects in Dhofar Governorate, where demand is rising for quality real estate projects. The project name ‘Ajwaa’ is an Arabic word refers to the beautiful weather Salalah is enjoying throughout the year, thus reflecting the opportunities this project offers to investors in both corporates or individuals’ capacity. The project location was carefully selected within one of the most active areas in Salalah directly on Sultan Taimur Street in Al Saada, with an easily accessible routes to all parts of Salalah. Ajwaa will represent a distinctive investment destination, as it will allow individuals and institutions the opportunity to own a commercial space for their own business or to rent it and obtain returns from it. It was designed on a land area of



more than 20,000 square metres and includes more than 220 various commercial spaces making it an integrated commercial destination for work & leisure alike. Himansu Mohapatra, General Manager of Al Tamman Real Estate, mentioned: “Al Tamman Real Estate is a major real estate developer in Oman, and today we announce our new project in Salalah — Ajwaa — which comes to enrich the market with quality and innovation which meets the demand expectations”. Speaking about the location and design, Himansu added: “What

distinguish the project, in addition to its strategic location, is its distinctive design that comes in accordance with the highest technical and aesthetic specifications, in addition to designing smooth exits and entrances for the audience”. Younis al Harrasi, CEO of Tibiaan Properties, said: “We are pleased today to announce our cooperation of our first project in the Wilayat of Salalah with Al Tamman Real Estate Company, where we have studied the project importance & value addition to the Governorate of Dhofar starting from identifying the

land location all the way to creating the best mix of commercial units which will serve the community”. “This project comes in line with our direction to expand our presence all over the Sultanate of Oman to deliver real estate solutions and wider range of investment opportunities after a journey that extends to over 20 years of real estate services in Oman. We are proud to work alongside a well-known real estate developer who has a proven record of distinguished projects of high quality & delivery standards,” Al Harrasi added.

ahlibank hosts Al Nukhba customers event

MUSCAT: ahlibank hosted an event for Al Nukhba customers in its new state-of-the-art headquarters at Wattayah, who have been a part of its impressive growth in the local and regional banking sector. Al Nukhba banking account offers its customers a range of exclusive benefits and services. Of the many privileges offered to Al Nukhba account holders are dedicated service centres, Internet and mobile banking services, 24-hour call centre support, and a relationship manager available at all times to cater to the customers’ needs. The new ahlibank building reinforces these privileges through its state of the art construction with beautiful interiors and designated lounge facilities, aimed at serving customers and catering for their various financial needs. The building received appraisal from Al Nukhba customers for being grandiose and impressive as it is a prime example of the Bank’s commitment to improving the experiences of its customers.



Speaking of the event, Muneer Ahmed al Balushi, AGM – Head of Retail Distribution, ahlibank, said, “With the new building we will serve our Al Nukhba customers with more efficiency. We are proud of our many endeavours that have led us to this point and we thank our Al Nukhba customers who have stood by us as we continue to provide better services and products to cater to their financial needs. Their presence today assures their trust in our capabilities and affirms our efforts to achieve the country’s overall strategic and sustainable growth objectives.” Explaining further, he said, “The bank expanded its financing and investment activities in the banking sector in the Sultanate of Oman, and it paved an exceptional success story that we are all proud of”

NBO partners with Buna to facilitate seamless cross-border payments

MUSCAT: National Bank of Oman (NBO) has recently signed an agreement to join the Buna Payment System. Buna is a cross-border and multi-currency payment system that allows customers to send and receive payments across the Arab region and facilitates remittances, trade and commerce between countries in the Arab world. This move reflects the Bank’s efforts to meet the needs of its customers and make every experience simpler and more seamless. Abdullah al Hinai, CEO of NBO, said, “The introduction of Buna is a huge step forward for NBO and our customers and as we look to provide more intuitive platforms and offer our customers more efficient and



secure payment solutions. We are proud of our team for achieving this milestone and we look forward to working with our partners at Buna to unlock opportunities, as one. I would like to express my gratitude to the Central Bank of Oman for supporting this initiative which is in keeping with the efforts to advance the national payment systems in Oman.”

