

P10

SEEB EDGE
BAHLA
TO LIFT
MG CUP



P13

OMAN OIL EXPORTS
REACH 49.7 MILLION
BARRELS BY
FEBRUARY-END



P20

OMANI STUDENTS
SHINE IN DUBAI
WOODEN BRIDGE
COMPETITION



■ CAIRO

SYRIA FM VISITS EGYPT IN OVER 10 YEARS

Syria's foreign minister met his Egyptian counterpart in Cairo on Saturday, the first such visit in more than a decade and the latest sign of Arab states mending ties with President Bashar al Assad. Faisal Mekdad was embraced by Sameh Shoukry as he arrived at the Egyptian foreign ministry, the first official trip since before the uprising and conflict that began in Syria in 2011. President Assad was shunned by many Western and Arab states due to the war in Syria

SEE PAGE 5

■ NEW YORK

RUSSIA TO HEAD UN SECURITY COUNCIL

Russia assumed the rotating presidency of the United Nations' Security Council on Saturday for a month, a move decried as an April Fool's Day joke by critics. "As of 1 April, they're taking the level of absurdity to a new level," said Sergiy Kyslytsya, Ukraine's permanent representative, according to The Guardian. "The security council as it is designed is immobilised and incapable to address the issues of their primary responsibility, that is, prevention of conflicts and then dealing with conflicts," said Kyslytsya.

SEE PAGE 6



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PAKISTAN POSTS HIGHEST-EVER ANNUAL INFLATION

P6



ANGER AT MACRON SEEPS INTO UNEXPECTED CORNERS

P8

■ GLOBAL STAMP FOR OMAN DESERT MARATHON



Oman Desert Marathon (ODM), Oman's unique desert challenge marathon through the golden sands of Bidiya, will be held from January 20 to 24, 2024. For the first time, the last edition of ODM had been recognised by the International Trail Running Association (ITRA) so that the athletes got international ranking points for their participation. **REPORT ON P12**

‘BB’ will help Oman to ease debt

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL1

S&P Global has revised Oman's outlook to positive, while affirming its ratings at "BB". Welcoming the latest outlook statement by S&P, Omani economic expert Mohammed al Mudhiani said: "The optimistic outlook highlights Oman's adaptability to anticipated future oil market fluctuations." Speaking to the Observer, Al Mudhiani underlined the importance of the positive credit rating to Oman's

efforts to tap international debt markets at competitive costs. "The credit rating plays a critical role in determining loan interest rates - the cost of interest is influenced by several factors, one of which is the credit rating." According to the economist, the improved rating will enable Oman to benefit from reduced interest rates through refinancing. "The ongoing progress will contribute to lowering interest rates on specific loans. Furthermore, due to the Sultanate's continuous improvement and excep-

tional management, it has saved more than RO 380 million and RO 127 million during the previous year," he said. The New York-based international agency cited in this regard Oman's continuously improving fiscal performance. It noted in particular the Oman government's efforts to bolster the country's financial performance and sustain economic development - measures that have contributed to a significant strengthening of Oman's fiscal position far exceeding expectations. **SEE ALSO P13**

‘A Journey to Light’ explores culture and friendship

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
[@lakshmioman](#)

Two bikers from Pakistan are now in the Sultanate of Oman after completing their Umrah in Saudi Arabia and travelling through the countries with a message of friendship. Bikers, Manawar Hussain from Sialkot rides a 500 cc Benelli and Shan Elahi from Lahore rides a 660 cc Yamaha. They are part of the 25-member team of bikers from Cross Route Club currently exploring GCC countries. They began their six-day spiritual venture titled 'Journey to the Light' from Lahore, Pakistan, to

Bikers are part of the 25-member team of bikers from Cross Route Club currently exploring GCC countries

reach the Iran border on January 6. Once in Iran, it took another five days to reach Bandar Abbas in Iran to take the ferry to reach Sharjah, which took about six hours. From Sharjah, the bikers took their ride to Dubai and Abu Dhabi for the next five days to reach their destination, Saudi Arabia, to perform the Umrah.



Munawar Hussain from Sialkot and Shan Elahi from Lahore.

UMRAH IN SAUDI
On January 28, they performed Umrah and stayed in Saudi Arabia for almost two months exploring the country.

Eid al Fitr likely on April 22; nine-day break anticipated

SHADDAD AL MUSALMY
[@shadadm](#)

Excitement about Eid al Fitr — the first day of which is most likely to fall on Saturday (April 22) in the Sultanate of Oman as per astronomical data — is building up with many anticipating a nine-day break.

Abdulwahab al Busaidy, head of the observatory at Oman Astronomical Society, told the Observer that the first day of Eid al Fitr, in all likelihood, would fall on Saturday (April 22), because to be able to see the moon, it should be at least 12 hours old. "The new moon will be born on Thursday, April 20 at 8.12 am and the sun will be setting at 6.30 pm. So it will be around nine hours or so when the sun sets. This means the moon will stay on the horizon for 21 minutes. The moon will set at 6.51 pm. Inclination will be four degrees and elimination is 0.23 per cent," Al Busaidy said. "So this means it will not be possible to see the moon within those 21 minutes. It is almost impossible because to be able to see the moon, it should be at least 12 hours old," he added. So, based on the calculations and astronomical figures available, Al Busaidy said, it will not be possible to see the moon on Thursday evening, meaning Friday will be the last day of Ramadhan. "Hence Saturday,

It will not be possible to see the moon within those 21 minutes. It is almost impossible because to be able to see the moon, it should be at least 12 hours old

ABDULWAHAB AL BUSAIDY
Oman Astronomical Society

April 22 will be the first day of Eid al Fitr. However, this is not the case with many other countries including our GCC neighbours who may break their fast on Friday, April 21," he said. Eid is one of the most anticipated festivals in the Islamic calendar with elaborate preparations taking place in the weeks before the day, involving shopping, planning outings and travelling for some. Mohammed al Farsi, a private sector employee, said, "We would be happy if we get a nine-day break. I just wish the authorities concerned announce earlier so that I can now plan my break properly because I am thinking of travelling to Dubai with my family."

TURN TO P2



Racism destabilises societies, impedes development: Oman

GENEVA: The Sultanate of Oman assured that racism constitutes a challenge to the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, destabilises societies, weakens governments, impedes development opportunities and undermines the integration of people.

The delegation of the Sultanate of Oman at the 52nd session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva stated that the continuation of the tendencies of hatred and intolerance increases the possibility of depriving people their rights to development and well-being for ethnic or religious reasons, so that their rights are affected by stigmatisation, humiliation, lack of integration or isolation.

The Sultanate of Oman pointed out the discriminatory treatment against Muslims in many countries are subjected to, be it against their people or



against their religious symbols, such as burning copies of the Holy Quran under the pretext of freedom of expression.

In the speech, Oman noted the experiences in this field, including many of its initiatives like the Sultan Qaboos Chair for the dialogue of civilisations and the 'Human Reconciliation' and 'Peace Message' projects which stem from a well-established policy and directions based on supporting a culture of coexistence and spreading tolerance among citizens. — ONA

Indian Community Fest to be confluence of Indo-Oman cultures

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The 10th edition of the Indian Community Festival (ICF) and Muscat Science Festival (MSF) to be held under the Indian Social Club (ISC) on May 5 and 6 at Amerat park will be an amalgam of cultures and traditions that bind the two friendly countries together, according to the organisers.

