



P12

AL RAWAHI AND AL HMOUD FORGE AHEAD AFTER FRIDAY SETBACK AT RALLY SWEDEN



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SAMAYIL INDUSTRIAL CITY ATTRACTS 24 NEW PROJECTS IN 2023



P20

EXPLORING OMAN DESERTS HAS BECOME MORE ACCESSIBLE TODAY



MUSCAT

HIS MAJESTY GREETES PRESIDENT OF GAMBIA

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of greetings to President Adama Barrow of the Republic of The Gambia on the occasion of his country's Independence Anniversary. His Majesty expressed his best greetings to President Adama wishing him good health and happiness and for the friendly Gambian people further progress and prosperity.

MUNICH

BADR HOLDS MEETINGS WITH OFFICIALS

Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, on Saturday met with Shaikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al Thani, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference (MSC) which began on Friday in Munich, Federal Republic of Germany. The two sides stressed the depth of the strong fraternal relations between the two brotherly countries and the joint keenness to foster cooperation and coordination in various fields for mutual benefits.

DETAILS ON P2



AL BASHAYER CAMEL FESTIVAL CONCLUDES

HH Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, presented awards to the winners in the presence of ministers and dignitaries at the seventh annual Al Bashayer Camel Festival which ended in the Wilayat of Adam on Saturday.

REPORT ON P10

February 25 official holiday for teachers

MUSCAT: On the occasion of the Omani Teacher's Day, it has been decided that next Sunday will be an official holiday for the teaching staff in the public and private schools in the Sultanate of Oman, according to a statement issued by the Ministry of Education.

The statement said that on the occasion of the Omani Teacher's Day, which falls on February 24, His Majesty the Sultan has designated this day as an official holiday for all teachers as well as those holding related teaching and administrative positions in public and private schools.

In the event that this day coincides with a day off, the Minister of Education may compensate for it with another day. It has been

decided that Sunday, February 25, will be an official holiday for all teaching staff in the public and private schools in the Sultanate of Oman, the statement said.

On this occasion, Dr Madeeha bint Ahmed al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, extended her utmost greetings to His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, appreciating His Majesty's keenness and interest in the status of teacher and his effective role in raising the generations of this generous nation, praying to Allah the Almighty to protect His Majesty, grant him good health and a long life wishing that this dear nation enjoys more progress and prosperity under his wise leadership, the statement said. — ONA

\$1.3-billion 'Al Khuwair Downtown' project to change Muscat's skyline

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, FEB 17

The ambitious Al Khuwair Downtown and Waterfront Development Project, boasting a hefty \$1.3 billion investment, is set to redefine urban living in Oman's capital. Spanning an impressive 3.6 million square metres, surpassing the area of Muscat International Airport, this initiative promises a vibrant new hub of Muscat Governorate.

According to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, crucial agreements are already in place, paving the way for the project's operational plan and the launch of construction work to commence before the end of 2024. Embracing cutting-edge technology, developers will be seamlessly integrating modern planning tools with the unique landscape of Al Khuwair site.

The renowned Zaha Hadid Architects, carrying on the legacy of the late visionary Iraqi architect, has been entrusted with designing a key 38,000-square-metre section of the project. Zaha Hadid Architects is partnering with well-known real estate services



Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, presenting details about Al Khuwair Downtown and Waterfront Development Project at the recent investment forum.

and investment firm CBRE in the project design. Expanding its reach further, the Ministry has partnered with Al Tawoos Company for the development of a mixed-use tower.

While initial impressions might suggest towering structures, the Ministry has clarified that Al Khuwair Downtown will feature a cluster of buildings, each standing tall at approximately 35 to 40 floors. The 12-month design phase prioritises creating a distinctive waterfront landmark, with the strategic location within the

flight path securing approval for structures up to 150 metres (50 floors) from the Civil Aviation Authority. A budget of around \$8 million has also been allocated to support the brand identity and marketing of this new urban landmark.

Significantly, Al Khuwair Downtown and Waterfront Development Project is one of the bigger investment prizes in a portfolio of urban initiatives unveiled by the Ministry in recent months for investments and development partnerships.

TURN TO P2

Three-part documentary 'A House of Wonders' premieres today

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

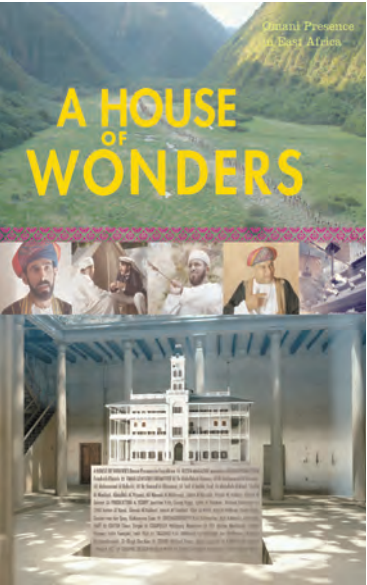
The Ministry of Information will premiere 'A House of Wonders: Omani Presence in East Africa', a three-part captivating documentary on the historic relations of Oman and East Africa, at the House of Musical Arts, Royal Opera House Muscat, on Sunday.

An illustrated book with 322 pages that documents Oman's cultural role in the region and depicting different stages of the project will also be launched. Each episode is 55-minute long with Arabic, English and Swahili subtitles.

'A House of Wonders' is an Oman-German venture that focuses on Bait Al Ajajib — an iconic government building in Stone Town, Zanzibar — as a witness to this relationship. The series will follow the lives of Sayyid Said bin Sultan, Tippu Tip, and Mubarak al Hinawy covering a span of 150 years. Local experts as well as international scholars contribute to a multi-perspective approach seeking to establish awareness on the richness and diversity of the shared heritage between Oman and East Africa.

The films will be broadcast on Oman TV during the

OMAN-EAST AFRICA RELATIONS



Each episode is 55-minute long with Arabic, English and Swahili subtitles. The documentary will be shown on Oman TV and Vox Cinemas across Oman free of charge

course of this year.

The production of the film that was shot in 10 countries took 3 years with a short suspension during the pandemic. It is said to be the biggest documentary project in the Sultanate of Oman to date. It features 28 international scholars as well as prominent Omani actors and more than 600 supporting actors.

The documentary has already won the first prize for documentary at the ASBU Festival (Arab States Broadcasting Union) in Tunis (2023) and was shown at Zanzibar International Film Festival. 'A House of Wonders'

will also be screened free of charge at VOX Cinema City Centre Sohar, February 19, 7:30 pm; VOX Cinema Nizwa Grand Mall, February 20, 7:30 pm; Cinépolis Oasis Mall Salalah, February 22, 7:30 pm; and VOX Cinema Mall of Oman Basher, February 24, 7:30 pm.

Friedrich Kluetsch, Saif al Rahbi of *Nizwa* magazine, Huda al Jahwari, Abdulrahman al Maskari and Juma al Maskari are co-directors of the movie. Professor Dr Abdullah al Kindi of the project committee will speak about the documentary at the event.



Sayyid Badr holds key meetings with regional, global leaders



Sayyid Badr holds important meetings with regional, international leaders on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference (MSC) in Munich, Germany. – ONA

MUNICH: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, on Saturday met with Shaikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al Thani, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the State of Qatar, on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference (MSC) which began on Friday in Munich, Federal Republic of Germany.

The two sides stressed the depth of the strong fraternal relations between the two brotherly countries and the joint keenness to foster cooperation and coordination in various fields for mutual benefits.

The two ministers discussed the events currently unfolding in Gaza and the military escalation taking place in the region, expressing their support to the Palestinian people and their right to freedom and to live in peace and dignity.



Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, also met with Hanke Bruins, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, with whom he discussed bilateral relations and mutual cooperation expressing their keenness to continue developing them and exchanging experiences and investing in various sectors to achieve more common gains.

They also discussed the

regional developments in both the Middle East and Europe, stressing their support for the efforts aimed to reach a ceasefire, address the catastrophic humanitarian conditions, resort to international law, and purposeful and constructive dialogue to achieve security and peace underscoring the necessity of establishing an autonomous Palestinian state based on the two-state solution.

The foreign minister also met



with Mariya Gabriel, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Bulgaria. They discussed bilateral relations and cooperation between the two friendly countries and ways to bolster them. They also touched on the current situation in the region, stressing the importance of finding an urgent and lasting solution to the Palestinian cause.

The meetings were attended by

several officials from both sides.

Meanwhile, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy also met with Luminica Odobescu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Romania, on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference (MSC) which began on Friday in Munich, Federal Republic of Germany.

During the meeting, the two sides stressed their joint desire to bolster bilateral relations and cooperation underscoring the importance of dialogue as a way to achieve mutual understanding, security and stability through the effective application of the rules of international law and justice for all while attaching top priority at this stage to addressing the humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip through an immediate ceasefire and the delivery of urgent aid and relief materials.

The Foreign Minister also met

with a number of senior members of The Elders group in the presence of Ban Ki-moon, former secretary-general of the United Nations, Juan Santos, former president of Colombia, Gro Brundtland, former director-general of the World Health Organization, and Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland, and former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

A number of issues were discussed and opinions exchanged During the meeting with a special focus on the components of decisive peacemaking based on the recognition of the Palestinian state and the imposition of the two-state solution on the international agenda to fulfill the will of the international community and to establish justice and the rules of security and stability for all parties.

— ONA

E-contracting for pilgrims from today

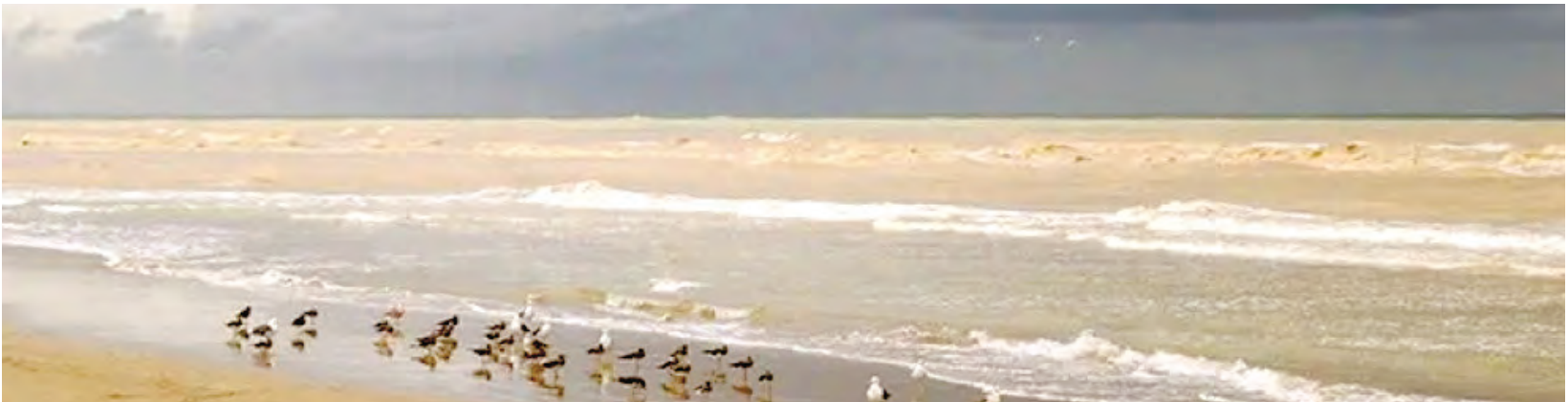
MUSCAT: The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs announced that e-contracting for those eligible for Haj for 1445 AH will be available from today for a period of 10 days by paying 50 per cent of the cost of Haj.

The Ministry explained that the costs of the institution services in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia amount to 6,274 Saudi riyals for pilgrims arriving by air to Medina and 6,078 Saudi riyals for those arriving by

air to King Abdulaziz Airport in Jeddah.

The cost of the Haj for pilgrims travelling via land transport to Medina or Mecca stands at 4,613 Saudi riyals which covers service fees, tent fees, Mina and Arafat camps, health insurance and transportation fees which includes 15 per cent value-added tax, the cost of the Haj card as well as the visa fees for non-citizens (300 Saudi riyals).

— ONA



Oman Met urged seagoers to check the sea conditions before marine activities.

Rough sea, temperature drop expected from today

MUSCAT: Oman Meteorology has warned of high sea waves (rough sea) on the coasts of Musandam Governorate and the coasts of the Sea of Oman, from today, February 18 and February 21.

The sea will be moderate or rough, with waves 2.0-2.5 metres coinciding with active northwesterly winds.

Oman Met also urged seagoers to check the sea condition before practicing marine activities.

Northwesterly winds are expected to begin in the governorates of Musandam, Al Batinah North, and Al Buraimi, gradually extending to include most of the governorates of the Sultanate of Oman on February 21, and active

southwesterly winds on the coast of the Arabian Sea.

A relative drop in temperatures is expected, especially in mountainous and desert areas, coinciding with active northwesterly winds.

\$1.3 billion ‘Al Khuwair Downtown’ project to change Muscat’s skyline

FROM PAGE 1

An investment forum held at the Royal Opera House Muscat last week showcased a range of opportunities across future cities, neighbourhoods and integrated residential plans presented by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning.

Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, stated, “We are partnering with local and international investors to present developments about our future projects.” The urban projects align with the Oman 2040 national development strategy aimed at turning ambitious vision for urban development into reality. Careful planning, international expertise and comprehensive collaboration are central to the approach, he explained.

Investment and partnership opportunities encompass the sizable portfolio of urban development projects unveiled by the Ministry recently. The flagship Sultan Haitham City and other envisioned Future Cities across the

country stand out. Officials noted that these developments offer a clean slate for urban development.

Further contracting and partnership opportunities will arise when the Ministry releases tenders for basic services and other contracts during the Phase 1 development of major urban projects. The Greater Muscat Structural Plan also holds promise for shaping the capital city’s expansion and growth.

Officials highlighted that Al Jabal Al Akhdhar initiative presents opportunities for investment in a sustainable and eco-friendly development amidst nature.

The Ministry’s Sorouh Programme for Integrated Housing Scheme also offers investment potential. Eleven such integrated neighbourhoods are planned nationwide, with four currently open for investment through the Tatweer platform.

Beyond individual projects, Thursday’s forum emphasised the importance of open communication and collaboration. Real estate developers, investors and stakeholders were among the attendees.

Salalah Airport sees big surge in handling cargo

STAFF REPORTER

SALALAH, FEB 17

The Salalah Airport reported a huge jump in the volume of air cargo handling last January, at a rate of 310 per cent over the volume of shipments for the same period last year, and a rate exceeding 185 per cent over the same month in 2022.

The number of shipments handled in January 2024 exceeded the numbers for the same period in 2019 — that is, before the pandemic — which gives a positive indication and a clear indication of the steady growth of air cargo traffic through Salalah Airport.

The data provided and analysed by the air cargo business development team at Oman Airports also indicated a steady increase in cargo handling volumes since the end of the last quarter of last year.

The growth rate exceeded 48 per cent over the last quarter of



The growth rate exceeded 48 per cent over the last quarter of 2022 and exceeded 13 per cent over the total freight handling of the same year

2022 and exceeded 13 per cent over the total freight handling of the same year.

Zakariya bin Yaqoob al Harrasi, Vice-President of Salalah Airport, said that the airport achieved high numbers and percentages during the first month of this year as a translation of the combined efforts of various parties with the efforts undertaken by the Commercial Operations Unit at Oman Airports to advance the air cargo sector at Salalah Airport through various initiatives to attract freight agents

and dealers.

He added that providing all necessary support and facilities to business owners in the local market in Dhofar Governorate in activities related to air freight will contribute to marketing the air cargo building and promoting Salalah Airport as a unique strategic location.

It is noted that the success of the launch of the sea-air connection flight, which took place in September last year, achieved the desired strategic objectives.