Cambridge IFA WOMANi acknowledges Bank Nizwa’s exceptional female leaders

MUSCAT: Bank Nizwa, Oman’s leading Islamic bank, is dedicated to offering women equal opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities as a pioneering and female-friendly institution. This commitment has resulted in five of the bank’s employees being listed in the Cambridge IFA WOMANi 2022 report’s top 300 influential women in Islamic business and finance. The report acknowledges women who have made significant contributions to the industry and demonstrated exceptional leadership and innovation. To honour the female members short-listed from the Middle East, Bank Nizwa partnered with Cambridge IF to host a special event in Oman. The celebration was held under the auspices of HH Sayyidah Dr Mona bint Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Assistant Vice-Chancellor of



Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). From Bank Nizwa, the list includes HH Sayyidah Wisam bint Jaifer al Said, Head of Marketing and Corporate Communications, Haifa Abdul Ali al Lawati, Head of Human Resources, Ikhlal bint Dawood al Lawatiyah Head of Service Quality, Customer Care and Phone Banking, Amal bint Said al Juma, Chief Manager — Wealth Management and Amna al Balushi Chief Manager — IT Governance & Security; all holding senior positions at the

bank. In addition to the recognition ceremony, there were two panel discussions featuring Haifa bint Abdul Ali al Lawatiyah and HH Sayyidah Wisam bint Jaifer al Said as speakers. Haifa bint Abdul Ali al Lawatiyah participated in the discussion on “Women in Leadership: Breaking Barriers and Creating Change,” while HH Sayyidah Wisam bint Jaifer al Said contributed to a panel discussion, titled, “The Future of Women Empowerment and Gender

Equality in Islamic Finance: Challenges and Opportunities.” “In the world of Islamic banking and finance, women have had many opportunities to excel. The number of women professionals who have contributed to Islamic finance has grown and continues to do so. Now more than ever, women play a significant role in Islamic finance. Omani women have played a key role in the overall development of Islamic finance, besides setting the pace for women to occupy high positions in Islamic banking. In Bank Nizwa, women hold a significant number of senior positions, demonstrating the importance of empowering women. The bank focuses on supporting Omani women in their efforts to acquire additional qualifications and enhance their skills,” said Khaled al Kayed, the CEO.

Toyota Hilux now with biggest excitement benefits

MUSCAT: Own a Toyota Hilux and get exclusive benefits. The benefits include service 3 years/30,000 kms (whichever is earlier) and insurance 1 year or cash gift in lieu of insurance RO 200 to RO 250 and 8 Toyota Raize SUV raffles. The campaign is valid until May 10, 2023. (Prospective buyers may be advised that the benefits vary between model variants, model year and manufacturing year. Terms & Conditions apply. Customers can visit any Saud Bahwan Automotive showroom for exact details.) The powerful Hilux Adventure is equipped with a mighty 4.0 Litre V6 Engine

packing a mighty punch with 235 HP & 38.3 Kg-m Torque. It has an Auto Disconnect Differential to keep the tempo going. The 4.0 Litre V6 Toyota Hilux Adventure is a truly exciting mean machine that’s been developed by Toyota to get your pulse racing. Similarly the Hilux 4X4 is equipped with a 2.7 Litre Petrol Engine that is available in 5-speed Manual Transmission and 6 Speed Automatic Transmission, outputting 164 HP. The Hilux is not only a tough vehicle but also an advanced pick-up with stylish cues hitherto found only on SUVs. The front of the Hilux gives a sense that the vehicle



is wider than it is. This is achieved by the horizontal Bars that make up the Grille and Sleek Headlamps that wrap around the front of the Fenders.

The Hilux sports a thick, chunky Front Bumper sculpted like an SUV, Front Fog lamps, Alloy Wheels, apart from Side Stripes that adorn the vehicle.

If you are looking for some of the finest moments on the road or off-road then the Hilux rises above expectations in all aspects. The Hilux really is two vehicles in one: a work truck through the week and a family vehicle on weekends, thanks to added comforts and safety features. Indeed the Hilux models are stunning in design and features. Their performance & safety parameters are amongst the best and the strong frame and suspension impart toughness for any demanding task. Specifications of vehicle imported from Toyota Motor Corporation are as per the GSO Conformity Certificate applicable

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Muscat City gears up for Urban Hackathon



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

Following the success of the Urban Hackathons in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the European Union Delegation to Oman will host the third Urban Hackathon #peoplemakeplaces in Muscat during May 21 – 23, 2023.

The event is being organised in partnership with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, Muscat Municipality, as well as the Embassies of Germany, Netherlands, and Spain, and Oman Think Urban (OTU).

The Oman Urban Hackathon aims to bring together local practitioners and civil society to find bottom-up solutions to the most pressing issues on sustainable development and to promote local talent as well as Muscat's green transition.

Applications for the hackathon are open until March 25, 2023. Registrations are open to high school students (16+), university students, freelancers, entrepreneurs, and professionals in the field of urban planning, architecture, civil engineering, digital art & design, environmental science, culture studies and transportation.