The event, succeeding the 'Keralotsav' which was last held 6 years ago, will host Kerala's erstwhile health minister who was in power when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world and she will be honoured for her overall contribution to the health sector.

While a group of artistes from India will fly in to present their country's cultural authenticity, local artistes will display typical Omani art forms and together, they will give a feast to the eyes of the spectators by presenting a

fusion of both countries.

The Muscat Science Festival, MSE, which will be held as part of the 2-day Community Fest, aims to nurture the scientific aptitude among both Omani and expatriate students, besides Indian children in Oman.

"We are expecting between 50,000 to 60,000 visitors to the Amerat Grounds during the two days of the festival. Entry to the venue will be free," organisers said during a press briefing.

A replica of typical Indian temple fest was created during the last edition of the Keralotsav and the same would be recreated at the venue.

Mallika Sarabhai, globally acclaimed danceuse and chancellor of Kalamandalam Deemed University, Dr VP Gangadharan, renowned cancer specialist, Peruvanam Kuttan Marar, and Kamal and Ranjith, famous film directors were the chief guests in the previous years.

WHO closely monitoring MVD developments: Regional Director

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 1

In the wake of first-ever outbreak of Marburg Virus Disease (MVD) in Tanzania and Equatorial Guinea, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said it is closely monitoring the development of the cases and that it is working alongside the affected countries to control the disease.

This was stated by Dr Ahmed bin Salim al Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for Eastern Mediterranean when he was interviewed by ONA. He added that the world is currently witnessing an outbreak of Marburg Virus Disease in the United Republic of Tanzania and Equatorial Guinea and that there



is presently a slight potential for a global outbreak. The WHO is aiming to prevent an outbreak of MVD by surveilling the virus and helping high-risk countries to lay down readiness plans.

Al Mandhari noted that the

WHO is committed to fighting the new health challenge and is closely working with the affected countries and international partners to limit the spread of the disease and protect public health. The international organisation

seeks to enhance ways of verifying MVD suspected cases and providing necessary measures for protecting the health workers and local communities.

Last Earlier, Oman's Ministry of Health stated that MVD is highly contagious and with a death rate of 60 per cent to 80 per cent. 'We urge citizens and residents not to travel to these two countries unless absolutely necessary,' MoH statement said.

'The Ministry would like to note that efforts are being made to contain the outbreak in its current geographical scope. The Ministry advises the public, at present, to postpone travel to the countries affected by Marburg Virus Disease (MVD) unless absolutely necessary,' it added.

'A Journey to Light' explores culture, friendship

FROM P1

The duo experienced the roads of the Sultanate of Oman as one of the best they got during the journey, but the landscape of the country and its architecture fascinated them more.

"The landscape of the Sultanate of Oman is fascinating and the city is clean. Our team-mates are waiting to explore the country. Next time we would like to start and end our journey from Oman," noted Manawar, who is a businessman.

During their stay in the Sultanate of Oman, they have been exploring Muscat.

A trained architect, who is in the business of advertising and printing, Shan noted, "We visited the Royal Opera House in Muscat and it is brilliant. The changeable stages and the quality of construction are excellent. We visited the Grand Mosque and we can feel the vision of the late Sultan Qaboos, whether it is the verandas or the dome."

"Omani culture is represented here at the mosque whether it is a colour scheme, tiles, stones, pathways, ablution area etc. The roads of the Sultanate of Oman are beautiful as well as the planning of the markets and parking slots. We also visited Al Ameen Mosque. Its beauty in the day and at night is exceptional. In the beginning,



mosques were built at high places so that they were visible and this is because of travellers coming in and they could easily spot the mosque. Al Ameen Mosque has this feature. In the olden days mosques used to be community centres as well," explained Shan.

Manawar added, "I enjoyed going for my Fajr prayers to the mosque as I could see so many people dressed alike. Everyone has to experience the Sultanate

of Oman." "We are grateful to the authorities of the Sultanate of Oman, the Pakistani Embassy, Oman Bikers Club and the community for the kind gesture," said the bikers.

Ateeq-ur-Rehman Khan, Consular Community and Media Affairs, Embassy of Pakistan, said, "This visit is significant as it provides a wonderful opportunity for the people of Pakistan and the Sultanate of Oman to connect and

explore Oman's unique culture, traditions and way of life."

At the same time, the visitors were able to share their own experiences and perspectives with the Omani people they met along the way.

"May this be just the beginning of many more opportunities for adventure sports enthusiasts to travel to each other's country and strengthen ties between the two peoples."

'Ramadhan is a spiritual journey to know inner self'

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The Sultanate of Oman, being home to a large number of expatriates, presents a diverse culture and a mix of beliefs. The overall harmony reflects during religious festivals, particularly Ramadhan when people of all faiths take part in the celebration of peace, dedication and discipline.

During the holy month of Ramadhan, some non-Muslim expatriates also fast as a matter of expressing solidarity to their Muslim friends, while many others treat it an opportunity to correct routine and get rid of bad habits.

There are many, including new Muslims and non-Muslims, who fast for the first time during



Ramadhan. They say Ramadhan is a spiritual journey to know inner self.

"For me, this year has been full of amazing events, including reverting to Islam, getting married and more recently having a baby. Now we have arrived at the month of Ramadhan and it is time to explore my spirituality with more



depth and connection (Takwah) to see what the experience will bring me," said Joe, who is fasting for the first time as adult new Muslim.

"The first week of Ramadhan has shown me many things about this great month. It has been easy although at first it sounded like a difficult thing. The intention that was set at the start of the journey



was one of worship and connection to spirituality and connecting to this intention or 'Niyah' makes you remember 'why' in the more challenging times," he said.

"The elimination of wanting for food is accompanied by the reduction of desire for material things which leaves my mind clear and sharp. This sharpness

and clarity makes my prayers and good deeds more focused and meaningful with each passing day," he added.

For Shravan Raveendran, a student of Indian School Muscat (ISM), fasting was just an experiment and an attempt to keep pace with his fasting colleagues. "There was no particular reason why I fast. It is rather a sign of friendship with my classmates and my playmates around my house in Darsait," admits Shravan.

"After fasting for a day, I feel calm and to my surprise, there wasn't any hunger or thirst. I'd advise my other friends also fast for a day, at least, and feel the difference," he said.

Runita Sahay, a lecturer with Muscat University, said she is

fasting to connect with deeper self and connect with the higher power. "Fasting during Ramadhan is considered to be a pillar of faith among Muslims and I was fortunate to receive the wisdom and learn about its deeper meaning after I moved to this beautiful country nearly two decades ago," she said.

"I understood in the most profound manner that this is the time to connect with our deeper self and then further deepen our connection with the higher power. In addition, through mindful fasting and abstaining, we could develop and inculcate empathy for the lesser fortunate who are struggling to access basic necessities such as food and water," she added.



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Verses on bones: Symbols of Islamic culture

TEXT & PHOTOS BY
YAHYA AL SALMANI

With technological advancement, printing has become easy and easier now to get books and magazines electronically even on mobile phones. During the holy month of Ramadhan, reciting the Holy Quran is easy with books and these gadgets.