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URGENT APPEAL FOR REINSTATEMENT OF NEET EXAM CENTRE IN OMAN

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Parents of children studying in Indian Schools in Oman have submitted a mass petition requesting the reinstatement of the cancelled NEET examination centre in Oman to the Indian Ambassador to Oman at the open forum held at the embassy on Friday.

The NEET examination centre was started in Oman at the Indian School Muscat centre after petitions were submitted to the Members of Parliament, Elamaram Karim, and

John Brittas, after they raised the issue in the Indian Parliament in 2022.

The National Testing Agency (NTA), under whose umbrella the crucial NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test) exams are held, has recently announced that the centres in Oman and other Gulf countries would be cancelled as the registration process for the NEET UG 2024 began and that a total of 554 centres across India have been said to be available for candidates.

But the exemption of Gulf countries, including Oman, where 21 Indian schools are operating,



from the list this year has now created a crisis that affects the future of students, according to the parents.

“The new decision has created a crisis for expatriate parents who

are facing financial difficulties due to various reasons,” members of Kairali, a gathering of the diaspora in Oman told Observer.

They added that with the skyrocketing seasonal airfares and as the online registration for NEET exam has already begun, the sudden decision to cancel the examination centre in the Gulf countries including Oman has created serious concern among the students, and has become nearly impossible to afford to send their wards to take NEET exams back home.

A group of parents led by

Kairali Oman held talks with Amit Narang, Indian Ambassador of India to Oman, and demanded immediate re-establishment of the NEET exam centre in Oman.

There are 21 Indian schools and nearly 45,000 students spread across the country and over 500 NEET aspirants in the country.

Representatives of the parents, Sudhi Padmanabhan, Shaji Sebastian, Manoj Peringeth, Arun VM, Mithun Mohan and others said that the ambassador assured the concern of the parents and students and the matter would be brought to the attention of the

Union Ministry of Education and NEET authorities immediately.

Earlier, the representatives of the Indian parent group of NEET aspirants in the country submitted a memorandum to the Minister of State for External Affairs and Parliamentary Affairs, V Muraleedharan to consider the request.

Referring to the allotment of NEET Exam centres in Kuwait and Dubai recently, the representatives said allotting a centre in Oman would only help hundreds of such students to take a step forward towards their academic goals.

Oman participates in Arab health meet

AMMAN: The Sultanate of Oman, represented by the Ministry of Health, took part in the ordinary meeting of the Executive Office of the Supreme Council of the Arab Board of Health Specialisations, which was held in the Jordanian capital, Amman in the presence of a number of Arab health ministers and representatives of Arab health bodies.

Addressing the meeting, Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, stressed the need to advance medical education being a priority in developing the professional lives of doctors providing healthcare to patients which is the

primary focus of health systems in all countries of the world. The minister noted that continuing medical education enhances professionalism and develops the scientific and practical knowledge of medical personnel which helps meet the needs of patients and raise the level of health response in the Arab world.

The meeting aimed at improving health services in the Arab world and promoting everything that would contribute to the qualification of specialists in the health fields.

The meeting discussed ways and mechanisms for qualifying health



specialists to be highly professional and scientifically competent in accordance with international standards.

It also discussed ways of raising the scientific and practical levels of

health service providers in various health professions and specialisations through cooperation with the relevant educational institutions.

— ONA

CAA: Key contributor to national treasury

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, FEB 17

The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) is one of the major contributors to the national treasury, which it has been able to achieve due to a surge in passenger traffic at airports and also because of the use of Omani airspace by airlines.

According to Naif al Abri, President, of CAA, says around 465,000 aircraft used the airspace of Oman in 2023, while Muscat International Airport received more than 12 million passengers through the Airport until the end of 2023, fetching over RO 110 million in revenues.

He said, “The old Muscat airport terminal building will be redeveloped as a multi-purpose facility, with plans to convert it into an aviation museum that will showcase the history of aviation of the country.”

He said that only competition can bring down the ticket prices on the domestic, which was also echoed by the



Naif al Abri with head of the delegation from Saudi Arabia

Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) last week.

Speaking to the Observer last week, Al Abri said the new National Aviation Strategy will reflect the paradigm shift in the function and the role of the CAA in the coming years.

Meanwhile, the civil aviation authorities of the Sultanate of Oman and Saudi Arabia held a meeting in Muscat on Thursday and reviewed the strategic programmes, the draft National Aviation Strategy 2040, and ways to benefit from the Kingdom's civil aviation experience in implementing such programmes, including developing airport cities, traveller experience, and protecting travellers' rights.

Nasser's photographic journey into Oman's reclassified avian marvels

LIJU CHERIAN
@lijucherianoman

Oman boasts a rich diversity of owl species, with the Desert Owl standing out as a remarkable endemic inhabitant of the Arabian Peninsula.

Noted Omani wildlife photographer, Nasser bin Hamed al Harthy, shares insights into the fascinating evolution of the Desert Owl, formerly known as Hume's Owl, which has undergone a captivating transformation since its discovery in 2013.

According to Nasser, after the desert owl was discovered, a similar-looking owl was reclassified, shedding its previous identity to emerge as the Desert Owl (Strix Hadorami).

Its feathers have adapted seamlessly to the golden sands, providing effective camouflage during daylight hours. Unlike its Omani counterpart, this owl thrives in the solitude of wadis, where ancient wells hold whispered tales, evolving to suit its desert habitat.

These adaptable owls are well-suited to arid environments, commonly found in rocky areas, wadis, and desert regions. Oman, with its unique wildlife, becomes a challenging yet rewarding home for creatures that



Nasser bin Hamed al Harthy at work capturing Desert Owl, formerly known as Hume's Owl.

endure harsh conditions.

The Desert Owl's elusive nature adds to its mystique, making it a challenging find even in the vast desert landscapes.

Nasser emphasises the owl's preference for calm places with extensive hunting grounds, venturing into the night to capture these nocturnal hunters in their element.

Nasser's dedication to preserving these creatures leads him to share only general information with readers,



safeguarding specific locations to protect the enigmatic Desert Owls.

His nocturnal odyssey spans the remote wilderness of Oman, from expansive deserts to the heights of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar and various governorates, including Al Sharqiyah, Al Batinah, Al Dakhiliyah, Dhofar, and Muscat.

“Photographing these owls at night is no simple task, requiring patience and meticulous planning,” he admits as he utilises modern technology,

including Google Earth and online mapping, and collaborates with local communities to gather valuable information about their habitats.

Equipped with a Nikon D500 and a Tamron VII 150-600 lens, along with special torches to illuminate the landing spots of responding owls, Nasser captures the beauty and mystery of these captivating nocturnal creatures.

In September 2022, Nasser realised his photography dreams when he undertook a trip to the Sundarbans, India, where wilderness seamlessly merges with mangroves.

His quest was to capture the majestic Bengal Tiger and immerse himself in the awe-inspiring beauty of this unique landscape. Witnessing kingfishers, egrets, and the elusive masked fin foot was a mesmerising experience.

It also marked his inaugural encounter with saltwater crocodiles.

In Nasser's words, “Venturing into the night to photograph owls is no easy task. This requires patience and hard work.” Despite the challenges, the thrill of capturing these mystical beings remains undeniable, showcasing the dedication required to document and conserve Oman's unique wildlife.

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- 12- R/C Land with an area of 750 square meters in Duqm.

Contact at: - +968 92822040, 97365897
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120 DOCTORS GRADUATE FROM OMAN MEDICAL SPECIALITY BOARD

MUSCAT: The Oman Medical Speciality Board (OMSB) marked a significant milestone as it celebrated the graduation of the 15th batch of doctors who successfully completed their training within the Board.

The training period ranged from four to six academic years for specialised training programmes and two to three years for local fellowships. The ceremony took place at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

A total of 120 male and female graduates comprised this batch, specialising in three fields for local fellowships: cardiology for adults, genetic medicine, and haematology and oncology for children.

The graduates excelled in 17 medical specialties, including anaesthesia, dermatology, ear, nose and throat surgery, emergency medicine, family

medicine, general surgery and dentistry. Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, presented certificates of appreciation to honour distinguished doctors among the faculty members and resident doctors.

The minister also distributed graduation certificates to the 120 specialised doctors, both male and female, and recognised graduates with international achievements. Dr Siham bint Salem al Sinaniyah, Vice-President of the Council for Professional Efficiency Affairs, emphasised the crucial role of educational institutions and research centres in scientific and knowledge building. She acknowledged the significance of medical progress and highlighted the alignment of student training with the rapid developments brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution and its technological



Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health, presented certificates at the graduation ceremony of the 15th batch of doctors from OMSB.

advancements.

The ceremony featured a visual presentation showcasing the doctors' journey and their

accomplishments during the training years at the Council.

Distinguished attendees included Dr Fatima bint



Mohammed al Ajmiah, Executive President for Oman Medical Speciality Board, several under-secretaries, members of

the Majlis Ash'shura, members of the Council's teaching staff, and parents of the graduate doctors. — ONA



Indian School Sur (ISS) held its valedictory ceremony for outgoing class 12th students.

ISS holds valedictory for class 12th students

SUR: Indian School Sur (ISS) held its valedictory ceremony on February 15, bidding farewell to 55 outgoing class 12th students.

The event was graced by dignitaries, including the chief guest, Jami Srinivasa Rao, President of the School Management Committee (SMC), Pradeep Kumar A V, Convenor; Adv Saeed T P, Treasurer; Dr Ramkumar, Member; Shabeeb Mohammed, Member; Nishreen Basheer, Member, Principal Dr S Srinivasan, along with parents, teachers and graduating students.

In his address, Srinivasa Rao encouraged the students to utilise their acquired knowledge to overcome life's challenges effectively. He wished them success as they embarked on their journey towards achieving their dreams.

Dr Ramkumar, member of the SMC, emphasised the importance of education and

diligent study in shaping a meaningful life. Drawing inspiration from ancient wisdom, he highlighted the duties children owe to their parents as a guiding principle for success.

Shabeeb Mohammed, member of the SMC, stressed the significance of self-belief and the right attitude in achieving success. He expressed gratitude to the teachers for their dedication in shaping the students' academic journey.

Nishreen Basheer, representing the SMC, extended heartfelt congratulations to all graduating students.

Dr S Srinivasan, the Principal of Indian School Sur, in his speech encouraged students to confront future challenges with confidence and dedication, transforming their dreams into actionable visions.

He highlighted the three fundamental D's of life: Desire, Decision and Discipline, as

guiding principles for success. He also highlighted the importance of good grades in shaping the students' future and urged them to embrace change gracefully.

Sarala, HoD of Science, motivated the students with words of encouragement, and mementos were distributed as a token of appreciation and love from Indian School Sur.

Aswathy, physical education teacher, delivered a vote of thanks.

Citations for outgoing students were read by their class teachers, followed by blessings from educators.

Outgoing students, SMC members, Principal, and the chief guest shared their experiences.

The valedictory ceremony marked the transition of students from ISS to the next phase of their lives with optimism and determination.

Cultural map, industries' project unveiled

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, through the Department of Cultural Identity, unveiled the 'Map of Cultural and Creative Industries' research study project at the Youth Centre in Muscat Governorate.

This two-year project aims to comprehensively understand and analyse the cultural and creative industries sectors in Oman, proposing a methodological framework for monitoring the creative economy's contribution to the national gross domestic product.

Thuraya bint Hamad al Maawaliyah, Head of the Cultural Industries Department, highlighted the map's seven pillars, covering



policies, creative economy, education, national talent, intellectual property, technology and innovation, and creativity and society. The project involves systematic scientific research and international consultations with specialists, contributing to

evidence-based data for decision-makers to support Oman's cultural strategy. The launch event, attended by dignitaries and experts, included the publishing of the QR code for the map file on the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth's website. — ONA

Artists from Oman, India take part in IDF Art Expo

MUSCAT: Incredible Talents took part in the recently concluded 10th IDF Art Space Expo from February 5 to 7. The expo was inaugurated by HH Sayyidah Meyyan bint Shihab al Said, Chairperson of Oman Design Association.

The exhibition saw a plethora of master artists from Oman and India taking part.

Various master artists who participated from India included Pradeep Kumar M Argade, Ajay Rawat, Sarojini Datta, while from Oman, artistes like Mona Raj Rathod, Shavana Arab and Amrin Siddique took part.



On the concluding day, Eng Said al Shanfari, CEO of Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC), was the chief guest who distributed the mementos. Incredible Talents is an Indian government-approved non-profit

international organisation which had earlier conducted successful exhibitions in Muscat, Goa, Mumbai and Dubai. Mona Raj Rathod and Dr Tushar Bansal are the founders and co-founders of Incredible Talents.

Sulfur springs and unique ecosystem attract tourists to Adam

TEXT & PHOTOS BY
YAHYA ALSALMANI

Due to its many topographical characteristics, there are many tourist destinations in the Sultanate. Sulfur springs are classified as one of these destinations that attract tourists and specialists in geological sciences.

In addition, these sites are a major source of recovery from many rheumatic diseases and skin allergies.

In Ain Namah in the Wilayat of Adam, Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, sulfur springs continue to flow throughout the year. This spring is located in a topographical depression extending in the middle of the desert plain, which is about 40 km from the centre of the wilayat, and is located along Wadi Halfeen.

Every time after heavy rains, the



The sulfur spring is located in a topographical depression extending in the middle of the desert plain.

water flow increases, as the water covers a wide area along the valley.

Despite the distance of this location, people visit this unique location to heal and spend

comfortable time in this spacious place surrounded by desert trees. This site is also characterised by soft sand and unique geological formations that surround the area from the east and

west.

The importance of this site is not limited to recovery from the sulfurous waters and tourism. This natural oasis located in the middle of the desert

attracts many rare wild animals such as wild rabbits and deer, and at the same time is considered a haven for dozens of species of resident and migratory Omani birds.

Studies indicate that sulfur water has many benefits whether used for drinking or as an external treatment used for bathing or inhaling. The reason for its importance is due to the effect of hydrogen sulfide, which is absorbed by the pores of the skin and passes through the mucous membranes of the stomach and bronchopulmonary membranes.

This water helps clean the intestines, liver, and urinary tract. It also helps lower blood sugar.

Medical research confirms the significant role of hydrogen sulfide in many biochemical reactions of the body. New data is beginning to reveal

new therapeutic applications for this water.

Hydrogen sulfide gas can be absorbed in several ways and can penetrate the skin and mucous membranes. Therefore, it can work at the cellular level, whether in the skin or the internal organs of the body, so the topical application of sulfur mineral water rich in hydrogen sulfide can treat internal organ disorders.

"Dozens of tourists flock to this beautiful site, especially during official holidays, and the number of tourists increases after periods of rain.

"There is also a group of researchers who go to this site to study its geological and physical formations", an Omani resident said.

This site can only be reached by a 4WD because the road leading to it is not paved.



Fresh Gaza strikes as fears grow for patients

GAZA: Israel said it had taken 100 people into custody at one of Gaza's main hospitals on Saturday after troops raided the facility, with fears mounting for patients and staff trapped inside.

The deadly bombardment of Gaza continued overnight with another 100 people killed in Israeli strikes, according to the health ministry.

At least 120 patients and five medical teams are stuck without water, food and electricity in the Nasser hospital in Gaza's main southern city of Khan Yunis, according to the health ministry.

Israel has for weeks concentrated its military operations in Khan Yunis.

Intense fighting has raged around the Nasser hospital — one of the Palestinian territory's last major medical facilities that remains even partly operational.

The power was cut and the generators stopped after the raid, leading to the deaths of six patients due to a lack of oxygen, according to Gaza's health ministry.

"New-born children are at a risk of dying in the next few hours," the ministry warned on Saturday.

Israel's army said troops entered the hospital on Thursday, acting on what it said was "credible intelligence" that hostages seized in the October 7 attack had been



Demonstrators, holding a placard and the Palestinian flag during a 'Protest for Palestine' and in front of Italian national television headquarter RAI, in Romeon. – AFP

held there and that the bodies of some may still be inside.