The hackathon revolves around seven themes of urban

planning for applicants to choose from. The themes are as follows:

- Climate change and urban sustainability: solve heatwaves challenge, adapt to rising sea levels, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, public transportation, consumption behaviour, and construction.
- Waste management: formulating ideas that reduce industrial or organic waste and promote recycling and reuse methods.
- Mobility: inventing eco-friendly transportation on land, sea, or flight alternatives.
- Energy: reducing consumption, and shifting to renewable energy alternatives.
- Water management: ideate alternative methods to reduce water consumption, reduce risk of flooding & wadi management and inspire water provision.
- Community participation and public spaces: thinking of ways to empower local communities and offering accessible natural open spaces for the public to use.
- Communities and culture as urban dimensions: originating urban ideas that uplift cultural exchange and social cohesion, boost cultural and social activities within marginalised communities, or raise awareness about cultural practices.

Oman's food sector bottom-line hit by Ukraine War fallout in 2022

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, MARCH 20

A number of Omani publicly-traded companies operating in the food processing and dairy sector have reported varying impacts to their bottom-line from a steep rise in the cost of imported wheat and other raw materials last year — an increase induced primarily by the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

According to some of the leading players, imported wheat prices were up by an average of 30 per cent during the year, while input costs for animal feed production jumped by an average of 50 – 100 per cent. However, payouts by the government in the form of wheat and feed subsidies did help mitigate these additional costs, they noted.

Oman Flour Mills, majority-owned by Oman Food Investment Holding Company (Nitaj), said an uptick in sales revenue during the year was offset by an increase in raw material prices.

“Raw material cost has increased by RO 24.6 million (36.2%) mainly due to an overall increase in the prices of raw materials (grains) by 22.8%... This has led to an overall decrease in the operating profit by RO 2.5 million (-42.8%) as compared to (2021),” said Salah bin Hilal al Maawali, Chairman, Board of Directors.

However, an initiative by the Ministry of Finance to provide a subsidy to flour millers and animal feed producers helped address the impact of “fluctuating grain prices”, Al Maawali added in the Chairman's report for the year.

Raysut-based Salalah Mills — the nation's biggest flour miller by capacity — warned that elevated international wheat prices would have an adverse bearing on its



RAW MATERIAL COST HAS INCREASED BY RO 24.6 MILLION (36.2%) MAINLY DUE TO AN OVERALL INCREASE IN THE PRICES OF RAW MATERIALS (GRAINS) BY 22.8%... THIS HAS LED TO AN OVERALL DECREASE IN THE OPERATING PROFIT BY RO 2.5 MILLION (-42.8%) AS COMPARED TO (2021),

profitability.

“The purchase of wheat is a very important decision,” Ahmed bin Alawi bin Abdullah al Dhahab, CEO, explained in the Management Discussion & Analysis report for the year.

“The management monitors the international wheat prices closely to make proper planning, as the cost of wheat represents about 80-85% of the production cost.

The company ensures that it stores enough stock of wheat to keep providing its customers with all the products they need.

The international wheat prices increase by more than 30% in 2022. Company net profit will largely depend on the customers' ability to accept higher selling prices,” he stated.

Dhofar Foods & Investment Co SAOG, a key producer of dairy, poultry and animal feed products, lamented that fallout from the Ukraine crisis had impacted the company's bottom-line in 2022. “The Ukraine / Russia war has escalated the major prices of all commodities imported by the company,” said Nasser bin Mohammed al Harthi, Chairman.

“Logistic sector costs increased by 200 - 300% due to rising crude oil prices and post-covid container shortages.

The gross profit of the company declined to 11% compared to 12% in the prior year. The profitability was under pressure due to regulated prices in dairy business.”

Eng Ali Hilal al Kuwari, Chairman — A'Saffa Foods, also

blamed the Ukraine conflict for a “steep increase” in feed raw material prices. “Our major raw material prices increased by 50% to 100%. The management took the proactive decision to mitigate the impact of the high material prices by improving its sales and commercial activity, in addition to controlling the other costs. We are thankful to the government for the feed subsidy,” he stated.

According to Mohammed bin Suhail al Shanfari, CEO, high inflation exacerbated by the Ukraine conflict had made food, energy and input costs pricier for the company.

“During the year we have seen a very high increase in the prices of soya and maize which are the major ingredients of the poultry feed. Such a steep increase could not be passed on and, as a result, the profit margins of the Poultry and Poultry Products segment of the company have been severely affected,” he added.