There was a time when it was not that easy. Studies indicate that the process of collecting and codifying the Holy Quran passed through three stages in the past. The first relied on memorising its verses by the heart through oral indoctrination. Then the



process of writing and codifying began in the house of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and then



the Holy Quran was collected in one Mushaf. In the Quranic schools called



Al Khatateeb, Muslims used several methods to memorise the Holy Quran, including



writing its verses on camel bones (shoulders). Students repeated the Quranic verses

daily to memorise the texts and then start explaining them and interpreting meanings.

This method was popular in the past but is no longer used today. However, some museums and homes still maintain such traditional educational methods that were in practice hundreds of years ago.

“As in all human civilisations, documentation was done in different forms. The tools ranged from rocks to bones in day-to-day daily life. Therefore, the traditional methods used by Muslims in teaching the Holy Quran confirm the high level of intellectual creativity,” an Islamic education teacher told the Observer.

Digital-based training programme for craftspeople conducted in Bahla

HAMAD AL HASHMI
MUSCAT, APRIL 1

The Business Incubator Centre in the Wilayat of Bahla, at the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority, conducted a training programme on 3-D printing to the benefit of entrepreneurs and craftspeople.

The programme aimed to introduce modern technologies in the manufacture and development of handicraft products, introduce craftspeople to digital manufacturing techniques and digital pottery production. It also aimed at changing the participants’ mindset and training them to utilise digital technologies, 3-D design to create complex innovative designs using 3-D printers to convert digital models into prototypes.

The participants received training on 3-D design and printing using the Solid Works programme, a leading



programme in the field to 3-D design and modelling. It provides an integrated solution for viewing engineering designs in a 3-D manner and is considered an ideal simulator that helps in creating a clearer vision of engineering designs. Solidworks programme is used for designing various models such as vases, cups, plates, etc and designing equivalent templates for them to be manufactured later.

The participants acquired numerous skills, most importantly learning about digital production techniques and stages of digital production in pottery, learning the basics of digital and 3-D design programmes as well as 2-D design in Solidworks. They realised a number of results through using Solidworks programmes in their crafts industries and acquired new skills such as speed and accuracy in production, and the use of modern technologies in designing products.

Eid al Fitr likely on April 22; nine-day break anticipated

FROM P1

Oman now gives the same number of holidays to both government and private sectors and employees say the move is good, especially for long breaks like Eid holidays.

“I am happy now that whenever we get holidays, most of my family members who are working in the private sector also get the same number of days. This helps us plan get-togethers during holidays like Eid,” Bader al Harthy, a government employee, said. A long Eid break is also seen to benefit the local tourism industry, especially Salalah and Musandam, as many will want to spend such a long break there. Many cannot afford international travel.

“Families across the Sultanate of Oman are looking forward to celebrating Eid and many of them would use the long holidays to go to Salalah or Musandam. So, long breaks help boost local tourism,” said a travel consultant.

South Sharqiyah eying several development projects

SUR: The Governorate of South Al Sharqiyah is presently conducting a number of advisory studies for development projects including for Khor Al Battah development and the execution of beautification project at Jabal Eid in the Wilayat of Sur.

Dr Yahya bin Badr al Maawali, Governor of South Al Sharqiyah, said that the study related to the development of Khor Al Battah in the Wilayat of Sur comprises a number of surveys including a survey for measuring works, measuring waves, currents and water level, in addition to geotechnical soil survey.

The 4-pronged advisory study is expected to be completed with all its components by the end of the year, Al Maawali said, explaining that the Khor Al Battah area includes a number of tourist attractions that characterise the Wilayat



of Sur. He indicated that the governorate is currently executing a beautification project related to the development of the Al Tina area in Jabal Eid in the Wilayat of Sur, funded by the Oman LNG Company. The project includes a 1.2 km cycling and walking track, an open-air theatre, a bus parking and a children’s playground.

The governorate will float a tender to conduct an advisory study for the development of the market area in the Wilayat of Sur which includes treatment of water and sewage leaks. The governorate will soon announce a number of municipal projects in different wilayats of the governorate, he concluded.

— ONA

MoAFWR constructs seven new flood protection dams



SUHAIL AL NAHDI
MUSCAT, APRIL 1

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources(MoAFWR), has constructed seven more flood protection dams in different governorates at a cost of RO 227 million with the aim of enhancing the protection dam system to reduce the risk of flooding.

Three flood protection dams were built in the governorates of Muscat and Dhofar at a cost of RO 127 million. Four more dams are under construction two of them are in Muscat Governorate and the other two are in Dhofar Governorate at a total cost exceeding RO 100 million.

The construction of Al Jufainah flood protection dam will be complete by the

end of the year. It will be the second of its kind in the Wilayat of Al Amerat. The dam is aimed at reducing the risk of flooding and protecting residential buildings in Al Amerat and commercial stores in Al Qurum, one of the worst-hit by Cyclone Gonu in 2007.

The dam is 2.66 km long, its reservoir is 73 sq km and has a capacity to store 15.7 million cubic metres of water. The project involves 6 dams built of compacted dirt and gravel.

The dam is 800 metres long, 30 metres high with a bottom drainage hole for discharging the dam lake. It also has a channel for passing flood waters underneath the dam as well as a side dam with a length of 1,180 metres and a height of 24 metres.



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Consumer Protection Authority

AUDI VEHICLES RECALL CAMPAIGN

MODEL A6 - A7 Year 2019/2022





Campaign Date : 02/04/2023
Campaign Type : Safety Action
Campaign Section : Mechanical / Replacing tank level sender
Product Description : Audi Vehicles

Production Year	Vehicle Model	VIN No.	No. of Affected Vehicles
2019 / 2022	AUDI A6 – A7	From: WAUZZZF22KN015984 To: WUAZZZF26NN900778	92

- Description**
The distance between the tank level sender and an internal breather line may be too small. As a result, the sender may get caught on a breather line in the tank. As a result, the drop in fuel level can no longer be detected during vehicle operation. An incorrect fuel level/remaining range is shown in the instrument cluster. If the fuel in the tank is used up completely, the vehicle will stop without warning.
- Action:**
Replacing tank level sender.
- For More Information:**
Owners of affected vehicles may contact Premium Motors to book an appointment starting 02/04/2023.
- Contact Data:**
Premium Motors Service Center, Ghala, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman.
Tel: 22845112 – Mob: 95700636, P.O. Box: 94, P.C: 105
Sunday to Thursday, From 8:00 AM To 5:00 PM



RAMADHAN ENTERS SECOND PHASE TIME TO ASK FOR FORGIVENESS

KABEER YOUSUF
[@kabeeryousef](#)

MOSQUES in and around Muscat became more active as more people began to stay overnight seeking Almighty's forgiveness upon His slaves as the holy month of Ramadhan entered the second part of the ten days today.

The holy Quran says that the first 10 days of the holy month of Ramadhan are the days of 'Mercy of Allah' while the following ten days are 'Forgiveness from Allah' and the last being 'Salvation from hellfire'.

These ten days are the days to seek forgiveness from Almighty Allah, and for the very reason, they are of great importance to a believer as the days of fasting are moving forward taking us on an intangible spiritual voyage.