The raid has been criticised by medics and the United Nations. The army has insisted it made every effort to keep the hospital supplied with power, including

bringing in an alternative generator.

A witness, who declined to be named for safety reasons, said that the Israeli forces had shot "at anyone who moved inside the hospital".

World Health Organization spokesperson Tarik Jasarevic slammed the operation, saying "more degradation to the hospital means more lives being lost".

"Patients, health workers, and civilians who are seeking refuge in

hospitals deserve safety and not a burial in those places of healing," he said.

Doctors Without Borders said its medics had been forced to flee and leave patients behind, with one employee unaccounted for

At least 120 patients and five medical teams are stuck without water, food and electricity in the Nasser hospital in Gaza's main southern city

and another detained by Israeli forces.

Israel's subsequent assault on Gaza has killed at least 28,858 people, mostly women and children, according to the territory's health ministry. The UN Human Rights Office said the Nasser hospital raid appeared to be "part of a pattern of attacks by Israeli forces striking essential life-saving civilian infrastructure".

A day after US President Joe Biden called for a "temporary truce" to secure the release of captives, Palestinians reiterated their demands, including a complete pause in fighting, the release of prisoners, and withdrawal of Israeli troops.

— AFP

Israel out to destroy UNRWA, says Lazzarini



Philippe Lazzarini

GENEVA: Israel is waging a concerted campaign aimed at destroying UNRWA, the head of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees said in an interview published on Saturday.

Philippe Lazzarini said calls for his resignation were part of the Israeli government's push.

"Right now we are dealing with an expanded, concerted campaign by Israel aimed at destroying UNRWA," he told the Swiss newspaper group Tamedia.

"It is a long-term political goal because it is believed that if the aid agency is abolished, the status of the Palestinian refugees will be resolved once and for all — and with it, the right of return. There is a much larger political goal behind this.

"Just look at the number of actions Israel is taking against UNRWA," the main aid body in the Gaza Strip, he said.

He cited measures in the Israeli parliament, moves to remove the agency's VAT exemption and orders for contractors at Israel's port of Ashdod to "stop handling certain food deliveries for UNRWA".

"And all these demands come from the government."

Furthermore, Lazzarini says more than 150 UNRWA installations have been hit since the Gaza war began.



This picture shows the damaged Gaza City headquarters of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). – AFP

It is a long-term political goal because it is believed that if the aid agency is abolished, the status of the Palestinian refugees will be resolved once and for all.

PHILIPPE LAZZARINI
UNRWA Commissioner General

Israel has called for Lazzarini to step down following claims that a tunnel had been discovered under its evacuated Gaza City headquarters.

Lazzarini said the tunnel was 20 metres below ground and UNRWA as a humanitarian organisation did not have the capabilities to be examining what was underground in Gaza.

He also said there was "no reason" to comply with Israel's lone call for him to quit, "especially since my resignation would not improve the situation at UNRWA".

"The criticisms are not concerned with me personally, but with the organisation as a whole. The calls for resignation are part of the campaign to destroy UNRWA", he said.

Several countries -- including the

United States, Britain, Germany and Japan -- have suspended funding to UNRWA in response to Israeli allegations that some of its staff participated in the October 7 attack.

Lazzarini said \$438 million has been frozen — the equivalent of more than half of expected income for 2024.

"If all countries continue to withhold their payments, UNRWA's funding will very quickly be at risk," he said.

"From March onwards, expenses exceed income. And without new donors, UNRWA will have to cease operations in April."

He said this applied not only to the Gaza Strip but also to work in the West Bank, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. — AFP

The occupation invades West Bank hospitals

JENIN: A climate of fear pervades a hospital in the occupied West Bank city of Jenin, where patients and doctors are reeling from last month's deadly raid by Israeli agents disguised as medics.

At the rehabilitation ward at Jenin's Ibn Sina hospital, two patients recalled hearing the screams of a nurse as Israeli forces reached the third floor. "I opened the door and saw a man. I didn't know they were special forces," said a patient, a grey hoodie pulled up over his head to conceal his face. "The man was choking the nurse with his hand and hit her with the butt of his gun."

His account matched that of an elderly patient, speaking while exercising along the corridor clutching a walking frame, who recalled hearing shouting while he stayed put in his room.

Neither knew that through a sky-blue door just metres away,

the Israeli unit shot dead three Palestinians, including a paraplegic patient hospitalised for months.

"It's toughest at night," said the patient, who had been shouted at by the undercover agents to shut his door during the assault.

All but one person in the hospital spoke on condition of anonymity, as they were worried about their safety.

Only on closer inspection were bullet holes visible in the abandoned hospital bed and an adjacent chair where the young men had been shot.

A medic said he was approached by a man dressed as a doctor, who spoke perfect Arabic and showed the ID pinned to his chest before asking him to unlock room 376.

The World Health Organisation said it was "appalled". Such an attack "creates fear and is dangerous for health workers and patients", said Rik Peepkorn.

— AFP

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1. Mr. Shoaib Abdul Ghaffar – Head of International Branch Operations (shoaib.ghaffar@hbl.com) Office Tel no. 0097143029158

2. Mr. Asad Malik- Head Centralized Operations (Asad.malik@hbl.com) Office Tel- 0097143029170.

Communication Channel 4:
Tariq Al Kiyumi Legal Consultants and Law office (Muscat, Al Khuwair, Sultan Qaboos Street, Sky Tower, Way No.35, Building No.479, First Floor, Office No.101, Phone Nos. 00968 97166697- 00968 24396873.



Wang says China will be a ‘force for stability’

BEIJING: Beijing’s top diplomat Wang Yi said China will be a “force for stability” in the world during a speech on Saturday at a major security conference in Germany.

“No matter the changes in the international situation, China as a responsible major country will always maintain the continuity and stability of its major policies and resolutely stay a force for stability in a turbulent world,” Wang said.

Foreign Minister Wang’s address at the Munich Security Conference, a gathering of 180 leaders and defence chiefs, followed a fresh appeal by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky for more help in his country’s fight against Russian troops. China says it is a neutral party in the conflict but has been criticised for refusing to condemn Moscow for its attack of Ukraine.

“China-Russia relations do not involve forming alliances, creating opposition or targeting third parties,” Wang said.

“They are normal relations between two neighbouring major



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the side of the Munich Security Conference (MSC) in Munich, Germany. – Reuters

countries.”

He added China opposes “pushing responsibility for the Ukraine crisis onto China”.

“China has already done a lot of constructive work on Ukraine,” Wang said. “We will continue to

play a positive role.”

Beijing initially pushed for a “political settlement” to the Ukraine conflict but its efforts have floundered in recent months after Western countries said it could enable Russia to hold much

of the territory it has seized.

Wang also reiterated on Saturday China’s stance on the Mideast conflict, calling for an immediate ceasefire and the opening of channels for humanitarian aid into Gaza.

“No matter the changes in the international situation, China as a responsible major country will always maintain the continuity and stability of its major policies and resolutely stay a force for stability in a turbulent world

WANG YI
Chinese Foreign Minister

“We cannot allow this humanitarian disaster to continue,” Wang said.

He called China the country with the “best record” of peace.

Meanwhile, the foreign ministers of China and Britain said on Saturday they wanted

to deepen cooperation after they met on the sidelines of the Munich security conference.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told UK counterpart David Cameron at the meeting that they should “strengthen exchanges and cooperation”, state media in Beijing said on Saturday.

London, meanwhile, later said the pair had “agreed that the UK and China should continue engagement across a range of areas.

“This includes trade links; building on our existing cultural ties and links between our peoples; and working together to tackle climate change,” it added in a statement.

During Friday’s meeting, Cameron “unambiguously set out the UK’s position across a number of areas of disagreement, including on human rights”, said the UK Foreign Office.

Wang warned that the world faced challenges including “resurfacing Cold War mentality, rampant protectionism, and sluggish economic recovery”, according to Xinhua. — AFP

On its third try, Japan launches H3 rocket

TOKYO: Japan successfully launched its new H3 flagship rocket on Saturday, putting its space programme back on track after multiple setbacks including the failure of the rocket’s inaugural flight last year.

The launch also marks a second straight win for the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) after its lunar lander, SLIM, achieved a “pinpoint” touchdown last month and made Japan only the fifth country to put a spacecraft on the moon.

A relatively small player in space by number of launches, Japan is seeking to revitalise its programme as it partners with ally the United

States to counter China. The H3 lifted off at 9:22 am local time and after it successfully released a small satellite, jubilant scientists at the Tanegashima Space Center in southern Japan clapped, yelled and hugged each other. The rocket also released a microsatellite and a dummy satellite during its flight of nearly two hours.

“The newborn H3 has just made its first cry”, JAXA project manager Masashi Okada, who has led the decade-long development of the new rocket, told a news conference.

“And we need to start preparing for the H3 launch as soon as tomorrow.” — Reuters



A model of H3 rocket lifts off from the launching pad at Tanegashima Space Center, Kagoshima Prefecture, Japan. – Reuters

AU leaders meet facing conflicts

ADDIS ABABA: African leaders opened a two-day summit on Saturday as the continent wrestles with coups, conflicts, political crises and regional tensions.

Ahead of the gathering in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, African Union Commission head Moussa Faki Mahamat voiced alarm at the violence gripping many nations, both in Africa and other parts of the world.

Sudan was in “flames”, Faki said, while also highlighting the jihadist threat in Somalia, “eternal tensions” in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the “terrorist danger” in the Sahel, and constant instability in Libya.

“The resurgence of military coups, pre- and post-electoral violence, humanitarian crises linked to war and/or the effects of climate change are all very serious sources of concern for us,” he told African foreign ministers.

A mini-summit aimed at finding ways to relaunch the peace process for the DRC opened on Friday on the sidelines of the main AU meetings and was due to continue on Saturday.

“I doubt that there will be any strong decisions,” said Nina



African Heads of State pose for a group photograph before the opening ceremony of the 37th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union (AU) at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa. – AFP

Wilén, director of the Africa programme at the Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations think-tank in Brussels.

The pan-African body has so far had “very little influence on countries that have suffered recent coups”, she said, adding that member states did not want to set precedents that could clash with their own interests.

Among those attending from

outside the region was Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. But UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was not present.

Gabon and Niger will be absent following their suspension over coups last year — joining Mali, Guinea, Sudan and Burkina Faso, which are also barred.

The crisis in Senegal, set off

by President Macky Sall’s last-minute move to push back this month’s elections, is also likely to be discussed.

Beyond Africa, the Mideast conflict in Gaza is a hot topic, with Faki describing it as a “war of extermination”.

Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh was among those attending. — AFP

ANKARA

Gold mine stripped of licence after landslide

The Turkish government on Saturday shut down a gold mine where nine workers are still missing after a landslide.

The environment ministry on Saturday said in a statement it was withdrawing the mine’s “environmental permit”, without which it cannot operate.

According to a preliminary experts’ report, the mine’s managers didn’t take the necessary precautions even though they were aware of cracks in the mine’s slag heap.



Energy Minister Alparslan Bayraktar said earlier on Saturday that six managers at the mine had been arrested, and two others released with conditions. — AFP

GOMA

‘Bomb’ hits DR Congo airport as fighting flares

A bomb struck the airport in the restive eastern DR Congo city of Goma early on Saturday as fighting flared between rebels and government forces, security and government sources said.

“Yes, it’s true, Goma airport was hit by a bomb last night,” a source in the Governorate of North Kivu province said, asking not to be named. A security source spoke of “two bombs” at the facility in Goma, the North Kivu capital and home to one million people, adding that they



“caused no damage.”

“Two experts are on site to check where the bombs were fired from,” the source said. Goma residents reported hearing two loud explosions. — AFP

DHAKA

Bangladesh lender confirms ouster of Yunus

A Bangladesh bank confirmed on Saturday it had ousted Nobel peace laureate Muhammad Yunus from two businesses he founded, weeks after his conviction in a criminal case. The bank’s current government-appointed chairman said on Saturday its board had nominated new directors.

Grameen Bank chief legal counsel Masud Akhter said in a statement that Majid was now chairman of Grameen Telecom and Grameen Kalyan.



Yunus told a news conference a group of “outsiders” had come to a building that houses several of his companies this week to “forcefully” take over the offices and lock staff out. — AFP



In brief

ROME



DEATH TOLL AT FLORENCE BUILDING SITE RISES TO 5

Rescue teams on Saturday worked to recover the body of a fifth person killed by the collapse of a supermarket under construction in Florence.

The region's president Eugenio Giani said that the final death toll stood at five after Friday's accident, which happened as workers were putting together prefabricated concrete structures.

"We can now say there are five dead, it's a dramatic toll," he told Italian media.

The bodies of three construction workers were found after the collapse, and the body of a fourth was recovered by firefighters working through the night. — AFP

ZAGREB



THOUSANDS PROTEST AGAINST GOVT IN CROATIAN CAPITAL

Several thousand people gathered on Saturday in the Croatian capital at an anti-government rally organised by the opposition that seeks immediate elections, accusing the rulers of corruption.

The protest dubbed "It's enough! To elections now!" was organised by 11 left-wing opposition parties.

It was sparked by the recent appointment of a high-ranking judge as the country's new state attorney general, the nomination that sparked controversy for his alleged links with corruption suspects. Croatia has to hold regular parliamentary elections by September 22, but the date has not been fixed yet. — AFP

MOSCOW



POLICE DETAIN MOURNERS AT TRIBUTE TO NAVALNY

Russian police on Saturday detained people who had come to lay flowers for late opposition leader Alexei Navalny at a monument in Moscow for victims of Soviet repression.

Video footage showed people being taken away by masked police during the silent, peaceful tribute where dozens had gathered. Reporters saw two people being detained and dozens of police surrounding the area, not allowing people to linger near the imposing bronze monument, known as the "Wall of Grief". Flowers and candles could be seen at the monument and more flowers could be seen on nearby pavements. — AFP

Ukraine exits from Avdiivka to 'save people'

KYIV: Ukraine withdrew troops from the besieged eastern stronghold of Avdiivka to save the lives of its soldiers, President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Saturday, handing Russia its biggest symbolic victory since May.

The pullback comes after Russian forces stepped up efforts to capture the eastern industrial hub in October, leading to mass casualties and destruction.

Facing ammunition shortages and outnumbered on the battlefield, Ukrainian forces announced they had withdrawn in the early hours of Saturday.

"The ability to save our people is the most important task for us," Zelensky told a security conference in Munich, explaining the move.

"In order to avoid being surrounded, it was decided to withdraw to other lines. This does not mean that people retreated some kilometres and Russia captured something, it did not capture anything," he also said.

This echoed earlier statements from the newly-appointed commander-in-chief Oleksandr Syrsky, who said he "decided to withdraw our units from the city and switch to defence on more favourable lines."

"The life of military personnel is the highest value," Syrsky said.

It was Syrsky's first major decision since his appointment, at a time when Ukraine faces mounting pressures in the east because of ammunition shortages, with a \$60 billion US military aid package held up in Washington.



A Ukrainian serviceman prepares for combat a Bradley fighting vehicle, not far away from Avdiivka, Donetsk region. — AFP file photo

The pullback comes after Russian forces stepped up efforts to capture the eastern industrial hub in October, leading to mass casualties and destruction

Soldiers are now holding a second line of defence, commander Oleksandr Tarnavsky said.

A number of Ukrainian servicemen were captured "at

the final stage of the operation, under the pressure of superior enemy forces," he added, calling on the international community to help "return our soldiers to their homeland."

Avdiivka lies in the Donetsk region of Ukraine, which the Kremlin has claimed to be part of Russia since a 2022 annexation that remains unrecognised by nearly all United Nations members.

The battle for Avdiivka, less than 10 kilometres north of the Russian-controlled city of Donetsk, has been one of the bloodiest of the two-year war.

Many compare it to the battle for Bakhmut, in which tens of thousands of soldiers were killed.