Bank Muscat organises annual leadership forum to realise its customer-centric vision and strategy



MUSCAT: In line with its commitment to strengthen communication channels with frontline employees, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, recently organised Leadership Forum 2023 at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Center, in the presence of Shaikh Waleed K al Hashar, Chief Executive Officer, Bank Muscat.

The event was attended by members of the Executive Management as well as officials and branch managers from both Bank Muscat as well as Meethaq Islamic Banking. The annual event is held as part of the Bank's strategy

to ensure that its employees are closely attuned to and aligned with its overall strategy.

The forum also helped discuss in detail, various aspects of the Bank's plans to further develop banking services in Oman, new financial trends, how to face challenges in the sector and the best way to achieve future goals and targets.

The annual gathering brought together employees under one roof so as to enable face-to-face exchange of ideas about various banking and finance-related matters. The event provided an opportunity to highlight important developments affecting the Bank and ensure its continued market leadership

and stress on the importance of continued alignment to the Bank's customer-centric vision of “Serving you better everyday”, which encourages innovation and continuous improvement of services in response to customer feedback and needs.

During the event, important details of the Bank's strategy and future plans were discussed as the bank builds further on four decades of success and major achievements to move to the next stage of its evolution. It also underlined the importance of providing an integrated banking experience to enable customers to enjoy ease of banking and save

time.

A large part of the Bank's future plans are based on rapid digital transformation, which will enable it to provide innovative products and services. Employees were encouraged to make the best use of the new capabilities and continue to maintain an outstanding performance for the benefit of all customers and partners.

At the end of the leadership forum, employees expressed their appreciation to customers for their continued confidence and trust in the services and products that the Bank constantly launches as part of its efforts to meet their diverse needs. Customers are central to

all the work performed by bank employees and they are indeed the bank's partners in success.

The 2023 Leadership Forum also included a number of presentations and a folk performing arts show that was staged by Bank Muscat employees. Bank Muscat's annual Leadership Forum ensures that frontline employees are closely aligned to its customer-centric vision and the overall strategy of continuous improvement.

As the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman for over four decades, Bank Muscat has assets over RO 13 billion and the largest branch network

in Oman serving over 2 million customers through 174 branches and more than 800 e-channel devices including Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) and Cash Deposit Machines (CDMs). The Bank has been focusing intensely on digital transformation over the past few years as it seeks to continue launching innovative products, services and solutions in line with global financial trends and customer aspirations.

Digital transformation, which is a cornerstone of the Bank's strategy, was a major topic of discussion at the Leadership Forum because of its importance in the achievement of the Bank's future goals.

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An edifice that enhances kids' knowledge

Located in Qurum next to the Children's Museum, the Children's Public Library is the first of its kind in the Sultanate of Oman, and as many as 30,000 to 35,000 young readers make use of the more than 25,000 titles inside the mammoth edifice every year... **P20**

Mysterious Corsican 'cat-fox' revealed as unique species

THE ELUSIVE STRIPED "cat-fox" familiar mostly to Corsican shepherds and as a source of intrigue to scientists, is indeed its own species specific to the French Mediterranean island, the French office for Biodiversity (OFB) announced on Thursday.

New genetic analysis has

"revealed a unique genetic strain to the wild cats" found in the remote forest undergrowth of northern Corsica, it confirmed.

Genetic sampling clearly distinguishes the ring-tailed Corsican cat-foxes from mainland forest felines and domestic cats, said the OFB in a statement.



While resembling house cats in some ways, the cat-fox earned its name from its length — measuring 90 centimetres (35 inches) from

head to tail — and its distinct black-tipped, ringed tail.

Other distinguishing features include the stripes on the front legs,

"very dark" hind legs, and a russet stomach. The dense, silky coat is a natural repellent for fleas, ticks and lice.

The inconspicuous feline finally became part of a concerted research effort — after years of playing a game of cat and mouse — when one was unexpectedly captured in a local chicken coop in 2008.

But it has long been part of local folklore.

"The cat-fox is part of our shepherd mythology," Carlu-Antone Cecchini, head of the forest cat mission at the National Hunting and Wildlife Office, now part of the OFB, said in 2019.

"From generation to generation, they told stories of how the forest cats would attack the udders of their ewes and goats."