The Prophet (SAW) said about the blessed month of Ramadhan: 'And it is a month, the first (part) of which is mercy, the middle (part) of which is forgiveness and the last (part) of which is freedom from the Fire'. [Ibn Khuzaimah]. Religious scholars opine that the second phase of the three phases of Ramadhan is the real testing ground of one's integrity, adherence to human values and the ability to let go all the material pleasures that we look forward to, during the day.

According to religious scholars, some of

the traits that we can try to increase during these days are, continuously extinguishing one's sins, giving charity and taking care of the poor and destitute.

"Since the time of prophet Muhammad (May Peace be Upon Him), the second ten days of the holy month is more prosperous and one should cultivate better values inside him/her and discard unwanted feelings like hatred and jealousy," said Hatim Abdissalam, a religious scholar based in Muscat.

"Giving or doing charity is one of the good deeds and feeding a poor is the best out of them because it could be just smiling at people, simply saying a good word and a quick online donation to the needy are the best charities. A good way to downweigh one's sins is through Sadaqah Jariyah, such as planting an olive tree, sponsoring an orphan or building a water well," he added.

It is always great to learn to forgive and we can always forgive others and forget their mistakes so that you will be forgiven.

"One can also keep a tab on to forgive anyone whom one had an issue with, altercation or verbal fight with. If you are holding onto any anger, bitterness or pain, it will help neither you nor them - in fact, you could be missing out on Allah's forgiveness because of it. Take the first step towards building bridges, as Allah forgives those who have a forgiving nature," Hatim added.





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Ahead of Trump court date, NY police ‘alert’ and ‘ready’

NEW YORK: Policing the “city that never sleeps” is no easy task even on a typical day -- so New York law enforcement agencies are taking no chances ahead of Donald Trump’s high-profile court appearance next week, bracing for protests for and against the first indictment ever of a former US president.

The city’s police department has ordered its 36,000 officers to be in uniform and ready to deploy next week, NBC News reported on Friday, citing official sources.

A New York Police Department (NYPD) spokesperson said on Friday that “officers have been placed on alert,” and stand ready to “ensure everyone is able to

peacefully exercise their rights.” Trump, 76, is to be booked and fingerprinted and have his mugshot taken at a Manhattan courthouse on Tuesday afternoon before appearing before a judge.

While the specific charges remain under seal, the case brought by New York District Attorney Alvin Bragg is widely believed to revolve around a \$130,000 hush money payment Trump gave a star ahead of his successful 2016 election.

Protests on both sides of the issue -- which the president and his supporters have decried as “political persecution” -- are expected to grow in the city, raising fears of unrest.



Plainclothes NYPD officers, some wearing Thin Blue Line apparel, prepare to deploy barricades near Trump Tower in New York on Saturday. – Reuters

Trump supporters, including Republican member of Congress Marjorie Taylor Greene, have announced plans to protest outside the courtroom during his appearance.

For now, the NYPD spokesperson said, there are “no current credible threats to New York City.” - ‘Politicised judicial systems’ - Outside Trump’s eponymous skyscraper on Fifth Avenue, a dozen or so people had already taken position on Friday with signs and banners that said, “Arrest Trump” and “Tick Tock, Times Up!” Another sign read, “No one is above the law.” A man in a Trump costume made an appearance, and took pictures with

a couple of the former president’s supporters, who carried a banner supporting his 2024 campaign.

Outside the district attorney’s heavily guarded office, Susan, a 60-year-old lawyer who declined to give her last name, had no qualms about saying she supports policies that Trump espouses, although “I don’t like his personality.” The expected charges against Trump are overblown, at best “a misdemeanor, not a felony,” she said.

“This is ridiculous -- politically motivated. I am ashamed of this justice in America that looks like that of other countries with politicised judicial systems,” she said. — AFP

Syria FM makes first Egypt visit in over 10 years

CAIRO: Syria’s foreign minister met his Egyptian counterpart in Cairo on Saturday, the first such visit in more than a decade and the latest sign of Arab states mending ties with President Bashar al Assad.

Faisal Mekdad was embraced by Sameh Shoukry as he arrived at the Egyptian foreign ministry, the first official trip since before the uprising and conflict that began in Syria in 2011.

President Assad was shunned by many Western and Arab states due to the war in Syria, which splintered the country and left hundreds of thousands of people dead. An Egyptian security



Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry (R) meets with his Syrian counterpart Faisal Mekdad at the ministry headquarters in Cairo on Thursday. – AFP

source said the visit was aimed at putting in place steps for Syria’s return to the Arab League through Egyptian and Saudi Arabian mediation.

The Cairo-based Arab League suspended Syria’s membership in 2011 and many Arab states pulled their envoys out of Damascus.

Some countries, including the United States and Qatar, have opposed the rehabilitation of ties with Assad, citing his government’s brutality during the conflict and the need to see progress towards a political solution in Syria.

But key regional powers including the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have recently signalled increasing openness towards Damascus. Egypt’s foreign ministry published pictures of the two ministers in a closed meeting before a wider discussion. Syrian state news agency SANA reported that the talks were aimed at strengthening ties between the two states. — Reuters

■ HAPPY NEW YEAR

Sudan factions delay deal on civilian rule

KHARTOUM: Sudanese leaders have postponed to next week the signing of an agreement to resume a short-lived democratic transition, an official said on Saturday, amid continued disagreement between military factions.

A coup in October 2021 led by army chief Abdel Fattah al Burhan had derailed the transition to civilian-led rule that began following the 2019 ouster of Islamist general Omar al Bashir.

Security reforms are a key point of contention in negotiations held over the past weeks, building on a preliminary accord reached in December to install a civilian government.

The signing ceremony planned for Saturday is now expected on Thursday instead to finalise “technical issues linked to the reform of the security forces”, said Khaled Omar Youssef, a civilian official arrested during Burhan’s coup who now serves as spokesman for the talks.

The December deal, reached after near-weekly protests since the 2021 coup, calls for the military’s exit from politics once a civilian government is installed.

The proposed reforms include the integration into the regular army of the powerful paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Burhan’s deputy Mohamed Hamdan Daglo. — AFP



Assyrian Christian revellers dressed in traditional clothing march with Assyrian flags during “Aketo” Assyrian New Year celebrations in Iraq’s northern city of Dohuk on Saturday. – AFP

Iraq launches new oil refinery in Karbala to reduce imports

KARBALA: Iraq inaugurated an oil refinery in the central city of Karbala on Saturday, a project the government hopes will reduce its dependency on imports.

Oil Minister Hayan Abdel Ghani said the refinery had begun “commercial production” after a ribbon-cutting ceremony led by Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani.

It has the capacity to refine 140,000 barrels per day and “help meet local demand for petrol, kerosene and heating oil, while reducing imports”, Abdel Ghani said.

Despite its immense oil and gas reserves, Iraq remains dependent on imports to meet energy needs.

The minister said the refinery, built by South Korean firm Hyundai, can produce nine million litres of fuel a day -- equivalent to more than half Iraq’s daily imports of 15 million litres.

The refinery also has the capacity to produce 200 megawatts of electricity and “60 megawatts of them will be allocated to the national grid”, Abdel Ghani added.