Avdiivka had around 30,000 inhabitants before the Russian attack. Most of the city has been since destroyed but less than 1,000 residents remain, according to local authorities.

The city has important symbolic value, and Moscow hopes its capture will make Ukraine's bombing of Donetsk more difficult.

Russian forces "push us out a bit of the temporary occupied Donetsk" region, analyst Mykola Bielieskov said. — AFP

EU Commission outlines defence strategy proposal



German Chancellor Olaf Scholz looks on during the annual Munich Security Conference, in Munich, Germany. — Reuters

MUNICH: The European Commission will present a defence industrial strategy proposal in three weeks, commission president Ursula von der Leyen said on Saturday, and will also open a defence innovation office in Ukraine.

"Europe has to step up its industrial base... I'm a convinced transatlanticist and at the same time we have to build a strong Europe and that goes hand in hand," von der Leyen told a panel at the Munich Security Conference.

She said the proposal aimed to increase defence spending, "spend better" with joint procurement and agreements to provide predictability to industry and better interoperability

between Europe's armed forces, and focus spending in Europe to keep "good jobs" for taxpayers footing the bill.

She added that Ukraine must be integrated into Europe's defence programmes as Russia was "outmassing Ukraine" with soldiers and by "throwing quick and dirty weapons produced in North Korea."

On the financial aid side, von der Leyen said it was in the US interest to pass a bill — currently stalled in Congress — to provide more aid to Ukraine as the measure was symbolic of democracies standing up to autocrats.

"It is not only about Russia's war in Ukraine and Putin's attempts to destabilise

Europe has to step up its industrial base... I'm a convinced transatlanticist and at the same time we have to build a strong Europe and that goes hand in hand

URSULA VON DER LEYEN

EU commission president

democracies but all the other autocratic adversaries that we are watching very closely..., whether the democracies stand united, are determined, show resolve."

In February, the EU agreed to provide a fresh aid package to Ukraine of 50 billion euros over the next four years on top of the 88 billion euros already spent since Russia launched its attack of Ukraine in February 2022.

Meanwhile, Europe must strengthen its ability to defend itself regardless of who wins the upcoming US elections or how the war in Ukraine turns out, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said in the global security conference in Munich on Saturday.

— Reuters

Biden calls derailment 'an act of greed'

OHIO: US President Joe Biden called the toxic derailment of a Norfolk Southern train in East Palestine, Ohio, completely preventable during a visit to the area a year after the incident sparked a health and environmental crisis.

In his first trip since the derailment, Biden toured the site of the accident, which forced residents to abandon their homes. Many people have since suffered from rashes, breathing problems and other ailments.

"While there are acts of God, this was an act of greed that was 100 per cent preventable," he said. "We were pushing railroads to take more precautions, to deal with braking, to deal with a whole range of things that were not dealt with. Norfolk Southern failed its responsibility."

East Palestine Mayor Trent Conaway, a conservative who does not support Biden, extended the invitation to visit to the

Democratic president, saying it would be good for his community.

"President Biden, your long-awaited visit to our village today allows us to focus on the things we agree with," Conaway said, listing efforts to address long-term health concerns in the community and economic growth as two of those things.

The president urged Congress to pass a bipartisan bill to toughen rail safety laws and said the federal government would remain active in the community until the cleanup was complete. The bill, advanced by Ohio Senators J.D. Vance, a Republican, and Democrat Sherrod Brown, has stalled. Republicans and some local residents have criticised Biden for not visiting earlier.

Biden's administration says he has been laser-focused on the issue since the derailment. Norfolk Southern said it knew more work was needed.

— Reuters



US President Joe Biden speaks with Environmental Protection Agency workers during his visit to East Palestine, Ohio, US. — Reuters

Are you watching your screen time?



Dr Hamed al Sinawi
@alsinawi

The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

I sometimes have the habit of watching people coming out of the mosque and seeing who would reach out to his mobile phone first and where.

To my surprise, I have noticed that more people are checking their phones the moment they step out of the mosque even before reaching their cars and I don't think they are all expecting an important call or message.

The same applies to people walking from their cars to the hospital entrance where I work.

While this little observation of mine is by no way scientific it shows that most of us are hooked on our phones for long hours and this is by no means exclusive to teenagers and adults.

With the recent advances in technology, people are spending longer hours using electronic devices such as mobile phones, laptops, computers, tablets and televisions for online studying or work but this is often extended to include using these devices during free time as a form of entertainment.

Recent research studies show that increased screen time is related to reduced development, poor psychological health, sleep disorder obesity, and

depression which is one of the most common types of mental health problems.

According to the WHO, depression has been among the three top causes of non-fatal health losses for the past 30 years and is expected to be the leading global cause of disability-adjusted life year by 2030.

The estimated number of people suffering from depression around the world increased by 53.2 million because of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

The link between long screen time and depression has been a topic of interest and several theories have been suggested to explain this link including how the content of what we watch can also influence our mood.

Over the last few years, more research reported a link between excessive use of social media platforms and feelings of sadness, and dissatisfaction with one's life and personal achievements.

Watching people share photos of their latest holiday and recent publications can sometimes make us jealous as we compare what we see with our personal lives.

The interesting part is that long screen time is not

RECENT RESEARCH STUDIES SHOW THAT INCREASED SCREEN TIME IS RELATED TO REDUCED DEVELOPMENT, POOR PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH, SLEEP DISORDER OBESITY, AND DEPRESSION

limited to teenagers and adults but also includes the elderly.

This can be explained by the fact that elderly people who experience loneliness tend to watch television or use smartphones for longer hours to communicate with others or simply kill time.

Since many elderly people suffer poor physical health, it is important to know that long screen time can complicate their physical and psychological health even more.

So, what can you do to reduce your screen time?

A few tips may help such as turning off notifications, removing some applications activating the digital well-being functions that are available in most smartphones, and tracking the amount of time you spend using your device and then sending you a daily report.

Other tips include banning smartphones from the bedroom and avoiding using them when eating.

In my opinion, these tips can be very useful but need self-discipline to implement and maintain however, it is never too late to start monitoring your screen time.

Sudan aid workers sound the alarm over spiralling crisis

GUILLAUME GERARD

Sudanese aid worker Shakir Elhassan and his family were among millions forced to flee their homes and former lives after war broke out last year in Sudan.

Some 10 months later, he is one of many voices in the sector warning of a devastating humanitarian crisis that could soon spiral into famine.

“The needs are unprecedented,” the communications manager at Care International said, deploring a lack of global attention.

“There is a huge gap in medicines, food,” he said, speaking from the east of the country after what he described as 10 days without internet.

Conflict broke out in April last year between Sudan's army chief Abdel Fattah al Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, his former deputy and commander of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Elhassan fled the capital Khartoum in July, joining his wife and three children who had already sought refuge 180 kilometres further south in the town of Wad Madani.

But in December the RSF attacked the town in Jazirah state, which had become a “humanitarian hub” for the region.

“It was horrific, I moved out from Jazirah just with the clothes” on my back, he said.

“On the road, there was thousands of people moving on foot, in a state of panic. Most of them were women and children.”

He and his family found shelter some 400 km east of there, in the provincial capital of Kassala state near the Eritrean border, where they still live and he says he sees a constant trickle of new arrivals.

“People arrive in Kassala exhausted, some of them sick, starving. Many of them told me they are bankrupt,” he said. “I have seen thousands of people here sheltering in very poor conditions,” he added.

The war in Sudan has killed thousands, including 10,000 to 15,000 people in the single town of El Geneina in the western region of Darfur, according to UN figures.

It has displaced more than six million people inside the country, while more than a million have fled abroad, mostly to neighbouring Chad and Egypt.

William Carter, country director for Norwegian Refugee Council, visited Darfur in recent weeks.

“Aside from the trauma and the physical loss, what struck me is the level of hunger,” he said.

“People have sold everything. Bakeries are not producing even the half of what they do usually because they have no flour nor wheat.” —AFP

Where does Navalny’s reported death leave Russia and Putin?



Anton Troianovski

The writer is the TNYT Moscow Bureau Chief

The death of Alexei Navalny, as reported by authorities in Moscow on Friday, ushers in a new turning point for President Vladimir Putin's Russia, underscoring both the Kremlin's power and the potential for instability that continues to threaten it.

The announcement came just a month before Russia's rubber-stamp presidential elections, when the Kremlin will look to portray Russians as united behind Putin and his bid for a fifth term.

Analysts expect the Kremlin to try to couple his surefire electoral victory with fresh gains on the front in Ukraine, where Russian forces have been taking the initiative against a Ukrainian army struggling to maintain its Western support.

As the third year of the war nears, Putin's control of domestic politics appears nearly total, with his most prominent surviving opponents either in jail or in exile. Street protests are immediately snuffed out, and thousands of Russians have been prosecuted for criticising the war.

Offering high salaries to military recruits, the Kremlin has managed to wage its attack without resorting to a second military draft, meaning that most Russians have been able to go on with their daily lives. The West's far-reaching sanctions have not crippled Russia's economy.

But to some analysts, the reports of Navalny's death — which his aides said they feared were most likely true — are a reminder that Putin's power may be more tenuous than meets the eye.

“Navalny tended to sense the vulnerable points, rather than creating them,” a Moscow political analyst, Mikhail Vinogradov, said in a phone interview on Friday, suggesting Putin had liabilities, like corruption, that provided an opening for an opportunistic opponent. Vinogradov described the day's news as the most shocking death of a Russian politician in the country's post-Soviet history.

The circumstances remain murky.

But citing the widespread view that the Kremlin was essentially responsible



A photo of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny at a makeshift memorial as people demonstrate and pay their respect following his death in prison, in front of former Russian consulate in Frankfurt, western Germany. – AFP

NAVALNY’S DEATH — WHICH HIS AIDES SAID THEY FEARED WERE MOST LIKELY TRUE — ARE A REMINDER THAT PUTIN’S POWER MAY BE MORE TENUOUS THAN MEETS THE EYE

for Navalny's death — which President Joe Biden also asserted in comments on Friday afternoon — Vinogradov added that the news could further unsettle Russia's governing class. It could remind them, he said, of the extraordinary lengths the government will go to silence dissent.

Simmering unease with Putin's war and his crackdown on the opposition has been visible repeatedly in recent months, even as polls continue to show widespread support for — or at least acceptance of — the Ukraine attack. There was the surprise popularity of a little-known anti-war candidate for the coming presidential election, and the movement of the wives of mobilised soldiers demanding their husbands' return. Before that, there was the stunning, 24-hour uprising last summer led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a

threat that Putin apparently addressed, US intelligence agencies assess, by downing the mercenary chief's plane last August. That episode highlighted the potential for bubbling opposition to Putin to spin out of control at a moment's notice, and the pent-up demand by some of the Russian public for a charismatic leader who might represent an alternative.

One key question now is whether the Kremlin follows Navalny's death with a new round of repression and censorship. Even in death, political analyst Tatiana Stanovaya said on Friday, Navalny poses a problem for the Kremlin.

“A lot will depend on whether the regime overreacts, which may become an issue in and of itself,” Stanovaya wrote. “They will have to deal with Navalny's legacy.”

The power of that legacy was on display within hours of Navalny's reported death, as Russians gathered for impromptu vigils in cities around the world and social media filled with reports of people inside Russia laying flowers in his memory.

In front of the Russian Embassy in Berlin, a former Kremlin consultant turned opposition figure, Marat Guelman, said he believed that Navalny's death had the potential to reenergise Russia's beleaguered and disparate opposition groups.

- The New York Times

Sometimes, you just gotta laugh

We all need to laugh! Sometimes at ourselves, sometimes at others. Watching a film, television, or a sports event, most of us, in that moment feel the child we once were, or show the child we once were, and in either case, it's got to be good for us.

Whether it's a proper belly laugh, or a bit of a snigger, as long as nobody is irreparably damaged, I'm alright with comedy and laughter, and recall for much of my life being enthralled by the *Reader's Digest*, 'Laughter is the Best Medicine' pages, and learning to appreciate the value of humour, with subtlety, innuendo, double entendre, and word play intellectually and linguistically enthralling. I mean whoever, once seen, could ever forget Ronnie Barker's star turn as the stuttering corner shop proprietor Arkwright, in 'Open All Hours' with the inimitable David Jason, and you will never stop chuckling, while alongside Ronnie Corbett with their fork handle (four candle) sketch, their Lindsay Doyle (linseed oil) name-droppers, and a hilarious take-off of Mastermind, you will not only remember what laughter is, but all that ails you will be cured.

It's also a fact that while both sides of the Atlantic covet the English language, America and the United Kingdom see it very differently, with trainers/sneakers, jumpers/sweaters, full-stops/periods, biscuits/cookies, flats/apartments, holiday/vacation, being just a few of the amusing differences.

However it ramps up when another Brit comic, Michael McIntyre, noticed how literal the American adaptations are, that a pavement is called a sidewalk, "because they needed to know where to walk," that spectacles are known as eyeglasses, "presumably so they know where to put them," squash is racketball across the water, a rubbish bin is a wastepaper basket, and... do we need to explain the difference between horse



Ray Petersen
r.j.petersen52@gmail.com

The writer is a media consultant

WATCHING A FILM, TELEVISION, OR A SPORTS EVENT, MOST OF US, IN THAT MOMENT FEEL THE CHILD WE ONCE WERE, OR SHOW THE CHILD WE ONCE WERE, AND IN EITHER CASE, IT'S GOT TO BE GOOD FOR US

riding, and 'horseback' riding? You can see his point I think.

America has produced one of the most popular comedies ever in 'Friends,' 'I'll be there for you,' but it is one of the few to have ever successfully crossed the water and achieve critical acclaim there. Frazier, MASH, The Simpsons, West Park, Cheers, Married with Children, The Big Bang Theory, and Third Rock From the Sun have had their devotees in the UK, but Brits tend to find them too 'signposted,' too 'obvious' and 'slapstick,' to be appealing to their tastes.

I'm not sure where Omanis fit in a comedic spectrum, though I have observed an enthusiasm for 'sight gags,' slapstick, and belly laughs, I'm pretty sure much of what amuses me always seemed to also amuse my students. Stand-up comedy is something you either love or hate, as it needs you to be quite 'quick' and unrestrained. It probably also helps to not have any inhibitions as stand up does often run 'close to the bone.' Screened, situation comedies, work towards crises we can see coming, or think we can, but offer the chance for topical laughs, and all in all, have the noble aim of making us at least smile, and hopefully laugh. What kind of comedy is this though? "Brown is all colours mixed together. All books have 26 letters. Music is just vibrations.

Happiness is just a chemical release... and, it costs 11.2 cents to make a nickel, which is only worth ten cents," maybe more irony than comedy, but amusing all the same. I did smile too at the flippant prayer asking for "the coffee to change the things I can, and the wine to accept the things I cannot."

What about 'Why don't pirates have a shower before they walk the plank? Because they was up on shore.' Or maybe the mother who told her child to "stop annoying her, and go and play outside..." forgetting she was on an airplane. If you get a message about canned meat... don't open it... It'll be spam! Or one of the best maybe... Why can't you hear a psychiatrist go to the toilet? Because the 'p' is silent. He he he.

BEARER FOR GLAD TIDINGS



People gather to look at a giant dragon figure at a park during the celebrations of the Lunar New Year of the Dragon in Beijing on Friday. – AFP

Barghouti Palestine's Nelson Mandela

DAOUD KUTTAB

Hamas leaders have declared that any ceasefire deal in Gaza must include the release of Marwan Barghouti, a popular Palestinian leader who has been in an Israeli prison since 2002. In fact, Barghouti might be the key to more than a ceasefire; he may well be the best hope of reviving the two-state solution.

Now 64 years old, Barghouti has been a member of Fatah, the dominant faction within the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), since he was a teenager. He co-founded Fatah's shabiba (youth movement) decades ago, before rising to lead the Tanzim, Fatah's grassroots cadres that uphold the organisation's local-level leadership. Though he has spent more than two decades in an Israeli prison, he remains well-known and widely respected among Palestinians.