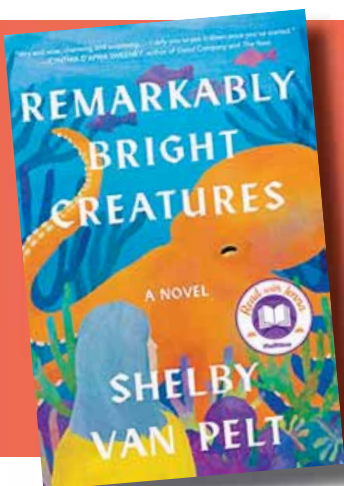
The discovery of a unique genetic lineage is an essential step towards ensuring proper protection and conservation for the endangered species. — **AFP**

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A widow working the night shift at the Sowell Bay Aquarium is aided in solving a mystery by a giant Pacific octopus living there.



ENTERTAINMENT

French actress Sarah Bernhardt plays the role of Queen "Dona Maria de Neubourg" in Victor Hugo's play "Ruy Blas", at the Comedie-Francaise. Nicknamed the "Golden Voice" by Victor Hugo, Sarah Bernhardt, who died on March 26, 1923, took French theatre to the four corners of the world, created fashion trends and derivative products, hit the headlines, becoming a true living myth. — **AFP**



CHANGING WORLD

Bees work in their hive in Isokyro, western Finland. Earth is hotter than it has been in 125,000 years, but deadly heatwaves, storms and floods amplified by global warming could be but a foretaste as planet-heating fossil fuels put a "liveable" future at risk. — **AFP**





Revival of Rusayl Cinema brings back nostalgic old-cinema style and feel

THE CINEMA AND theatre scene in Oman is very young and, over the years, has been placed on the back-burner. But with more access to technology, including the latest gadgets in film-making, more young Omanis are venturing into the scene.

Muscat, however, has witnessed progress being made in this area as the annual film festival just gets better and better.

Many budding Omani film-makers begin their journey by producing short films and documentaries, and several of them had found success winning accolades in film festivals outside of Oman.

On March 17, the Knowledge Oasis of Rusayl revived the Rusail Cinema which was closed in 2000. The launching aims to revive the art of local cinema as an artistic movement encouraging creative young Omanis who are capable of presenting clear messages and ideas and conveying their unique voices in film-making and theatre.

The organisers expressed that it is a perfect space and opportunity for these budding film-makers to express their own art and become gamechanger by helping develop the field so it can evolve and grow and become part of the global film movement.

The event was held with the cooperation of Omq Artistic Production Company and Zawraq Company. Rusayl Cinema was established in 1989 and was envisioned to unite different communities from around the world.

As time progressed and social media became more dominant including satellite channels dominating the airwaves, the cinema was closed in 2000.

Today's redevelopment takes the path being implemented by Taqat Oman Creative comprised of young Omanis with a vision to bring back the feeling of old cinema.



Part of their initiative includes bringing back the general feel of the cinema and replicating the decors, paintings, box offices, and stores that were popular in the past.

The Rusail Cinema also have a "Hafsa" restaurant that serves light cinema food.

The organisers expressed that in this version, "we hope that the journey of film-making in Omani cinema will extend to deeper and greater horizons of leadership and success."

They also said that for the budding film-makers of Oman, "We are with you, supporting you in building your dream, helping you in every step of achieving it because we believe that the idea that is created does not fade away."

CHANGING WORLD

Mountain forests disappearing at alarming rate: study



LOGGING, WILDFIRES and farming are causing mountain forests, habitat to 85 per cent of the world's birds, mammals and amphibians, to vanish at an alarming rate, according to a study published on Friday.

Mountain forests covered 11 billion hectares (2.71 billion acres) of the planet in 2000, the authors of the study published in the Cell Press journal One Earth said.

But at least 78.1 million hectares — an area larger than the US state of Texas — have been lost between 2000 and 2018, with recent losses 2.7-fold greater than at the beginning of the century.

Key drivers of the loss are commercial logging, wildfires, "slash-and-burn" cultivation and commodity agriculture, said the authors from China's Southern University of Science and Technology and the University of Leeds.

Of particular concern, they said, is that heavy forest losses have occurred in mountain areas that are "tropical biodiversity hotspots" — refuges for rare and endangered species.

High elevations and steep slopes have historically restricted human exploitation of mountain forests, the authors said. But they have increasingly been targeted for timber and used for agriculture since the turn of the



century.

Commercial forestry was responsible for 42 per cent of mountain forest loss, followed by wildfires (29 per cent), shifting cultivation (15 per cent), and permanent or semi-permanent commodity agriculture (10 per cent), the study said.

Shifting cultivation involves growing a crop on a plot of land for a few years and then abandoning it until it becomes fertile again.