Iraq, the second largest producer within the Organization of the

Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), exports an average of 3.3 million barrels of oil per day. Crude exports represent around 90 per cent of the government’s revenue. Ravaged by decades of conflict, Iraq’s crumbling infrastructure and endemic corruption have obstructed reconstruction efforts.

The Karbala refinery is “the first to be built since the 1980s with such production capacity”, an official said.

Three other refineries meet about half of the country’s demand for refined products and the rest is imported. — AFP

Completion of Repair Road works at Hawasnah & Qanot



Saroj Construction Company has finished repairing the damages that heavily affected the Wadi Al Hawasneh Road in the Wilayat of Al Khaboura in the Al Batinah North Governorate during the “Shaheen” cyclone, the road has now been officially opened to the public.

This project was executed by Saroj Construction Company, who completed on time and safely thanks to the structured and industry leading delivery of the team, and the proactive and cooperative approach of the Ministry of Transport, Communications and

Information Technology who made this success possible. The project includes the repair of 20 sites along the route, the leveling of “dirt shoulders” with a length of 60 km, and the implementation of 9 crossings of valleys and “box culverts” in 5 locations.

The implementation of road repair works was designed and executed according to the standard specifications of the Road Design Manual, and the road was provided with traffic safety requirements as per the corresponding guidelines.



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

TENDERS ANNOUNCEMENT

Tender No.	38/2023/MHT/HQ-9	Tender Name	RESTORATION OF SOHAR FORT AT WILAYAT SOHAR - NORTH AL BATINAH GOVERNORATE	
Tender No.	39/2023/MHT/HQ-10	Tender Name	RESTORATION OF MAGHABSHA FORT AT AL SUWAIQ - NORTH AL BATINAH GOVERNORATE	
Fees of Tender Documents (Non-refundable)		38/2023/MHT/HQ-9		25 O.R
		39/2023/MHT/HQ-10		25 O.R
Tender Document Sales End Date		9/04/2023		
Last Date for Bid Submission		19/04/2023		
Grade	38/2023/MHT/HQ-9		First	
	39/2023/MHT/HQ-10		Second	
E-Tendering Portal		https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om		

- Interested Companies registered with Tender Board (in the mentioned Grade) may obtain Tender documents from the E.Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>, against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document.
- Bids are submitted that fulfill the technical conditions and specifications, accompanied by a tender bond from a local bank not less than (1%) of the bid value, valid for (90) days from the date of its submission.
 - Any bid that does not meet the required tender bond will not be considered
 - The Ministry shall not be obligated to accept the lowest or any other bids
- The bid submission period starts after the end of the inquiry period shown in the e-tendering system, until the last date for submitting bids before (10:00 am, Oman time).

Support and inquiries	For more information, related to the tender, kindly communicate through the website of the e-tendering system: https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om
	For inquiries related to the technical support for the e-tendering system, kindly communicate through etenderhd@ita.gov.om or 24402200
For further information	Email : sotic@mht.gov.om Phones : 22088348 - 22088085



Biden tells Russia to release US reporter

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden on Friday called for Russia to release *Wall Street Journal* reporter Evan Gershkovich, who is being held on espionage charges, while rebuffing a call from the paper's editorial board to expel Russian journalists from the United States.

Asked by White House reporters what his message was to Russia regarding Gershkovich, a US citizen, Biden said: "Let him go."

The *Wall Street Journal's* board of opinion editors called in a piece published on Thursday afternoon for the expulsion of Russia's ambassador to the United States, as well as "all Russian journalists working here," describing the move as "the minimum to expect."

"The timing of the arrest looks like a calculated provocation to embarrass the US and intimidate the foreign press still working in Russia," it added.

The *Journal's* editor-in-chief, Emma Tucker, sent a note to the newspaper's staff on Friday, saying that "we will carry on doing everything in our power to secure Evan's release."

"Your safety and security are what matters most to me, and we will continue to protect that no matter where you may be reporting from," she added.

Speaking to reporters before leaving to view tornado damage in Mississippi, Biden said that expelling Russian journalists was "not the plan right now."
— AFP



People leave after collecting free bags of flour from a government distribution point in Islamabad on Saturday. — AFP

Pakistan posts record ever annual inflation

ISLAMABAD: Consumer price inflation in Pakistan jumped to a record 35.37 per cent in March from a year earlier, the statistics bureau said on Saturday, as at least 16 people were killed in stampedes for food aid.

The March inflation number eclipsed February's 31.5 per cent, the bureau said, as food, beverage and transport prices surged up to 50 per cent year-on-year.

Thousands of people have gathered at flour distribution centres set up across the country, some as part of a government-backed programme to ease the impact of inflation.

At least 16 people, including five women and three children, have been killed in stampedes at such centres in recent days, police and officials have said.

Thousands of bags of flour have also been looted from trucks and distribution points, according to official records.

A spokesman at the statistics bureau said the inflation number was the highest ever year-on-year increase recorded by the bureau since monthly records began in the 1970s. "This is the highest ever inflation recorded in the data we have," he said.

The consumer price index was up 3.72 per cent in March from the previous month, the bureau said. Higher prices of food, cooking oil and electricity pushed up the index, it said.

Annual food inflation in March was at 47.1 per cent and 50.2 per cent for urban and rural areas respectively, the bureau said. Core inflation, which strips

out food and energy, stood at 18.6 per cent in urban areas and 23.1 per cent in rural areas.

It has been in economic turmoil for months with an acute balance of payments crisis while talks with the IMF to secure \$1.1 billion funding as part of \$6.5 billion bailout agreed in 2019 have not yet yielded fruit.

Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves have fallen to cover barely four weeks of imports.

A monthly report issued by the finance ministry on Friday projected inflation would remain elevated. The report cited market frictions caused by relative demand and supply gaps of essential items, exchange rate depreciation, and the recent upward adjustment in fuel prices as reasons behind higher inflation expectations. — Reuters

Russia assumes rotating presidency of Security Council

NEW YORK: Russia assumed the rotating presidency of the United Nations' Security Council on Saturday for a month, a move decried as an April Fool's Day joke by critics.

"As of 1 April, they're taking the level of absurdity to a new level," said Sergiy Kyslytsya, Ukraine's permanent representative.

"The security council as it is designed is immobilised and incapable to address the issues of their primary responsibility, that is, prevention of conflicts and then dealing with conflicts,"

Ukraine is not a member of the council but has been called to speak on matters related to the Russian war, however the envoy said Kyiv would not be represented at the body except in the case of an "issue of critical national security interest." Russia will be permitted to hold its own sessions at the council, and *The Guardian* said Moscow was planning to hold three.

The first will be on "risks stemming from the violations of the agreements regulating the export of weapons and military equipment," at which it is expected to attack allies for supplying arms to Ukraine. In addition, it will hold two sessions on "effective multilateralism" and on the situation in the Middle East, to be led by

As of 1 April, they're taking the level of absurdity to a new level...The security council as it is designed is immobilised and incapable to address the issues of their primary responsibility, that is, prevention of conflicts and then dealing with conflicts

SERGIY KYSLYTSYA

Ukraine's permanent representative to UN

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Thursday that Moscow "should not be" a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

"Russia is a permanent member of the Security Council. It shouldn't be, because of what it is doing in Ukraine, but the [UN] charter does not allow for a change in its permanent membership," Greenfield said. — Agencies

Pope Francis leaves hospital, quips 'I am still alive'

ROME: A jovial Pope Francis joked with well-wishers on Saturday as he left hospital after a three-night stay for bronchitis, and headed back to the Vatican to prepare for Christianity's most important week.