I first met Barghouti in the 1980s with my cousin, Mubarak Awad, an advocate of nonviolent activism. Given his interest in the effectiveness of nonviolent struggle, Barghouti had been given the Arabic edition of Nonviolent Soldier of Islam, a translated biography of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, an ally of Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian independence movement. Barghouti was keen to learn not only about Khan, but about anyone, from Gandhi to Martin Luther King, Jr, who might offer useful insights into how to achieve Palestinian liberation.

This intellectual quest shaped Barghouti's leadership of the First Palestinian Intifadha that began soon



Daoud Kuttab

The author, is an award-winning Palestinian journalist

HAVING MADE GREAT PERSONAL SACRIFICES FOR THE CAUSE, BARGHOUTI ALSO RECOGNISES THE NEED TO FIND A WAY TO COEXIST PEACEFULLY WITH ISRAEL

after. The massive protests began as a nonviolent uprising aimed at "shaking off" (the translation of intifadha) Israeli occupation; violence erupted only after the killing of four Palestinian labourers in Gaza. Barghouti became too high-profile for Israel's liking, and he was arrested for incitement and later expelled to Jordan.

During this period, Barghouti began to see the weaknesses in Fatah's structure. Palestinians needed to be preparing for statehood, he concluded, so Fatah had to become a political party. It was a bold idea — and a controversial one.

In 1994, Barghouti was permitted to return from Jordan under the Oslo Accords that the PLO had negotiated with Israel. But he was no fan of the Accords, doubting Israel's commitment. And, in fact, far from returning Palestinian lands in exchange for peace, the Accords allowed hawkish Israeli leaders to quadruple the number of Jewish settlers in those lands.

After being elected to the Palestinian Authority's new parliament, the Palestinian Legislative Council, in 1996, Barghouti began advocating actively for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, having learned Hebrew in prison and then building relationships with Israeli politicians and peace activists in order to further the cause. But Barghouti was becoming disillusioned with

the peace process — a feeling that intensified after the collapse of the Camp David summit in 2000. By 2002, he no longer identified as a pacifist, though he made clear that he was not a terrorist either. "I, and the Fatah movement to which I belong, strongly oppose attacks and the targeting of civilians inside Israel," he wrote that January, but "I reserve the right to protect myself, to resist the Israeli occupation of my country, and to fight for my freedom." Far from seeking to "destroy Israel," Barghouti concluded, "I still seek

peaceful coexistence between the equal and independent countries of Israel and Palestine." But violent attacks on Israelis, largely carried out by Hamas, were increasing, and in March 2002, Israel effectively ripped up its security pacts with Arafat and the Palestinians, before re-occupying all major Palestinian cities from which it had withdrawn under the Oslo Accords. Soon after, Israeli security forces arrested Barghouti on murder charges linked to his alleged involvement in deadly attacks on Israelis. Refusing to recognise the court's

authority, he did not put forward any defence, and was handed five consecutive life sentences.

Even behind bars, Barghouti has remained an influential figure in Fatah and a champion of the Palestinian cause. Together with other jailed Fatah leaders, in 2006 he produced a document for the PLO outlining tactical measures, including limiting armed resistance to territories occupied in 1967 and establishing a unity government. Barghouti believes wholeheartedly in the right of Palestinians to self-determination, having made great personal sacrifices for the cause.

He also understands the realities on the ground, and recognises the need to find a way to coexist peacefully with Israel. And he may well be the only leader with the standing to convince Palestinians across factions to accept an imperfect compromise, if it means they can finally live peacefully alongside Israel in an independent Palestinian state.

I haven't spoken to Barghouti directly since our meetings in Tunis in the 1990s, but I have followed his story closely over the years and believe that, once released from prison, he would quickly reclaim his role as a moderate Palestinian patriot and open the way for real progress. With Israeli-Palestinian relations at a historic nadir, there may be no one better suited to lead the way to a just peace.

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Protesters with pictures of Marwan Barghouti, a popular Palestinian leader who has been in an Israeli prison since 2002.

sport



UAE CAMELS GRAB AL BASHAYER SWORDS

WALEED AL LAHWARI
ADAM, FEB 17

Camels from the UAE won major titles at the seventh annual Al Bashayer Camel Festival which ended in the Wilayat of Adam on Saturday.

'Dorah' snatched the Al Bashayer Cup and 'Eltemas' got the second cup. 'Samha' won the golden sword and 'Al Dhab' the silver sword.

HH Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for International Relations and Cooperation Affairs, and Personal Representative of His Majesty the Sultan, presented the awards in the presence of ministers and dignitaries.

The final competition included four main races for a distance of 8 km. Two races were for individuals with SUV cars as prizes for the winners and two races were for organisations. The camel owners got the cup and a car in the first two races. The winner in the fourth race received the golden sword and a SUV car, while the third race winners received a silver sword and a SUV car.

'Dorah', coached by UAE Mohammed bin Zaytoon al Mehairi, snatched Al Bashayer Cup and a SUV car in the opening round of the organisations category after finishing the race in 12:43:67.

'Eltemas', coached by Oman's Hilal bin Abdullah al Shedi,



claimed the second cup and a SUV car in the individual category after completing 8 km in 12 minutes and 53.02 seconds.

'Al Dhab', owned by UAE's Mohammed bin Sultan al Katbi, bagged the silver sword and a SUV car in the third round of the individual category in a record time of 12 minutes and 38.62 seconds.

UAE's 'Samha', coached by Mohammed bin Zaytoon al Mehairi, clinched the golden sword and a SUV car in the organisations category.

Al Shedi, the owner of 'Eltemas', said after snatching the second cup: "I would like to thank Allah for this triumph. Special thanks goes to the festival supporter, Oman government and HH Sayyid Asaad bin Tarik al Said. Al Bashayer Cup is ranked as the top prize to everyone. I am proud to be on the podium to receive the cup."

"'Eltemas' is one of the best camels in this race. Three weeks ago, I managed to win the Oman Camel Federation Cup and today we had another victory. Moreover, I hope to be on time at the conclusion of the Royal Camel Corps competition after three weeks."

The six-day race was held at Al Bashayer Square in Adam in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. Over 4,000 camels from Oman and other GCC countries competed in 74 rounds in different categories.

Great Britain clinch gold medal in FISU short relay race

SPANISH ATHLETES IMPRESS TO CLAIM GOLD IN FISU LONG RELAY RACE

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 17

Great Britain team clinched the gold medal of the mixed short relay event on the opening day of the FISU World University Championships Cross Country (Muscat 2024) at the Military Technological College on Saturday. The team comprising Tyler Bilyard, Tia Wilson, Alexander Melloy and Bethan Morley won the gold medal after they clocked 19 minutes and 19 seconds while Alejandro Quijada, Raquel Echeverria, Adam Maijo and Marta Serrano of Spain bagged silver with 19 minutes and 22 seconds. South Africa's Cameron Domingo, Simonay Weitsz, Sisanda Dumisa and Liam Swart Christopher claimed the bronze medal when they finished the race in 19 minutes and 33 seconds. In the mixed long relay event, the Spanish team grabbed the gold medal as they completed the race distance in 52 minutes and 19 seconds. The team comprised Miguel Baidal, Alicia Berzosa, Angel Martinez and Andrea Romero. The silver medal went to France as they finished the race distance within a timing of 52 minutes and 36 seconds. The French athletes were Julien Rebeck, Melanie Allier and Baptiste Cartieaux. South Africa's Phemelo Ntoe, Maria Karabo Mailula, Abednico Choba and Kirsti Erin Bell team took the bronze medal after they registered a timing of 53 minutes and 10 seconds.



The first world class University Championship event began in Oman on Friday under the auspices of Bader bin Salim al Maamari, Secretary-General of the Tender Board, in presence of Leonz Eder, FISU President; Dr Salim al Araimi, Chairman of OCUS; and officials

During the opening ceremony, Dr Ali al Bimani, Vice-chancellor of the National University of Science and Technology, in his speech said: "For ages, sports have been viewed to stay healthy and fit but it goes beyond that. Today sports are essential for students' overall growth and development. Various sports helped them



to learn and embrace life skills including teamwork, leadership, accountability, patience and self confidence. Students got the chance to work on their physical and mental

abilities to achieve their goals in life. There are a variety of international university events and different players represent their country in these championships. FISU World

University Championships Cross Country (Muscat 2024) organised in Muscat is one f those international events. I welcome all the participants and wish them good luck."

Dr Salim al Araimi, Chairman of Oman Committee of University Sports (OCUS), said

"It is a great day to welcome all the athletes from around the world to Oman. We are grateful to host FISU World University Championships Cross Country (Muscat 2024). We wish good luck to all the athletes in this World Sports University event. I hope to have a pleasant stay and return back to your home

countries with great memories about the Sultanate of Oman."

Leonz Eder, FISU President, in his speech said: "On behalf of the International University Sports Federation and the organising committee of the event, I am pleased to welcome you all to the beautiful city of Muscat, to host the 23rd World University Cross Country Championships - Muscat 2024. This is the first world championship in the Sultanate of Oman under the umbrella of the FISU. I am confident this event will be followed by many events during the coming years.

"I highly appreciate the proper planning and great efforts made by the organising committee of this championship in Muscat. Special thanks goes to the volunteers of the tournament. I also extend my thanks to FISU colleagues for their cooperation with the organising committee and their assistance in accomplishing many tasks. We wish all the athletes a successful tournament and to enjoy all the details of this tournament.

I am confident that the memories that will bring you together in this tournament will remain for many long years. I also wish you success in the competitions, and I hope all the athletes get much closer to Omani culture."

Over 200 athletes from 21 countries are taking part in FISU World University Championships Cross Country (Muscat 2024) in Muscat on Saturday and Sunday.

AL NASR DEFEAT SOHAR 2-1; AL RUSTAQ EDGE AL WAHDA

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 17

Al Nasr came out on top in a thrilling 2-1 victory over Sohar on Friday at the Al Saada Sports Complex in the 11th round of the Omantel League. Both teams entered the match with the aim of securing three points. Sohar was looking to win and move into second place in the title race, while Al Nasr was keen to take advantage of home and the support of their fans to break into the top four.

Al Nasr made a bright start to the match and took the lead in the first minute through Waleed al Musalami, but the goal was ruled out for offside. Sohar responded well and created several dangerous chances in the first 15 minutes but their strikers failed to capitalise.

Al Nasr then took advantage of a quick counter-attack to score the opening goal through Mohammed Abdulhakeem in the 15th minute. Despite Sohar's attempts to equalise, Al Nasr managed to double their lead through Musab al Maamari in the 43rd minute to take a 2-0 lead into half-time.

In the second half, Al Nasr managed to maintain their lead until injury time, thanks to a disciplined defensive performance that limited Sohar's chances. Both teams exchanged attacks during the second half, but there was a lack of concentration in front of goal. Sohar eventually managed to pull one back through substitute

Khalil al Balushi in the 91st minute, but it was too late as Al Nasr sealed a 2-1 victory. The win moved Al Nasr up to 18 points equal to Sohar in fourth place but Al Nasr remains ahead on goal difference. The win intensifies the competition between the two teams for the fourth spot in the top four.

Al Rustaq edge Al Wahda
Al Rustaq secured a narrow 1-0 victory over Al Wahda on Friday at the Sur Sports Complex in another 11th-round match. The match was very tight between both teams. There were adopting a cautious approach in the first half. Neither side created any clear-cut chances, and the first half ended goalless. Al Rustaq came out stronger in the second half and took the lead in the 86th

minute through a header by player Mohammed al Ghafri, catching the goalkeeper of Al Wahda club off guard to give Al Rustaq a 1-0 lead.

Al Wahda players worked very hard to find an equaliser in the closing stages, but Al Rustaq players blocked all the chances to secure a valuable victory.

The result moves Al Rustaq up to 11 points, provisionally climbing from 10th to 8th place. Al Wahda, meanwhile, remains in 11th place (second from bottom) with 7 points. Goalless draw between Ibri and Bahla

Ibri and Bahla played out a goalless draw on Friday in another 11th-round match. The draw leaves Ibri in sixth place with 16 points, while Bahla remains in 12th (bottom) place with 6 points.



Seeb and Salalah Clubs register wins in Youth Basketball League

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 17

The second round of the Youth Basketball League for the 2023-2024 season featured a triumph registered by Seeb Club as they defeated Nizwa 44-42 in a tight clash while Salalah managed to beat Suwaiq 77-26. Both matches played at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher.

The first encounter was exciting throughout its four quarters, with both teams sharing control and achieving a tie. The fifth quarter was the decisive factor as Seeb players managed to defeat Nizwa by two points. Abdulrahman al Maamari, who scored 27 points, and Asaad Al Balushi, who scored 13 points, stood out for Seeb. Yousef al Shraiqi, who scored 12 points, and Akram al Rashidi, who scored 10 points, stood out for Nizwa.

Nizwa started strong, winning the first quarter 17-6. Seeb tried to get back in the game in the second quarter, but Nizwa held on to their lead, winning the half 22-17.

Seeb continued their comeback in the third quarter, outscoring Nizwa 14-2 to take a 31-24 lead. The fourth quarter was close, with Nizwa tying the game at 42-42. However, Seeb scored five points in the fifth quarter to win the game 44-42.

In another match, Salalah



Dominated Suwaiq 77-26. The Dhofar Governorate based team led in all four quarters of the game. Salalah Club players delivered an

outstanding performance which helped them to seal a valuable victory in the Youth Basketball League.

Oman go down fighting to World Champions Brazil



ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, FEB 17

A gritty Oman gave the five-time World Champions Brazil a scare before going down 5-3 in a Group D game in the Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup 2024, at the Dubai Design District Stadium on Friday. In the same group, Portugal outclassed Mexico 8-2 to claim its first victory at the same venue. The large triumph took Portugal on top of group D with three points in goal difference with that of Brazil who positioned in second place with the same credit. Oman and Mexico are placed in the third

and fourth places respectively with no points till now. In the group D opener, Edson Hulk confirmed the victory for Brazil as he scored the fifth goal to seal the first victory for his team. Oman's Abdullah al Souti took the lead very early in the game as he netted the opening goal in style. Edson managed to return Brazil to the match as he equalised and a few minutes later Mauricinho made it 2-1. Oman's Abdulrahman al Fazari missed a golden opportunity after he missed a penalty corner. Al Fazari came strongly and compensated with striking the



equilaiser to make the result 2-2. Later, Brazil players pressed hard towards Oman's goal side as they managed to score two goals through Diogo Catarino and Rodrigo. Oman's captain Khalid al Oraimi reduced the goal gap as he struck the third goal for the national team. Later, Oman played with one man less after Abdullah al Souti received the red card. This allowed the opponent to score one more goal through Edson to end the match at 5-3. Despite the defeat, Oman's stars produced an excellent show against the top world ranking players.

Oman will take on Mexico on Sunday at 5:00 pm. Coach Talib Hilal's boys will aim to claim the first winning points to revive their hopes in the Beach Soccer World Cup. In the concluding match of the group stage, Oman will face former champions Portugal on Tuesday at 5:00 pm. Oman heroes will aim for the first time to move into the second stage of the world-class Beach Soccer event as the top two from each group will move to quarterfinals on February 22 while semifinals will take place on February 24. The third and fourth play-off and the final are scheduled for February 25.