"The drivers are different for different regions," said Zhenzhong Zeng, a co-author of the study, with wildfires the main cause of loss in boreal forests found in high latitudes.

"For boreal areas, it's caused by climate change, because there's an increase in temperature and a decrease in precipitation," Zeng said.

"We have to reduce the use of fossil fuels to slow down global warming."

Commodity agriculture was a main driver of mountain forest loss in Southeast Asia, the authors said.

"People plant more rubber or palm farms to make more product," Zeng said. "People need to have more land to grow corn to feed their chickens."

Shifting cultivation is preeminent in tropical Africa and South America.

- Impact is huge -

The authors said the greatest amount of forest loss observed during the study period using satellite data was in Asia — 39.8 million hectares — more than half the global total.

South America, Africa, Europe and Australia also all suffered significant losses.

"The mountain forest loss in the tropical areas is increasing very fast, much higher than other regions," Zeng said. "And the biodiversity is very rich there so the impact is huge."

"For tropical areas, we have to make people live with the forest, not cut the forest," he said.

Xinyue He, another co-author, said that regrowth has been observed in some areas but it does not always involve native species and is not keeping pace with forest loss.

She said there needed to be greater forest management including stricter enforcement of laws and regulations.

"Protecting areas can help to reduce the loss," she said. — **AFP**



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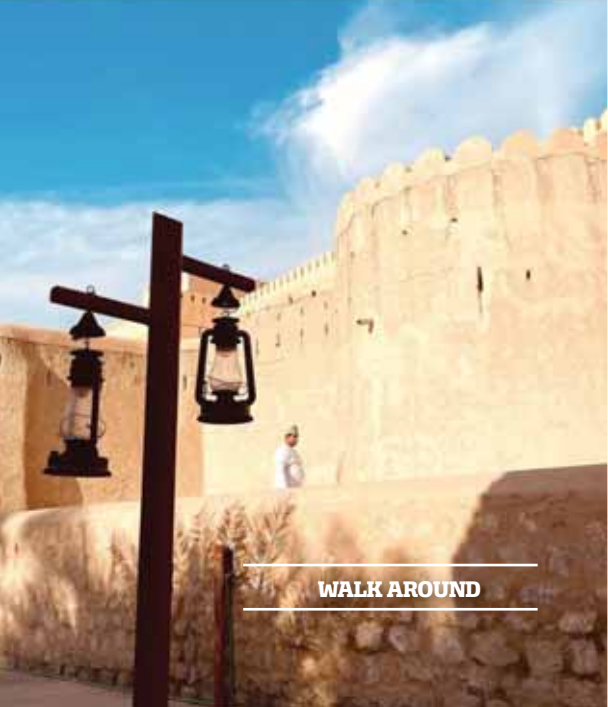


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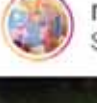


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AROUND THE WORLD

CULTURE

Cambodia celebrates return of 'priceless' stolen Angkor jewellery



CAMBODIAN LEADER Hun Sen unveiled a collection of stolen Angkor crown jewellery on Friday which was recently returned to the kingdom after decades in Britain, pleading for other long-lost treasures to be handed back.

Gold crowns, necklaces and amulets were among the trove of treasures from the Angkor period, which ran from the ninth to 14th centuries AD when the Khmer empire dominated vast parts of Southeast Asia.

The Cambodian culture ministry characterised the items — expected to go on display at the national museum — as "priceless cultural heritage".

"I appeal to museums, institutions and Khmer artefact collectors to continue to return those items voluntarily to Cambodia," Hun Sen told the ceremony.

"Heritage items should be returned to their country of origin."



The culture ministry last month discreetly received 77 pieces from the family of the late, disgraced British art dealer Douglas Latchford.

Two 10th-century sculptures recently returned by the United States were also displayed on Friday.

Dominic Williams, the British ambassador to Cambodia, tweeted that it was an "extraordinary privilege to see these previously stolen artefacts displayed in their ancestral home".

When he died in 2020, Latchford was awaiting trial in the United States for art trafficking, and the same year his family agreed to return the antiquities to Cambodia.

The family returned five stone and bronze artefacts in 2021.

Thousands of antiques and artefacts were stolen from Cambodia during the conflict and genocide of the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s.

Last year, the United States returned 30 looted items, including bronze and stone statues of Buddhist and Hindu deities that were carved more than 1,000 years ago.

The Cambodian government has been negotiating with other countries, including the United States, and private collectors to return more Khmer artefacts to the kingdom. — **AFP**

LIFESTYLE

Moroccan villagers keep communal store tradition alive



SURROUNDED BY olive and palm trees in a Moroccan mountain village, a centuries-old collective granary preserves the ancient practices of the Amazigh culture.