The 86-year-old pontiff, who was admitted to Rome's Gemelli hospital on Wednesday with breathing difficulties, got out of the car transporting him and smiled and joked with the crowd.

Asked by someone how he felt, he quipped twice with a big smile "I am still alive!" Francis will now begin preparations for Holy Week and Easter, the most important

week in the Christian calendar.

The pontiff felt unwell on Wednesday after a general audience in St Peter's Square, but his condition improved after he was given antibiotics.

On Friday, the pope visited the children's cancer ward at the hospital, handing out chocolate Easter eggs and baptising a weeks-old baby boy.

As he left on Saturday, he reached out to bless sick people, and stopped to hug and pray with distraught parents whose young daughter had just died.

The Argentine pope confirmed on Saturday he will preside over



Pope Francis addresses the media as he leaves the Gemelli hospital in Rome on Thursday. — AFP

Palm Sunday mass in St Peter's Square, the start of a busy week of events leading up to Easter.

Francis' hospitalisation was his second since 2021, when he underwent colon surgery, also at Gemelli. His increasing health issues over the past year have sparked widespread concern, including speculation that he might choose to retire rather than stay in the job for life.

Pressed by journalists on Saturday as to whether he had been scared by his latest illness, he shook his head and said "no".

He is set to dive back into work at the Vatican, with a meeting

with a top cardinal on the agenda for later on Saturday.

Visitors to St Peter's Square on Friday expressed relief over his recovery. "I was afraid for the pope," said one 56-year-old Italian tourist who gave his name as Davide. "But I'm happy he's better, that he's returning. For believers and the Catholic community, it's important," he added.

The Vatican said on Thursday that Francis had been diagnosed with "infectious bronchitis" requiring antibiotics, and that the treatment had brought about a "marked improvement in his state of health". — AFP

SHORT TAKES

ROME

Climate activists turn Rome fountain black

Climate activists in Italy turned a Baroque-style fountain at the foot of Rome's Spanish Steps black on Saturday, in a protest they said evoked an "end of the world" scenario.

Three activists from Last Generation poured a vegetable-based carbon liquid into the landmark 17th-century fountain, known to Romans as La Barcaccia, before being escorted away by police.

The fountain, in the shape of a boat, was designed by famed



Italian sculptor Pietro Bernini.

Popular tradition has it, he was inspired by the discovery in 1598 of a boat in the square after it was washed inland by a flooding Tiber river.

HELSINKI

Finnish PM's rival upbeat on election eve

Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin's centre-right rival Petteri Orpo (pictured) was upbeat on Saturday on the eve of legislative elections after polls put his party in top place. "We have done a great campaign. We have the best candidates all over Finland and we are first in polls so I'm optimistic," National Coalition party leader Orpo said.

The party that comes out on top traditionally inherits the post of prime minister, provided they can form a majority in



parliament.

According to the latest survey published on Thursday by public broadcaster Yle, Orpo's National Coalition has a thin lead at 19.8 per cent.

WARSAW

Kyiv orders 100 armoured vehicles from Poland

Ukraine has ordered 100 Rosomak multi-purpose armoured vehicles, which are made in Poland under a Finnish licence, Poland's prime minister said on Saturday.

"I bring an order placed yesterday by (Ukrainian) Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal for 100 Rosomaks that will be fabricated here," Mateusz Morawiecki (pictured) said during a visit to the Rosomak manufacturing site in the southern Polish town of Siemianowice Slaskie.



The order will be financed through funds that Poland has received from the European Union and US funds that Ukraine has received, the prime minister said.

A President faces prosecution, and a democracy is tested



Peter Baker

The writer is an American journalist and author

Trump could face a second indictment in Georgia and a third from federal prosecutors and potentially even a fourth

For the first time in American history, a former president of the United States has been indicted on criminal charges. It is worth pausing to repeat that: An American president has been indicted for a crime for the first time in history.

So many unthinkable firsts have occurred since Donald Trump was elected to the White House in 2016, so many inviolable lines have been crossed, so many unimaginable events have shocked the world, that it is easy to lose sight of just how astonishing this particular moment really is.

For all of the focus on the tawdry details of the case or its novel legal theory or its political impact, the larger story is of a country heading down a road it has never travelled before, one fraught with profound consequences for the health of the world's oldest democracy.

For more than two centuries, presidents have been held on a pedestal, even the ones swathed in scandal, declared immune from prosecution while in office and, effectively, even afterwards.

No longer. That taboo has been broken. A new precedent has been set. Will it tear the country apart, as some feared about putting a former president on trial after Watergate? Will it be seen by many at home and abroad as victor's justice akin to developing nations where former leaders are imprisoned by their successors? Or will it become a moment of reckoning, a sign that even someone who was once the most powerful person on the planet is not above the law?

"Whether the indictment is warranted or not, it crosses a huge line in American politics and American legal history," said Jack L Goldsmith, a Harvard Law professor and former top Justice Department official under President George W Bush.

If that were not enough to shake the timbers of the republic, the first may not be the last.

Trump could face a second indictment in Georgia and a third from federal prosecutors and potentially even a fourth.

There is consternation that the barrier-shattering indictment would involve something as unseemly as paying hush money to cover up a romp. Given that the defendant has been involved in far more earth-shattering events like trying to overturn an election and inspiring an attack on the Capitol to prevent the transfer of power, the allegations by Manhattan prosecutors seem less than epochal.

But if the issue is accountability, then the case could redraw the lines and make it less daunting for prosecutors in Georgia and Washington to follow suit by charging more serious crimes if they have the evidence, since they will not have to bear



Reporters gather on a bridge near the Mar-a-Lago Club owned by former President Donald Trump, who was indicted by a Manhattan grand jury on Thursday, in Palm Beach.

the burden of justifying action never taken before. Leave it to the only president ever impeached in Congress twice to face so many prosecutions that lawyers need a score card just to keep track.

While the indictment of Trump takes the country into uncharted waters, the authors of the Constitution might have been surprised only that it took so long. Justice Department policy maintains that sitting presidents cannot be indicted, but the framers explicitly contemplated the prospect of them being charged after leaving office.

A president impeached by the House and convicted and removed from office by the Senate "shall nevertheless be liable and subject to indictment, trial, judgment and punishment, according to law," Article I, Section 3 of the Constitution declares.

"Generally, we consider that language to suggest that, whatever may happen with respect to an impeachment while a president is in office, he still may be held liable civilly or criminally after he leaves office for his misconduct in office," said Michael J Gerhardt, a constitutional law professor at the University of North Carolina.

In other words, no former president was immune from criminal liability. "The framers would have been horrified at the possibility of a president ever being above the law while in office or after leaving it," Gerhardt said.