Open Karate Championship concludes in Muscat

MUSCAT: Muscat Karate-Do Academy claimed the first place in the Open Karate Championship (Land of Peace), which was organised by the Shotokan Karate Center in Al Amal Sports Club on Friday. As many as nine clubs, academies and centres took part in the event which was under the patronage of Brigadier General Abdulmalik bin Ghassan al Mazrouei, Chairman of the Oman Taekwondo Committee. The championship competitions were divided according to the weights and age groups specified by the organising committee. The age groups (9-10-11-12) years old, males and females, began in the morning session. In the evening, the age groups (6-7-8-13-14-15-16) completed the competitions, males and females as well, divided into specific weights. The open Karate Championship

competitions were managed by an elite group of international, continental and national referees, numbering 20 male and female referees of different nationalities. The championship competitions were in kata and kumite were administered by applying the WKF Rules 2024. In the overall ranking of the first three places, Muscat Karate-Do Academy won the championship title and the first place cup with 12 gold, 5 silver and 5 bronze medals. The Shotokan Karate Centre ended as runner-up and took the second place cup with 11 gold, 16 silver and 33 bronze medals. Shitorio Oman Karate Do Kai came in third place with 9 gold, 11 silver and 14 bronze medals and the Marsal Al-Najah Martial Arts Centre came in fourth place with 5 gold, 4 silver and 5 bronze medals.

UMEÅ: The Oman Rally Team duo of Abdullah al Rawahi and Ata Al Hmoud overcame their lack of experience of winter rallying conditions and the additional difficulties of heavy snowfall to make an impressive start to their FIA Junior World Rally Championship (JWRC) campaign at Rally Sweden. After Saturday morning's ninth of the event's 18 special stages at Vännäs, the crew were progressing well in their M-Sport Poland Ford Fiesta Rally3 on the opening round of the five-event JWRC. They recovered strongly from hitting a banking on SS7 on Friday evening and incurring time penalties that pushed them down to 16th position by setting the 12th quickest time. Al Rawahi said: "It was tough and so many changes with the weather and the conditions. It was pretty new to me and a new challenge. We had a lot of moments and we lost so much time. The good thing was that we did all the stages until the last one (Friday) when we hit a bank and we broke the radiator. We had to stop. Otherwise, I was happy with the day." Co-driver Al Hmoud added: "We stopped five kilometres from the finish of the seventh stage when we hit a snow bank. It was a tough experience coming to a WRC and starting with Sweden. This was tough and driving at night was also new to Abdullah and for me as well. Anyway, we hope to gain more experience over the weekend. The pace has been okay." Al Rawahi started strongly on Thursday's shakedown stage and carded a couple of impressive runs



Abdullah Al-Rawahi in flying action on the opening stage in Sweden.

on a section of track where he was able to adjust his driving style to pushing hard between snow banks on studded tyres. Even before the event had begun in earnest, his Bolivian rival Bruno Bulacia succumbed to an accident. The South American was sidelined and the list of JWRC starters was reduced to 18. After finishing the opening 5.16km sprint stage in Umeå on Thursday evening in 16th position, the real meat of the action began on Friday morning with the first of two passes through the famous Brattby stage. Predictably, local driver Mikke Johansson used his local knowledge to full effect and posted the fastest time: Al Rawahi was 14th and moved up two places in the rankings.

Runs through the Noorby and Floda specials completed the morning's loop and Al Rawahi emerged unscathed from his first ever snow action in the World Rally Championship and returned to the service park in Umeå in 14th position after posting the ninth quickest JWRC time in SS4. Germany's Fabio Schwarz led Johansson by just 0.6 seconds. The three stages were repeated in the afternoon before competitors tackled the sprint stage in Umeå for a second time. Heavy snowfall hampered crews running at the front of the field through Brattby and made for horrific driving conditions on the already challenging stages. Al Rawahi continued his impressive form and the 10th quickest time saw the Omani climb to 13th in

JWRC. Al Rawahi was running strongly on the re-run of Noorby until he stopped in the latter part of the stage after hitting a banking and was unable to continue on to the final sprint stage in Umeå for fear of risking damage to the Fiesta's engine after breaking the radiator. Johansson leads the JWRC category from Estonian Romet Jürgenson. Further competition takes place in the Vännäs, Sarsjöliden and Bygdsiljum specials and a new stage at Umeå on Saturday afternoon. Action then concludes on Sunday morning with two passes through the 25.50km Västervik stage and a second run through the 10.08km Umeå special that acts as the event's Power Stage finale.





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300% jump in onion prices: MoAFWR



The increase in prices was mainly caused by the suspension of onion exports from India.

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, FEB 17

Onion prices have increased by 300 per cent above the average wholesale price, according to officials at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MoAFWR).

In an Observer exclusive, officials shared that the price of onions increased from 0.140 baisas per kilo in 2023 to 0.474 baisas per kilo in December of 2023, before surging to 0.600 baisas per kilo by mid-February 2024.

According to the Ministry, the increase in prices was mainly caused by the suspension of onion exports from India, which accounts for 44 per cent of total onion imports into Oman.

“The crisis of onion prices began on December 8, 2023, and is expected to continue until March 2024, to address the price increase in their local markets due to floods affecting production in India and some Asian countries,” said an official.

“[It was] due to the halt of onion exports to Oman from India, where Oman imports about 43 thousand tonnes annually of Indian onions, which accounts for 44% of the total onion imports (in 2022).”

To tackle the price increase, the Ministry says it is in process of opening direct imports from other onion producing countries including Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Pakistan and Yemen.

Last year, India implemented a ban on onion exports until March 2024 to address the matter of rising produce prices amidst climate change concerns. Additionally, several producing countries like Egypt and Yemen have implemented similar bans.

Currently, local onion production stands at 14,866 tonnes per year accounting for only 14 per cent of onion supply in the country, said the Ministry, adding that it is in the process of expanding local onion cultivation and increasing self-sufficiency, while also developing onion adjacent food industries.

Additionally, it will also provide investment opportunities to facilitate the expansion of onion cultivation across various governorates of Oman.

The daily trade in onions ranges between 300 and 400 tonnes, according to the Ministry.

Samayil Industrial City attracts 24 new projects in 2023



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 17

Samayil Industrial City, administered by the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn), witnessed substantial progress in its performance indicators throughout 2023.

The year saw the successful attraction and localisation of 24 new projects, bringing the total to 157 projects in Samayil Industrial City and a total investment surpassing RO 155 million. The projects in the industrial city are spread over an area exceeding 2.2 million sqm, out of the total area of the industrial city, which exceeds 11 million sqm.

Eng Yasser bin Ibrahim al Ajmi (pictured), Director General of Samayil Industrial City, highlighted Madayn's ongoing efforts in implementing key projects within the industrial hub. Notable among



these is the water connection project with Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company.

Al Ajmi also emphasised the array of investment opportunities in the industrial city, including the management and operation of the medical fitness examination centre, aimed at delivering top-tier healthcare services to the workforce in Samayil Industrial City and the surrounding population.

The prime location of the centre facilitates easy access, thanks to its proximity to the entrance gate and the highway. The centre covers an area of 1100.71 sqm and comprises various facilities, including laboratories, clinics, X-ray facilities, offices, among other facilities.

Al Ajmi also informed of an investment opportunity to develop, operate and manage a residential city for the workforce on a 100,000 sqm area within Samayil Industrial City.

Additionally, Al Ajmi highlighted that Madayn has divided the industrial city into several sectors.

Notably, the food sector currently boasts an occupancy rate exceeding 17%, while the logistics sector surpasses 34%. The construction materials sector sees an occupancy rate of over 26%, while the steel and wood sector shows remarkable demand with an occupancy rate exceeding 60%.

The plastic and paper sector registers a high occupancy rate of over 85%, the marble sector stands at over 78%, and the space dedicated to the SMEs currently sees an occupancy rate exceeding 34%.

According to the official, significant investment opportunities are available in Samayil Industrial City, each supported by preliminary feasibility studies.

These opportunities encompass diverse sectors including dairy and juice production, date products manufacturing and packaging, breakfast cereal production, dolomite processing, water leakage prevention solutions, copper bars and sheets manufacturing, gypsum production, electrical conductors manufacturing, glossy ceramics production, HVAC equipment manufacturing, electrical switch manufacturing, marble product manufacturing, and prefabricated building production.

Tech giants sign pact against AI-made political deepfakes

MUNICH: Tech giants including Meta, Microsoft and TikTok signed a pledge on Friday to crack down on AI content intended to deceive voters ahead of crucial elections around the world this year.

The accord commits the companies including Google and OpenAI to develop ways to identify, label and control AI-generated images, videos and audio that aim to mislead voters.

“I think you need all the players from the source of the generation to the actual consumption by the user involved and that’s why I think having everybody, 20 companies sign up to this is so impactful,” Nick Clegg, president of global affairs at Meta, said.

Among the 20 signatories of the deal, presented on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference in Germany, were also X, formerly known as Twitter, as well as Snap, Adobe, LinkedIn, Amazon and IBM.

Under the agreement, AI-generated content could be given a watermark or tagged in the metadata at source, although the signatories acknowledged that “all such solutions have limitations”.

The tech companies also said they would also work together to develop ways to “detect and address” deceptive election material on their platforms.

Such content could, for example, be annotated to make it clear it is AI generated.



Under the agreement, AI-generated content could be given a watermark or tagged in the metadata at source.

Meta, Google and OpenAI have already agreed to use a common watermarking standard that would tag images generated by their AI applications, such as OpenAI’s ChatGPT, Microsoft’s Copilot or Google’s Gemini (formerly Bard).

The pledge comes as big tech companies are under considerable pressure over fears that AI-powered applications could be misused in a pivotal election year.

The European Commission vice president for values and transparency, Vera Jourova, who attended the presentation in Munich, said she was pleased the tech companies “agree the technology can pose a risk to democracy”.

Governments “could not blame big tech for everything”, however, Jourova said.

“We also have some job to do on our side,” she said, with the EU preparing for elections to the European Parliament in June.

Recent examples of convincing AI deepfakes have only heightened worries about the easily accessible technology.

Last month, a robocall impersonation of US President Joe Biden pushed out to tens of thousands of voters urged people to not cast ballots in the New Hampshire primary.

In Pakistan, the party of former prime minister Imran Khan has used AI to generate speeches from their jailed leader.

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CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, FEB 17

CBO Executive President
Taher bin Salim al Amri added
in a foreword: “Sovereign
rating upgrades during the year
(2022) reflected a decrease in
perceived systemic risks, marking



Moody's followed suit with a change in its outlook for Oman's sovereign debt in October 2022 from "stable" to "positive", followed by two rating upgrades in May and December 2023 that elevated Oman's sovereign rating by two notches from "Ba3" to "Ba1", with a "stable" outlook, in December 2023.

In this context, the Central Bank also sought to highlight the important role of buoyant oil prices in helping Oman earn the

A sharp drop, or even a gradual downward trend, in oil prices could reverse those expectations and therefore result in sovereign rating downgrades. Over the long term, maintaining sustainable fiscal discipline and undertaking a significant restructuring of Oman's economy away from its heavy reliance on the hydrocarbon sector, in alignment with the Oman Vision 2040, are pivotal to avoiding any potential rating downgrades," the Central Bank further added.

Leveraging its proven strategies, Nama Water Services aims to achieve sustainable development, aligning perfectly with the key priorities outlined in Oman Vision 2040. "Nama Water Services has embarked on a multi-year



Eng Al Rasbi has further noted “The project is carried out together with the main transmission pipeline stretching from Al Sharqiyah South Governorate to different cities of Al Sharqiyah

Utilising both wrought iron and polyethylene pipes, the total length extends to 880 kilometres, delivering water

The projects also include the establishment of 17 tanks with a total capacity of 265,000 cubic metres besides 4 main pumping stations. Looking forward, Nama Water Services pursues to implementation of many projects in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate, including Al Jarda – Mehla'h water transmission line with a total estimate for the first stage at RO 2 million, incorporating 1 main pumping station and 8 main collection tanks with a total capacity of 34,000 cubic metres. — ONA

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 17

Moreover, the workshop shed light on queries related to the policy and ensured the partnership and integration between the regulator and the parties obliged to implement the policy to achieve the intended regulatory objectives that provide the required protection

Additionally, it enhances the principle of transparency and disclosure regarding the health condition of the borrower. It also provides clarity on the size of the insurance risks and sets the standards of underwriting, which limits disputes among the parties involved: banks, borrowers and insurers.



UNLEASHING MICE OPPORTUNITIES TO AMPLIFY OMAN'S TOURISM INDUSTRY

CONRAD PRABHU

The Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC) says it is seeking to capitalise on its record-breaking performance of 2023 to further strengthen its positioning as a key driver of growth across the wider national tourism and hospitality industry.

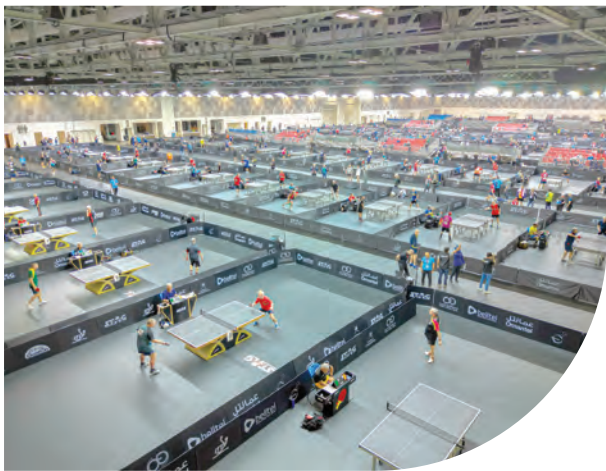
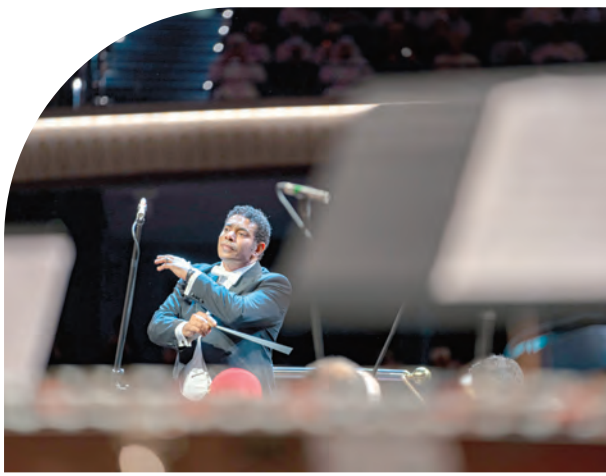
In support of this goal, OCEC — the premier destination of Oman's MICE tourism segment — plans to partner with key stakeholders such as Oman Airports, OMRAN and Visit Oman, among others, in ensuring that business travel has a multiplier effect across all aspects of the sector.

"We have been working closely with Oman Airports and other stakeholders in the industry to showcase the economic impact of business events tourism and how they can benefit from it," said Eng Said al Shanfari, CEO - OCEC.

"Research shows, for instance, that business travellers spend up to four times more than leisure travellers, from the premium hotels they choose to the business class travel options.

This allows us to create more cross-over insights with our current working groups to showcase the MICE sector's impact on the tourism industry.

Our current assumption is that building OCEC as a MICE destination enables the country to be more widely positioned as a safe, attractive, and welcoming tourism destination.



The OCEC remains committed to ensuring that we can attract international and regional events to benefit the whole tourism industry."

In remarks to the *Observer*, Al Shanfari highlighted the Centre's role in driving tourism inflows into Oman.

"Tourist inflows and incoming flights are often driven by some of the events we organise, attracting international and regional delegates," he said, citing in this regard NCSI statistics to show a 40% uptick in arrivals from the January to October 2023 period, compared to the same period in 2022.

"Some of the leisure tourists coming to Oman have often visited our country as business travellers before and vice-versa. The two are intimately linked," he stressed.

PAN-SECTORAL COLLABORATION

A working group of industry stakeholders, established by OCEC, now seeks to drive more cohesion in managing in the inflow of business tourists, according to the CEO. One key area of focus is to underscore the valuable economic impact of business events for the sector, he said.

"In 2023, we estimate that the direct total income generated from MICE is about \$1.9 billion in Oman. We want all tourism stakeholders to benefit through direct economic growth, foreign investments, and job creation.