"The traditions are vanishing, but not here," said proud village elder Hossine Oubrahim, in Ait Kine in the Anti-Atlas mountains.

High in the rugged hills some 460 kilometres (280 miles) south of the capital Rabat, Ait Kine is home to one of country's few remaining collective granaries called agadir in Amazigh, Morocco's Berber language.

The imposing, fully functional structure, likely built in the 18th century and restored in 2012, is still used by local residents to store and protect their produce.

"We were raised on the tradition of storing our grains, dried fruit, oil and valuables there," recalled Oubrahim, in his 70s and wearing an indigo-coloured tunic. "And we continue to respect it."

The village's granary is a "monument" that "represents our community spirit", said Abdelghani Charai, a 60-year-old merchant who returned to his ancestral home in Ait Kine after years away.

GRAINS, FRUIT, FAMILY ARCHIVES

The granary, built using a practice known as rammed earth, sits in the village centre, protected by a fortified wall with a stone watchtower.

In the past, during times of unrest and rebellion against the government, it offered a safe place for storage, Charai explained.

"The granary guaranteed security," he said.

Inside, 76 cubicles are arranged in three levels around an open courtyard with a water cistern.

The agadir has stocks of barley, dates and almonds, but it is also used to safeguard documents like marriage and birth certificates, religious texts and

contracts, and recipes for traditional medicine inscribed on palm stems.

Lahcen Boutirane, the guardian of the collective storeroom, said the village's 63 remaining families use it.

"Others have left, but they keep their archives here," he said.

Unwritten laws have kept these granaries sacred and inviolable spaces, not only storing crops to use in drought but also protecting them from attacks, said archaeologist Naima

550 ancient igoudar — the plural of agadir — according to the culture ministry, which is preparing a UNESCO World Heritage nomination.

They are located primarily across central and southern Morocco, in caves or on cliff sides, on hilltops and in valleys.

"The challenge is to save Morocco's collective granaries, which have almost disappeared in Algeria, Tunisia and Libya," said architect and anthropologist Salima Naji.

Passionate about these "insti-



Keddane.

Boutirane stressed the importance of preserving Ait Kine's agadir, which "bears witness to our ancestors' ingenuity".

SOLIDARITY

Collective granaries can be found elsewhere in North Africa — in Algeria's Aures mountains, Tunisia's south and Libya's Nafusa mountains — but they are most common in Morocco, though many are no longer in use.

The kingdom has more than

tutions of solidarity", she had helped restore Ait Kine's agadir, now an attraction for both researchers and tourists.

A group of Italian visitors appreciated the carved wooden door, adorned with forged iron.

"We are doing a tour of granaries," said guide Emanuele Maspoli, describing them as "extraordinary places that attest to the historical wealth of Morocco's oases".

"It's a magical place," said tourist Antonella Dalla. — **AFP**

ENTERTAINMENT

Paris' Moulin Rouge promises to scrap troubled snake act



PARIS' STORIED Moulin Rouge cabaret venue said on Thursday it would stop immersing non-aquatic snakes in water after the controversial stage act provoked outcry from animal rights activists.

The institution's daily show features a sequence with a dancer playing alongside pythons in a see-through pool.

The cabaret, founded in 1889, has now bowed to pressure from Paris officials and campaigners who said it was cruel to submerge terrestrial snakes.

Animal rights advocates said they had seen the snakes trying to keep their heads above water in the vexed segment.

The two species used in the act, Southeast Asian reticulated and Indian pythons, are protected and live on land, officials from the French capital's mayoral office told the venue in a letter.

"They may be strong swimmers, but the staging does not take into account the species' natural behaviour," the notice said.

The Moulin Rouge did not give an end date for the show and said it had to give "reasonable notice" to performers.

"Aware of societal developments on animal welfare, the Moulin Rouge will stop this number," the venue said, adding that respect for animals had "always been essential" to its operation.

HEATED CAMPAIGN

The move follows a heated campaign with petitions and demonstrations.

"The snakes have no business being there," Amandine Sanvisens, co-founder of the PAZ animal rights group, previously said. "This isn't the right environment for reptiles".

Last year the cabaret told *Le Parisien* newspaper: "We have never mistreated and will never mistreat animals."

It claimed it used "a species of aquatic python, equally at home in the water as on land" in the show. But Alice Georges, a keeper at exotic pet shop Ferme Tropicale de Paris, said she had spotted reticulated and Indian pythons in videos of the act posted online.