Indeed, while voting to acquit Trump at his second impeachment trial — the one charging him with inciting the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol — Sen Mitch McConnell, the Republican leader from Kentucky, said he did so because Trump was no longer in office but added that he was still subject to criminal prosecution.

"My view is that so long as the case that is brought is for a crime that is not unusual to charge, and the proof is also as strong as one would normally have — i.e. that one wards against the problem of selective prosecution — then it is imperative that we hold politicians to account regardless of what position they hold or held," said Andrew Weissmann, a deputy to Robert Mueller, the special counsel who investigated the Trump campaign's ties to Russia.

Meena Bose, who is the executive dean of Hofstra University's Peter S Kalikow School of Government and runs a presidential history project, said that a country plagued by polarisation and concerns about democracy would be stronger by enforcing responsibility on its leaders. "An active and continuing commitment to making sure all public officials follow the rule of law is essential to addressing those challenges," she said.

But others worry about the long-term consequences for the presidency, not least because this indictment is being brought by a local prosecutor rather than the Justice Department, opening the door to prosecutors around the country taking it upon themselves to go after a president.

In 2008, voters in two small towns in liberal Vermont approved resolutions accusing Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney of "crimes against the Constitution" and instructing their town attorneys to draft indictments. Nothing ever came of it, but it is not hard to imagine a conservative local prosecutor trying to charge President Joe Biden with, say, failing to adequately guard the border.

Goldsmith said any prosecution could tear at the fabric of the system.

"Especially if this indictment is followed



Former President Donald Trump speaks to the New Hampshire Republican State Committee in Salem, N H.

by even a justified indictment from the special counsel, we will see recriminations and retributions in the medium term, all to the detriment of our political national health," he said.

Trump's allies branded the Manhattan case political even before any indictment without waiting to review the actual evidence. Whatever Alvin L Bragg, the district attorney, turned up was immaterial — to defend their party's most recent president, and possible next nominee, they preemptively declared the prosecution illegitimate because it was brought by a Democrat.

Rep Mark E Green, R-Tenn, chair of the House Homeland Security Committee, compared any prosecution of Trump to political cases in less developed countries.

"Daniel Ortega arrested his opposition in Nicaragua and we call that a horrible thing," he said last week. "Mr Biden, Mr President, think about that."

Locking up former leaders on specious, politically driven charges may be common in the world's autocracies, but some of the most advanced democracies have not shied away from putting their leaders on trial for crimes. In Israel, former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert spent more than a year in prison for bribery, fraud and other charges while the incumbent prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, is currently on trial on similar charges.

In the United States, Teapot Dome, Watergate, Iran-Contra and Whitewater never put a president in the dock. The only sitting president to see the inside of a police station as a defendant was Ulysses S Grant, who was stopped for speeding down the streets of Washington in his horse-drawn carriage. He paid \$20 and went on his way.

Gift of a stethoscope to a refugee child inspired a career of caring



Megan Specia

from the first years of my life." Those years, in the late 1980s and 1990s, were spent in the chaos of war, with uncertainty swirling around him, first in his home city of Kabul; then in a refugee camp in Pakistan where he was displaced with his family; and then back to an Afghanistan engulfed in civil war.

Decades later, driven by hopes of one day becoming a doctor, he established a new life in Britain, where he overcame post-traumatic stress disorder, learned English

and studied medicine at Cambridge University, eventually becoming an emergency room doctor.

"I came in with no family support and hardly an education," Arian said. "But I wanted to do something with my life and I was taking steps toward it, although it was a long shot."

Two years ago, he published "In the Wars," a memoir about his journey from Kabul to Britain as an asylum-seeker. His story, a personal tale of overcoming odds, illustrates how Britain's asylum system has long provided sanctuary and opportunity for countless people.

But in recent years, successive Conservative governments have cracked down on the process, particularly with policies intended to deter asylum-seekers from crossing the English Channel.

In March, the government introduced legislation that would expel all people who arrive on small boats crossing the Channel without hearing their asylum claims, a position that has been criticised by human rights groups. The British government says that many who arrive this way are economic migrants, and that the policy will act

as a deterrent. Government data, though, shows that the majority who reach shore are eventually granted asylum.

Arian said his own journey showed "what can be done when you allow people to realise their potential."

"In this case, you can see the future I've got," he said. "But there are so many other futures on the line."

Speaking from his home in Chester in northwestern England, Arian, a father of two, recounted the arduous journey that led him out of Afghanistan.



Waheed Arian, a doctor in Chester, England, was once an asylum seeker from Afghanistan.

Waheed Arian fled the war in Afghanistan when he was a teenager. Now an emergency room doctor in Britain, he has made it his mission to bring hope and healing to others

When his parents sent him to Britain in 1999, alone at 15, it was a tough decision for them, he said. But, he explained, "I was at risk of being taken as a military soldier." He added, "I didn't have a future. I wanted to become a doctor, not a killer."

So his parents scraped together the money to pay a man to help him get to Britain to join a family friend.

He boarded a plane from Islamabad, Pakistan, a false passport in hand, and claimed asylum when he arrived.

"As soon as I landed in the UK, I was handcuffed and I was put in a prison," he said. "But I did come with that hope of safety, and the dream to become a doctor."

The power of Ramadhan



Dr Hamed al Sinawi
@alsinawi

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

Each year, Muslims around the world await the holy month of Ramadhan.

The month of fasting is for giving to the poor and doing other good deeds. For many of us it is also a time to reflect on our life and where we are heading and detox from unhealthy habits that we accumulated over the years.

The shorter working hours and longer prayers makes us shift attention toward Allah the almighty rather than our daily quests in the materialistic world.

The spirit of Ramadhan is beyond giving up eating and drinking and other pleasures during the day, it extends to give us an opportunity to use the self power we gain from giving up eating and drinking even when one is hungry or thirsty as we

surrender to Allah and count our blessings.

In Ramadhan we appreciate the feeling of the poor and we give them money in an act of empathy and kindness, the kindness that extends to be reflected in our behaviour in general. One becomes patient when waiting in the busy traffic or for his or her turn to pay at the supermarket check out point.

When dealing with people who are less patient than us and at some point may shout or behave in a rude way. We keep quiet, not because we are weak but we recognise it's against the spirit of fasting to show aggression.

Islam tells us to say “Am fasting” as a form of self reminder that we should be more tolerant of each other. Sometimes

IT TAKES AROUND 21 DAYS TO ADOPT A NEW BEHAVIOUR AND BY THE THIRD WEEK OF RAMADHAN MOST, IF NOT ALL, OF US SHOULD HAVE INTEGRATED RAMADHAN'S PROGRAMME INTO OUR LIVES

Ramadhan comes during the hottest month of the year yet a true Muslim would not give into the temptation to drink water when no one is around because he is not fasting to impress others but to show surrender to Allah who rewards those who fast with a special place in heaven. Modern science tells us that

fasting is good for our mental and physical well being. I once came across an article about fasting clinics in Germany where people experiencing severe obesity are advised by their doctors to undergo a fasting schedule similar to what we do during Ramadhan and the impact of this programme in their weight loss is significant.

Yet the question remains, why do people revert to old behaviours once Ramadhan is over?