The key here is the multiplier effect: how can one event generate economic growth for the rest of the country?"

An equally important goal is to encourage tourism companies and other hospitality stakeholders to capitalise on the large numbers of international delegates attending conferences in Oman.

By making these visitors feel welcome, they are very likely to return as leisure travellers, as they often do, Al Shanfari noted.

Furthermore, stakeholders need to work together to ensure that visiting delegates have a more seamless experience when they arrive for the first time.

"This means we need to coordinate with key stakeholders such as hotels or airports to ensure the experience is positive throughout the delegate's journey.

In our bid for international events, we also include tourism activities



In 2023, we estimate that the direct total income generated from MICE is about \$1.9 billion in Oman. We want all tourism stakeholders to benefit through direct economic growth, foreign investments, and job creation. The key here is the multiplier effect: how can one event generate economic growth for the rest of the country?

ENG SAID AL SHANFARI
CEO, OCEC

available for delegates during conferences; this is key to ensure that the event organiser can plan a comprehensive set of activities that cater to everyone.

For us, working with tourism companies is key to ensuring we can provide the best programme possible," the CEO explained.

SUSTAINABILITY & DIGITALISATION

Shedding light on the Centre's principal objectives for 2024, the CEO said OCEC plans to invest in digitalisation and sustainability initiatives. This includes plans for a solar project, and the deployment of digital systems and AI to enhance its competitiveness.

At the same time, the Centre has pledged to enhance efforts to support SMEs and young graduates starting out in the tourism sector.

Promoting inclusivity is another important priority for this year, he noted. "We are a venue welcoming all. Although our programme of events tends to be very B2B, we also ensure that we can welcome all generations to the OCEC.

We have various local events, such as the International Bookfair Festival or Muscat Art, which have reunited thousands of local citizens in the OCEC."

Further, as an event organiser in its own right, OCEC aims to build on its own portfolio of in-house events, such as Muscat Art, MIJEX, or the Oman Perfume Show.

"These tend to attract many visitors and cater completely to our local markets. In February, we will organise the Moonlight market during the International Bookfair Festival, which is one of the busiest times of the year for the OCEC. The idea is to attract wider crowds and activate the whole venue," Al Shanfari said.

In concluding, the CEO credited the Centre's laudable achievements to OCEC's staff. "One thing that I am grateful for is my team: we have a diverse range of talents at the OCEC with many Omanis bringing their expertise in events, sales, finance and marketing to drive our venue forward.

Their dedication is what makes the OCEC's success truly meaningful. For 2024, we will focus on being innovative and breaking new records to make the OCEC and Oman one of the best destinations for MICE tourism in the region," he added.

AI and flexible payment solutions could be the new frontiers for retail and e-commerce



STEFANO VIRGILLI
stefano@virgilli.com

The author is a member of the International Press Association

ONE SIGNIFICANT ASPECT OF EVOLVING CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR IS THE DEMAND FOR FLEXIBLE PAYMENT OPTIONS, INFLUENCED BY ECONOMIC FACTORS SUCH AS INFLATION.

In the midst of an evolving retail landscape, where consumer expectations are increasingly diverging from the offerings of both in-store and online shopping experiences, the need for innovation and adaptation has never been more critical.

This need is highlighted in a comprehensive global study by the IBM Institute for Business Value, which surveyed nearly 20,000 consumers and revealed significant dissatisfaction, with only 9% of respondents satisfied with the in-store shopping experience and a mere 14% content with online shopping.

This study underscores the urgency for retailers to embrace technological advancements, such as AI and voice assistants, to revamp the shopping experience—a sentiment echoed by retail consultant Jan Kniffen, who envisages a

pivotal role for voice assistants in enhancing post-pandemic retail environments.

One significant aspect of evolving consumer behaviour is the demand for flexible payment options, influenced by economic factors such as inflation. In response to this demand, Gulf-based buy now, pay later (BNPL) firm Tamara announced an additional \$100 million raise in August 2022, bringing its total capital raised to \$215 million.

This Series B funding round, featuring investments from entities including Sanabil Investments, owned by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund PIF, underscores the burgeoning interest in alternative payment solutions.

Tamara, founded in 2020 by Saudi entrepreneurs Abdulmajeed Alsukhan, Turki Bin Zarah, and Abdulmohsen Albabtain, has not only expanded

its market presence but also formed strategic partnerships with notable retailers such as IKEA and Saudi retailer Jarir, in addition to collaborating with e-commerce platforms Shein and Namshi.

This expansion and partnership strategy highlight the company's ambition to cater to a growing market demand for financial flexibility in shopping behaviours, a trend that aligns with the consumer preferences outlined in the IBM study.

The IBM report further delves into consumer expectations around technology, noting a significant appetite for AI enhancements in shopping experiences, with 55% of respondents eager for virtual assistants and 59% interested in other AI applications.

This technological enthusiasm reflects a broader trend towards digital integration in retail,

with consumers seeking more personalised, efficient, and seamless shopping experiences.

Moreover, the study identifies a stark gap in satisfaction with current AI assistant offerings, indicating a prime opportunity for retailers to innovate and improve these technologies to better meet consumer demands.

Economic pressures, particularly inflation, have also shaped consumer priorities, with 62% of IBM study respondents citing price as a top reason for brand or store switching.

This economic sensitivity is further emphasised by consumers' growing interest in BNPL services, like those offered by Tamara, as a means to manage spending more effectively amidst financial uncertainties.

In addition to technological and economic considerations, the Retail Week survey of 1,000 UK consumers, produced in

association with nShift, offers further insights into how shoppers are reprioritising their spending by category and demographic.

This geographical specificity in consumer behaviour and economic response indicates that retail strategies must be adaptable and informed by both global trends and local nuances.

Integrating these insights, it becomes clear that the future of retail lies in leveraging technology, like AI and BNPL services, to create more engaging, personalised, and economically flexible shopping experiences.

The data from these studies presents a compelling narrative for retailers to act swiftly in adopting innovative solutions to meet the changing demands of consumers, ensuring they remain competitive and relevant in a rapidly transforming market landscape.

Japan loses a big title, and perhaps its way



Illustration picture of Japanese yen banknote. – Reuters

ULA GALANI

Japan's journey back to normality has just taken an unwelcome turn. The world's third-largest economy in US dollar terms ceded the title to Germany on Thursday after unexpectedly slipping into a technical recession.

More unnerving is a slew of weak data making it harder for the Bank of Japan to justify hiking rates and officially ending its era of ultra-easy monetary policy.

The timing is awkward. The country's GDP contracted at an annualised rate of 0.4% in the last three months of 2023 due to sluggish domestic demand and falling public investment. There were a few bright spots but they didn't outshine the bleak picture: exports were resilient, defying a soft global economy, but those were propped up by the weak yen.

The unexpected shrinking landed days after the International Monetary Fund's First Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath confidently declared Japan's economy was starting to grow at its full potential and urged the BOJ to get a move on. That call suddenly looks premature.

The GDP weakness could prompt the central bank to wait before tweaking its policies. Governor Kazuo Ueda was widely expected to remove "yield curve control" and end a long period of negative interest

rates in upcoming central bank meetings in March and April. Under the yield curve control policy, the BOJ pilots yields on 10-year government bonds to around 1%. These actions would signal an official victory in the decades-long fight to reflate the economy.

True, the economy doesn't need to grow at full potential to determine whether inflation is sustainably hitting the central bank's all-important 2% target. Prices are the primary factor, but these are slipping in places too.

Core inflation, which excludes fresh food but includes fuel, in Tokyo rose 1.6% in January from a year earlier, its slowest rate in nearly two years.

All eyes will be on Japan Inc to divine the outcome of annual wage negotiations. Company CEOs are sitting on piles of cash but may not want to boost wages much if price increases and economic growth are not sustainably forthcoming.

The yen is also reflecting markets' uncertainty over the direction of interest rates. Instead of rallying against the US dollar on the back of the BOJ's expected rate rises and expected cuts by the US Federal Reserve, the currency has been weakening this year.

Japan pioneered new monetary policy tools in its long and tortuous journey to boost domestic demand and inflation. It is almost at its destination but the final stretch back to normalcy is looking increasingly complicated. — Reuters



MOHAMMED ANWAR AL BALUSHI
morward@hotmail.com

The writer is an academic lecturer and adviser at Oman College of Management and Technology

Before writing this article on fintech and its relevance in the Omani financial market, I delved into various articles and academic research papers.

The essence of academia often pushes one to explore deeper into research to propose effective solutions for institutions or to pose thought-provoking questions akin to Socrates, encouraging stakeholders to find their own solutions.

According to Feyen et al. (2021) and Cheng and Qu (2020), fintech entails the application of technological innovations in the financial sector, potentially transforming financial services by developing new business models or modifying existing ones. These innovations include artificial intelligence, blockchain, cloud computing, big data, and internet technologies.

In today's technological age, understanding fintech isn't akin to rocket science. If anything, the Omani financial market should actively promote and encourage its adoption.

Is fintech cost-effective for financial markets, particularly for bank operations? Utilising fintech, such as cloud computing, in bank operations proves cost-effective and flexible, especially in consumer payments and customer relationship



management (Begenau et al., 2018; Fuster et al., 2019)

Given its cost-effectiveness, the technological leaders of Oman's financial market should seriously consider embracing this trend.

Embracing fintech is likely to foster healthy competition in Oman's financial market, where consumers currently lack options. Research indicates that fintech's development could potentially spur competition and increased participation in emerging markets (Feyen et al., 2021; Pazarbasiglu et al., 2020; Frost et al., 2021).

Several fintech companies have already established a presence in Oman. Websites like f6s.com provide a list of such companies, including Wadiaa, an Omani fintech company focused on crowdfunding and crowd-investing for small to medium enterprises. Other companies listed include TameenX, BidBid, and BNPL.

How effective are these fintech companies in Oman? What progress have they made since inception, and what obstacles have they encountered? Furthermore, what developments can they spearhead for Oman's future?

Reports on the fintech industry, such as the Global FinTech Market Analysis, indicate significant growth potential. The market size is estimated to reach \$397.24

billion by 2029, growing at a CAGR of 11.72% during the forecast period (2024-2029).

As per a report from Fintech Market News, in May 2022, Mastercard has recently announced a collaboration with Synctera, a well-known fintech banking service.

The two companies have joined forces to provide account validation solutions for fintech powered by Synctera, leveraging Mastercard's open banking platform.

When discussing the implications of fintech, a nuanced examination reveals a blend of opportunities and challenges.

Digital innovators are injecting heightened competition and efficiency into the traditional financial sector, as noted by Philippon (2015, 2016).

A clear benefit is evident in the increased volume of remittance transactions coupled with reduced costs, as highlighted in research by Juan J. Cortina and Sergio L. Schmukler (2018), citing World Bank (2016) data estimating global remittance flows surpassing \$601 billion in 2015, with developing nations receiving \$441 billion of that sum.

A shift in perspective is observable among banks, as noted by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2015), moving towards considering fintech firms as collaborators and

facilitators rather than solely as disruptors and competitors.

Moreover, established players are recognising the imperative of harnessing fintech capabilities to expand their market share, retain existing clientele, and attract new segments, including the previously unbanked.

However, alongside these opportunities, there exist attendant risks, as cautioned by Cortina and Schmukler (2018).

Despite the potential benefits, FinTech services introduce novel vulnerabilities, such as insecure business models, misuse of personal data, challenges in customer identification, and electronic fraud.

Regulatory concerns, particularly in the United States, encompass issues such as lending discrimination, disclosure obligations for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and the sharing of customer information, as reported by Politico (2016). These threats extend beyond the US market, echoing concerns in other global markets as well.

Let me conclude by saying that, there's a need for further academic research in Oman's financial market to leverage the fintech trend effectively.

Additionally, technological leaders should refer to academic research and organise forums, seminars, lectures, and debates to foster discussions on fintech's integration.



Oman's total electricity and water production increases

MUSCAT: Oman's total electricity production until end of November 2023 recorded an increase of 6.6 per cent to reach 41,591.2 gigawatts per hour.

Statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information showed that the governorates of Al Batinah North and South and Al Dhahirah recorded a total production of 26,542 gigawatts per hour.

Al Dakhiliyah Governorate recorded the highest increase in total production by 96.9 per cent, reaching 164.4 gigawatts per hour.

Total production in Muscat Governorate increased by 55.2 per cent, reaching 560.3 gigawatts per hour, and Dhofar Governorate, by 13.5 per cent, reaching 4,362.1 gigawatts per hour.

On the other hand, statistics showed that the total amount of water produced in the Sultanate of Oman increased by 1.8 per cent to reach 478,182.9 cubic metres by the end of November 2023, compared to 469,899.1 cubic metres compared to the same period in 2022. — **ONA**

Oman shows economic resilience and fiscal surpluses amid global risks

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, FEB 17

Oman showcases remarkable economic resilience in the face of global risks, as highlighted in recent reports from the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the Central Bank of Oman (CBO).

Despite challenges, including debt crises and rapid inflation concerns prevalent in the GCC region, Oman's proactive risk management strategies and strong fiscal performance have positioned it favourably for stability and growth.

The WEF Global Risk Report emphasises Oman's low vulnerability to rapid inflation, contrasting with other GCC nations grappling with issues like rising cost of living and commodity price shocks.

By prioritising debt crises as a top concern, Oman underscores the importance of effective financial management and risk mitigation strategies to safeguard its economy and promote sustainable debt practices.

This unique risk profile highlights Oman's strength in addressing specific



The Sultanate of Oman is the least vulnerable to rapid inflation shock in the GCC region.

challenges and seizing growth opportunities for sustainable development.

On the other hand, the GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification report sheds light on Oman's economic stability and diversification concerns, shedding a spotlight on the country's resilience amidst rising global risks.

By maintaining a proactive approach to risk management and aligning economic policies with emerging trends, Oman is

well-positioned to navigate uncertainties and capitalise on opportunities for long-term growth.

Meanwhile, the CBO recently issued 'Macroeconomic Stability Report' further solidifies Oman's economic stability, revealing a significant turnaround with fiscal and current account balances recording surpluses in 2022.

The current account balance saw a remarkable improvement, turning into a surplus of RO 2.21 billion, highlighting positive momentum in Oman's external balance and trade activities.

Additionally, fiscal performance showed a surplus of about RO 1.14 billion in 2022, reflecting the government's commitment to fiscal discipline and sustainability.

Moreover, the report underscores the decline in public debt in 2022, signaling improved economic prospects and aggressive repayment strategies.

Total public debt decreased by 13.9 per cent, reaching RO 17.6 billion, indicating a commitment to reducing debt levels and maintaining fiscal stability. The adequacy

of CBO's foreign exchange reserves also remains strong, providing external buffers to safeguard against shocks and maintain the stability of the fixed exchange rate system.

On the inflation front, Oman's consumer price index (CPI) has remained well-contained, with an average CPI year-on-year inflation of 1.36 per cent in the first half of 2023.

Factors such as the fixed exchange rate regime, subsidies on essential goods, and prudent monetary policy measures have contributed to maintaining price stability in Oman, despite global inflationary pressures.

The collective findings from the WEF Global Risk Report and the CBO's report highlight Oman's economic resilience, fiscal surpluses, and proactive risk management strategies.