"These aren't aquatic snakes. What they're being forced to endure is horrible," she said.

It appeared the Moulin Rouge sat in a loophole in a 2021 law that forbids using wild animals in nightclubs or on TV from this year and bans owning them from 2028.

Hailed by President Emmanuel Macron's camp at the time as an animal rights coup, the law has both sparked a backlash from circus owners and been criticised by animal rights groups for not going far enough on issues like hunting, industrial farming or bullfighting. — **AFP**

art & life

Local Scene

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TUESDAY | MARCH 21 | 2023

An edifice that enhances kids' knowledge

By Kabeer Yousuf

They say the only habit that someone should wish their kids to foster from childhood should be 'reading' because reading is a very important activity in a child's life.

It is not only an activity that develops skills but also enhances the way the brain functions. Studies have proven that a child who reads books can develop a better understanding of abstract concepts, skills in comprehending things, improve their writing skills, and build up an outstanding vocabulary.

In addition, if there is one behaviour that specialists strongly recommend instilling in youngsters, it is the habit of reading because it has so many advantages. These advantages include how reading can help kids develop their verbal, social, and emotional skills as well as their memory and cognitive function, which results in increased brain capacity.

The place where children in Oman can freely visit to nurture their reading skills is the Children's Public Library. Located in Qurum next to the Children's Museum, the library is the first of its kind in the Sultanate of Oman, and as many as 30,000 to 35,000 young readers make use of the more than 25,000 titles inside the mammoth edifice every year.

Opened in 2017 with the slogan 'Knowledge is Our Right, the library works with the world of knowledge and its makers to present it to children in Oman.

The Children's Public Library aspires to be the first place where kids from 3 to 17 from all lands and cultures can go to learn. In order to provide students with a unique learning environment, it also encourages school visits, and students can schedule a visit to the library via the website of the institution.

The library interests its visitors and beneficiaries through floors and spaces where knowledge meets play, and research by raising questions and scientific curiosity.

LIBRARY SECTIONS

The library spaces are divided into zones, for example, reading areas, a colouring and drawing area, a play area room, a programme room, an Oman collections corner, a studio, and a Braille corner. Additionally, an Innovation corner that inspires young minds and helps them think further is where all the technology-related activities and workshops such as virtual reality, 3D printing, and Arduino programming happen.

STORY-TELLING ZONES

In this space, storytellers read stories to youngsters of different ages and lan-

guages in rings. After that, the tales go to the minds and mouths of the young, who tell them themselves; accordingly, the storyline does not break.

DRAWING AND COLOURING AREA

Children in this space move to their imaginations with their own hands, by drawing all their imaginations that translate their own art.

CHILDREN'S PLAY AREA

The children's play area is designed to meet the child's motor needs everywhere and to provide a space of movement that inspires him to search and learn in his own way, besides the sounds of knowledge spreading in the library.

Within this zone, young children are offered supportive activities that help them develop their motor skills through puzzles, building construction, building games, and the like.

PROGRAMME ROOM

Within this room, the library celebrates the establishment of various workshops and programmes, as it allows the workshop members freedom of movement and learning, not to mention the light space that motivates open-mindedness and overlooks the Qurum Nature Reserve.

This space accommodates 30 seats, with an area of 60 square meters. The shape and arrangement of the furniture can be controlled in proportion to the content of the workshop.

COMPUTER LAB

The Children's Public Library works to provide knowledge in all possible ways.

The library has a computer lab that allows young children and their parents to research and uses electronic resources.

THE INNOVATION CORNER

The innovation corner complements the Library's role in spreading the joy of learning through the knowledge that it instils in children through smart technologies that enable young people to experience and discover the worlds of modern technology.

BRaille CORNER

The Children's Public Library is committed to providing sources of knowledge for all groups, including blind children, through books translated into Braille and the latest devices for Braille sensors.

LIBRARY ACTIVITIES AND WORKSHOP

The library conducts a number of workshops every year, on average 50 per year. The main programme of the workshops is the "Marifah" programme sponsored by BP Oman. It is conducted online and in face-to-face workshops, as well as at events.

The library participates in many cultural forums every year, such as the Muscat International Book Fair.

The Children's Public Library has won several accolades for acting as a reservoir of knowledge. Most important of them include the 1st place titled 'Prize of Excellence for Libraries and Community Cultural Centers', in 2021, and the 2nd place in the same category, 'Prize of Excellence for Libraries and Community Cultural Centers', in 2022.