By capitalising on its unique strengths and navigating challenges effectively, Oman stands out as a beacon of stability and growth in the GCC region, charting a sustainable path towards economic diversification and resilience amid evolving global risks.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

ANNOUNCEMENT OF AMENDMENT TO THE LEGAL FORM

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



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TRAVEL TALES
A woman walks past the Russian Foreign Ministry headquarters after a heavy snowfall in Moscow. — AFP



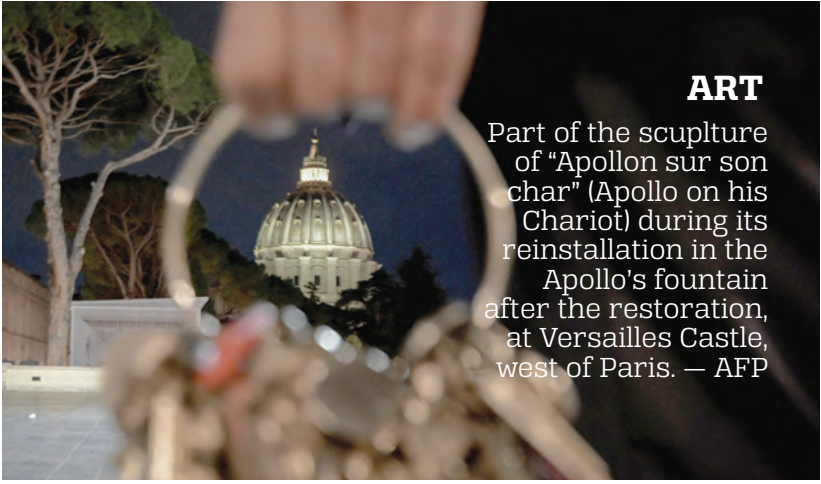
FASHION
A model walks the runway during the Thom Browne Fall 2024 fashion show at New York Fashion Week. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT
Kenyan-Mexican actress and President of the International Jury 2024 Lupita Nyong'ogo poses during a photo call of the International Jury 2024 prior to the opening of the 74th Berlinale, Europe's first major film festival of the year, in Berlin. — AFP



LIFESTYLE
A girl gestures as Iraqis attend a Valentine's Day party inside a hotel in Basra, in southern Iraq. — AFP



ART
Part of the sculpture of "Apollon sur son char" (Apollo on his Chariot) during its reinstallation in the Apollo's fountain after the restoration, at Versailles Castle, west of Paris. — AFP

art & life

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OMAN OBSERVER

www.omanobserver.om .features@omanobserver.om

Exploring Oman deserts has become more accessible today

Adventure-seeking tourists flock to Oman for the dream-like experience. Rich diversity in desert tourism offers treks, safaris, and more. Local operators facilitate seamless exploration, attracting visitors worldwide, especially from Europe.... **P20**



FASHION

Catwalks and parties: London Fashion Week marks 40 years

LONDON FASHION WEEK kicks off on Friday with designers new and established presenting their autumn/winter lines and fashionistas joining in celebrations as the showcase event marks its 40th birthday this year.

Representatives from the British Fashion Council (BFC) will open the London Stock Exchange on Thursday and London landmarks like Covent Garden and the London Eye will be lit up green to mark the anniversary and celebrate the creative industry's contribution

to the British economy. UK womenswear and menswear sales were valued an estimated total 47.5 billion pounds (\$59.6 billion) last year, according to the BFC citing research firm Mintel.

The council was founded in 1983 and its first London Fashion Week was held a year later.

It is one of the four big catwalk fixtures alongside New York, Milan and Paris and is best known for its emerging talent and avant-garde trends, and where designers like the late Alexander McQueen and Stella McCartney kicked off their careers.

"London's always been famous for its extraordinary creativity and I would say that's what sets it apart," Lydia Slater, editor-in-chief of Harper's Bazaar UK, told Reuters.

"If you look at so many of the enormous, really successful fashion houses, they're



an incredible hit by doing something really quirky and different. And so I think that's why over the years we've seen so many exciting things take place at London that you can't really imagine taking place at other fashion weeks."

London can also claim a surprise visitor to its front rows when the late Queen Elizabeth attended designer Richard Quinn's show in 2018.

This season, there will be more than 150 events at London Fashion Week, which runs on February 16-20.

"The NEWGEN designers will definitely be front and centre," BFC Chief Executive Caroline Rush told Reuters, referencing a programme providing financial support and mentoring for new designers. "But equally, we are also very excited to see (designers) Simone Rocha, Roksanda, Emilia Wickstead, 16Arlington, and (the) Burberry show on Monday will definitely be one to watch." — Reuters

often headed up by British creatives who started here and who made their mark at London Fashion Week."

Over the years, London has provided some key fashion highlights: from robots spray painting model Shalom Harlow's white dress at McQueen's Spring/Summer 1999 show to models transforming furniture into clothes at Hussein Chalayan's autumn/winter 2000 presentation.

"If you're trying to start out in Paris say, these brands are so big and so shiny and so polished that it's very difficult to kind of make your mark in that way," Slater said.

"Whereas with London, you can be a small designer and have a show that makes

INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



skyfairy_paso
Nizwa, Oman



HISTORIC CITY



vyntraveldiary with 2 others
Wadi Bani Khalid
Halal Beats • Fallen



DESERT OASIS



yru_here



FROM THE TOP

SHARE A SLICE OF YOUR LIFE

We select three photos daily for our Instagram Top Picks of the Day. The rules are simple. Follow us on Instagram. Upload your photos. Tag us and use **#OmanObserver** and **#BeAnObserver**.



Japan's humble 'onigiri' rice balls get image upgrade

WRAPPED IN SEAWEED and stuffed with delicious fillings, "onigiri" rice balls are shaking off their reputation as a cheap and uninspiring snack in Japan — and enticing hungry converts abroad.

Mouth-watering pictures on social media, rising demand for affordable lunches, and a surge in tourism to Japan are all drawing people to the humble onigiri.

Just ask any of the 50-odd customers lined up in a quiet corner of Tokyo for the restaurant Onigiri Bongo to open.

In the past, "no one came between lunch and dinner, but now customers queue non-stop", said 71-year-old Yumiko Ukon, who runs the more than half-century-old shop.

Some wait for eight hours, said Ukon, whose team makes some 60 different types of onigiri, bulging with traditional fillings like pickled plum, or more unusual offerings such as bacon with soy sauce.

Onigiri Bongo only has nine counter seats, but sells around 1,200 rice balls each day.

"When I was young, onigiri was something you would make at home," Ukon said. "Now people buy onigiri, or go out to have onigiri."

Long popular as on-the-go fuel in Japan, onigiri have been eaten for

over a millennium in the country, where they were once taken onto the battlefield by samurai.

The quick bites can be found in convenience stores on practically every corner, ubiquitous enough to be banal.

But with more visitors than ever flocking to Japan, and the country's pop culture booming in popularity, onigiri are now also becoming a lunch option overseas.

Japanese rice ball chain Omusubi Gonbei has opened outlets in Paris and near Grand Central Station in New York.

"It's light, healthy and easy to eat," said 53-year-old customer Sean King, who first tried onigiri in Japan and was "very happy" to find them in the Big Apple.

"You don't have any regrets after eating one."

AFFORDABLE LUNCH

The oldest rice ball restaurant in Tokyo, Onigiri Asakusa Yadoroku, was included in the 2019 Michelin Guide, elevating the status of the snack.

"From that moment, people who saw onigiri as an everyday bite to eat began to see it as a quality dish," said Yusuke Nakamura, president of Japan's Onigiri Society.

Spending on onigiri and other pre-prepared rice products has grown by 66 per cent over the past two decades in Japan, figures from the internal affairs ministry show.

In 2022, onigiri were the second-most-frequently purchased ready-to-eat food in Japan after bento lunchboxes, according to the Japan

her perfectly presented rice balls on social media, and the business grew from there.

Onigiri shops usually can't afford advertising, but online posts by fans showing different varieties of the colourful dish have played a big role in their new popularity, the Onigiri Society's Nakamura said.



Ready-made Meal Association.

And the number of specialised onigiri shops is rising quickly, Nakamura said.

The trend has been driven by demand for takeaway meals during the pandemic, but also inflation, with people choosing onigiri over a restaurant meal to save money.

While imported grains like wheat have become more expensive because of the war in Ukraine, "the price of rice, grown domestically, is relatively stable", Nakamura explained.

Japanese people have deep cultural links to rice, said Miki Yamada, who runs "Warai Musubi", a catering service specialising in "omusubi" — another name for onigiri.

In the Shinto religion, "rice is an offering made to deities", and the traditional triangular shape of onigiri may be a reference to mountains, where many Shinto gods dwell, the 48-year-old said.

PREMIUM' RICE BALLS

Yamada, whose family are rice farmers in Fukushima, realised the potential of onigiri after thinking up ways to promote rice from the region after the 2011 nuclear disaster.

She began posting pictures of



Younger customers are also attracted by "premium" rice balls made with quality ingredients, with various other cereals mixed in to make them more nutritious.

Miyuki Kawarada, 27, is president of Taro Tokyo Onigiri, which opened two shops in the capital in 2022 selling top-quality onigiri at up to 430 yen (\$2.85) each.

Kawarada wants to open dozens of onigiri restaurants abroad and thinks the snack could one day dethrone sushi as Japan's best-known culinary export.

Onigiri "can be vegan, or halal, and can be adapted to suit different cultures", she said.

"In Japan, but also abroad, I want to renew the stuffy, old-fashioned image of rice." — AFP

LIFESTYLE

How Vintage Won the Grammys Red Carpet

THE AWARDS SHOW red carpet has become such an access game, such a race of clout and connections to see who can wear the most never-before-seen or sizzingly-hot-off-the-runway look — the answer, this time, was Beyoncé, in Louis Vuitton menswear from Pharrell Williams' January show — that any other approach can seem like a shock.

But recently a different trend has been emerging, and at the 66th Grammys it reached critical mass. Indeed, it's so applause-worthy, here's hoping it isn't a trend at all but rather the signal of a permanent shift in the fashion-Hollywood industrial complex.

I am speaking of the rise of vintage. Or as it is apparently now known, "archival" fashion. "Archival" here is being used to refer to anything that simply isn't new. (Well, it was getting a little ridiculous to refer to two-season-old clothes as "vintage.") That could mean clothes from a brand archive or a personal one. Sometimes also known as a "closet."

At the Grammys, Laverne Cox, the El Red carpet host, led the way, as she also did at the Emmy Awards, in a Valentine's Day red contraption from 2015 Comme des Garçons. She chose the look, she said, because that collection had been about "blood and roses" and finding beauty in pain, and, well, it felt particularly apropos.

Then there was Olivia Rodrigo, another vintage disciple (remember the 1995 Chanel suit she wore to the White House?), in a white 1995 Versace siren gown. Also Caroline Polachek in gothic 1998 Olivier Theyskens coursing with crimson veins and arteries. Billie Eilish in an upcycled and customised Chrome Hearts "Barbie" baseball jacket. Lana Del Rey in a found-it-herself puff-sleeve black vintage floral number. Coi Leray in a 2019 Saint Laurent jacket and leotards, no pants.

And that was just the red carpet! Inside the Crypto.com Arena, Oprah wore a vintage sequined Valentino couture 2004-05 shirtdress straight from her closet, as she wrote on Instagram, to introduce her part of the "In Memoriam" segment of the show, and Miley Cyrus wore a vintage silver fringed Bob Mackie to perform her song "Flowers."

Cyrus wore three other outfits during the evening: a peekaboo Maison Margiela Cleopatra dress made entirely of gold safety pins for her entrance; a black beaded halter-neck Tom Ford jumpsuit when she won best pop solo performance; and a chocolate sequined Gucci gown

when she won record of the year. Which is both a reflection of the current state of style and the perfect example of why vintage is such a smart solution.

The obsessive interest in the red carpet, which despite efforts to Ask Her More is clearly not going away, has turned that particular phenomenon into a marketing tool used by fashion brands to sell more and more stuff; to promulgate the idea that no one should ever appear in the same thing twice. Not even, it seems, at the same awards show!

(There is an unfortunate new trend of celebrities wearing one dress to make their entrance and another to actually sit in their seats. Dua Lipa, for example, wore Courrèges on the red carpet, performed in Mugler by Casey Cadwallader and then switched to a backless black jersey number at the table.)

The result is a virtuous, or vicious, cycle of anticipation and consumption, depending on your point of view. Even if some of the celebrities give the clothes back the next day — and let's be honest, if it's a custom job, they just keep it — the signal absorbed by the watching world is of the constant need for newness.

Which, given what we know about the climate crisis and the fact that the simplest route to more sustainable fashion is fashion that is worn longer, is the opposite of the behaviour that anyone in the public eye should be modelling.

Vintage changes all that. It allows celebrities to show off their ability to access clothes that are otherwise unavailable to the public.

It allows brands to maintain their relationships with said celebrities — and takes some of the pressure off designers and their teams to create entirely new individual outfits at the same time that they are creating full collections for the ready-to-wear shows. (Daniel Roseberry of Schiaparelli, who dressed Taylor Swift in a custom look for the Grammys, recently told me that designing for award season was like making a full second collection.) Also, it bolsters their heritage and environmental cred.

And it shows the watching world that perhaps the best new dress for a special occasion is actually an old dress. Or at least one that already exists. As far as I am concerned, that deserves an award all its own. Here's hoping the Oscar stylists take note. — NYT



Exploring Oman deserts has become more accessible today

BY KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Sleeping under the stars, which play hide 'n seek with clouds moving fast in the vast expanse of the bluish sky, has been at the top of Natasha's 'to do list' for quite some time.

Today, in Oman's Rimal Al Sharqiya, camping in one of the majlis-coloured tents amidst the vast dunes, she, along with her parents, is realising that it is a dream come true for the terminally-ill 16-year-old. For her parents, it was not too late to fulfil one of their only daughter's dreams.

Just like Natasha and her parents, who travelled from Australia, there are hundreds of adventure-loving tourists who make it to Oman's arid deserts for camping, as well as to try their hand at adventure tourism, thanks to the highly salubrious weather and easy entry process at international gateways.

"People travel from across the world seeking Oman's deserts, as they are internationally popular, and there are clients seeking adventure tourism in the deserts more than any other form of tourism," says Mohammed Nishad of Muscat Caravan Tours, one of the major desert tourism planners.

Oman offers a range of rich and diverse desert tourism avenues, with Rub Al Khali, also

known as the Empty Quarter, topping the list, while Rimal Al Sharqiya is equally in demand globally. The best time to visit a desert in Oman and to camp there is from October to April each year.

Oman's tourism offers heterogeneous activities in which leisure, adventure, and nature are aptly combined. Visitors can trek, take on a safari, and boasting several tourist spots varying from the green of wadis and endless sand dunes to impenetrable rocky mountains with ancient villages.

Rub Al Khali, the largest continuous sand desert on Earth, covers much of the south-central portion of the Arabian Peninsula and is a hotbed for desert adventurers, covering an area of about 250,000 square miles (650,000 square kilometres). It sprawls across south-eastern Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.

Rimal Al Sharqiya is approximately 210 kilometres away from the capital city of Muscat. The desert spans 100 kilometres from North to South, featuring rich sand dunes measuring 250-300 metres in height, which change shapes throughout the day due to blowing winds.

Rimal Al Sharqiya is the most popular spot in Oman and hosts a number of camps run by different tour operators, including 1000 Nights Camp, Al Raha,

Desert Nights, and others. There is a wide variety of camps and tents, primarily to ensure guests can stay overnight without disturbances, according to tour operators.

A large number of inbound tour operators are also available for immediate processing of tours, and one can reach out to local companies such as Zahara Tours, Bahwan Tours, Mark Tours, Travco, Mazoon Travel, Oman Orient, and others.

"We have a number of tourists from most countries, with the majority coming from Germany, France, Italy, Australia, and Denmark, besides from the rest of the world," says Abdul Fathah, a representative of a tour operator. Oman Discovery, a tour operator run by an Omani citizen, is one of the companies that help tourists experience adventure tourism by offering clients rides on horses and camels in the desert, besides 4X4 excursions in the desert.

"We have designed sand tours up to 10 kilometres deep into the sand. During these tours, we climb the high dunes with excitement and suspense, observe the camels and their offspring, and stop in an area high above the dunes to watch the sunset. After sunset, we return to the meeting point and the place where you parked your car," he said, adding that there are intermittent stops in between for photography before the caravan continues.