According to psychologists it takes around 21 days to adopt a new behaviour so this means by the third week of Ramadhan most, if not all, of us should have integrated Ramadhan's programme into their lives, so what is going on? In my opinion there are few

factors that can explain this. First, the collective nature of Ramadhan, which means we are all doing the same thing, fasting, praying and living a more spiritual life as a group so we are kind of supporting each other.

Try fasting outside the month of Ramadhan while everyone is around and you will see the difference.

The second point is will-power and standing against temptation. During Ramadhan you feel stronger in the face of temptations so you keep on fasting even when you feel hungry because you fear god and respect the spirit of Ramadhan.

Having said that, once can still leave Ramadhan with positive changes in habits that can be adopted for longer, by God's well.

Trump indictment poses political risks for Biden

AURELIA END

Joe Biden has repeatedly said he'd like to face Donald Trump again in 2024, but the indictment of his former -- and possibly future -- opponent has opened a new box of political risks for the Democrat.

On Friday morning, Biden stopped to speak with reporters as he left for a trip to survey tornado damage in Mississippi -- instead of walking right past as he often does.

“I’m not going to talk about the Trump indictment,” he said to multiple shouted questions. “I have no comment on Trump.”

The White House has released no formal statement since the revelation on Thursday that Trump would become the first ever former president to face criminal charges, over a hush money payment to a porn star during the 2016 election.

Biden’s administration, seeking to avoid any perception of influencing the justice system, will likely remain “quiet for as long as they can,” former press secretary Jen Psaki said on MSNBC.

Trump quickly claimed the indictment was “political persecution and election interference,” and accused Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg of “doing Joe Biden’s dirty work.”

Other top Republicans similarly expressed outrage at Bragg, an elected Democrat, with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy pledging to hold him to account over an “unprecedented abuse of power.”

Psaki advised the White House to “keep your head down” and don’t “feed into the politics of this.”

Until now, her successor at the White House press room podium, Karine Jean-Pierre, has remained silent on the legal proceedings against Trump, using as cover a law that prohibits government officials from discussing future elections. Biden’s Democratic Party will however be broadly content with the dual-image split screen that could soon come: Biden touring the country touting economic programmes, Trump appearing in court.

After Mississippi, Biden will travel to his home in Delaware, where he spends most weekends.

But on Monday, he plans to travel to the northern city of Minneapolis, where the White House says he will “discuss how his economic agenda has led to the strongest job growth in history.”

A day later, Trump is expected to arrive in New York for his arraignment, and to have his finger prints and a mugshot taken.

The indictment of the Republican — which in no way prohibits him from campaigning — may have a mobilising effect in his own camp, and fuel fundraising efforts. — AFP

French anger at Macron seeps into unexpected corners



Catherine Porter

The writer is an international correspondent for the NYT

THE ancient wooden doors are adorned with an ornate metal knocker and a small grilled window, for guards to peek through. Once an imposing part of the elegant facade of Bordeaux’s City Hall, they look more like towering pieces of charcoal since being set on fire last week, after a protest against the French government’s retirement law.

“It makes me angry. This is our heritage,” said Catherine Debève, a retired accountant standing among the crowd drawn by outrage and curiosity to the stone plaza in the city’s centre to examine the damage.

“The government has to withdraw its law. Anger is growing.”

Traditionally, Bordeaux, in the southwest of France, is known for its surrounding vineyards, conservative politics and colonial wealth. It is a measure of the anger sparked by the government’s decision to force through a law raising the retirement age to 64, from 62, that Bordeaux, too, has become a violent flashpoint of the rancour.

University students have occupied their buildings, putting an end to classes. A record number of protesters have charged through the stony streets declared a World Heritage Site by Unesco. Protests have ended in fires and clouds of tear gas, with a handful of agitators later setting fire to the antique doors leading into the City Hall’s broad courtyard.

“Bordeaux is not usually a protesting town,” Mathieu Obry, a bus driver and union organiser, said during yet another march through the city’s downtown on Tuesday — the 10th — above the exploding firecrackers and echoing bull horns.

That so many had turned out on the streets, Obry said, revealed “the government has gone too far.”

As in much of the rest of the country, Tuesday’s protest was not as big or as violent as those last week. But it still drew large enough numbers — 80,000 by the unions’ count, 11,000 according to the prefecture — to indicate that outrage against the government remains strong.



A demonstration against pension reforms in Bordeaux, France.

THOUGH THE BATTLE OF THE STUDENTS IS OFFICIALLY WITH THE PRESIDENT AND HIS GOVERNMENT, MANY SAID THEY ARE ALSO ANGRY AT THE UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATION FOR NOT TAKING AN OFFICIAL POSITION AGAINST THE RETIREMENT LAW

For more than two months, the French have protested against President Emmanuel Macron's pension change. But after his government used a constitutional measure to push the law through Parliament without a full vote, the protests intensified.

In many places, like Bordeaux, students have now joined the demonstrations in force — historically, an ominous sign for those in power.

“It’s not just Paris that has mobilised. It’s here also, in ‘la province,’ ” or the provinces, said Mélissa Dedieu, 21, after chanting along to another rendition of a protest song that went: “Macron went to war with us, and his police too, but we remain determined...”

Shortly after Macron's government

survived a no-confidence vote last week, students pushed into the doors of the University of Bordeaux’s 140-year-old human sciences building and declared they were occupying it.

“We are entering the era of dictatorship,” said Maia Laffont, 23, a third-year psychology student, standing beneath stone busts of notable French scientists rising from the facade of the Beaux-Arts building, now scrawled with anti-Macron graffiti.

Students have taken over all floors and many administrative offices, as well as its auditorium and lovely courtyard, holding banner-making sessions, marshmallow roasts and general meetings. Though their battle is officially with the president and his government, many said they are also angry at the university administration for not taking an official position against the retirement law.

“They didn’t defend our long-term interests,” said Laffont, nervously watching a trio of passing police.

Their occupation is now two weeks old, but their numbers swelled after the government pushed through the law. The grievances have broadened from anger over the single law to the government’s method of ruling — and the constitution that permits it — writ large.

— The New York Times

To comment & email: opinion@omanobserver.om

A Journey: Intelligence, imagination and beyond

WHAT is it that sets us, humans, apart from others in the animal kingdom? It's fair to say, isn't it, that chimps, gorillas, or orang-utans, and dolphins, are those that we on the street would have no problem accepting as smart... very smart, but maybe... in their own way.

In a continual quest for intellect, the reasoning and understanding of intelligence, we often look to the animal kingdom for inspiration, and find it.

In dolphins, for example we have found an array of qualities that are remarkable in their diversity. Their behaviour being so much of what we would aspire to. They communicate clearly with each other, which has been proven, but their language has so many mysteries still, it has been beyond science to unlock so far.

However it is their sophisticated sonar systems which have been the focus of the majority of dolphin research across the last hundred years. Their unique echolocation system is believed to read shape and size in addition to distance and direction, which is mind boggling. They have a supportive social environment, which appears compassionate and caring, which extends to common nurturing and caring principles for their young and old respectively. Even more emphatically, they show joy in all they do, whether it's cavorting in the sea, leaping acrobatically, or interacting with human swimmers and divers, they display a curiosity and exuberance rarely matched by other species.

Apparently, chimps, gorillas, and orang-utans have the nearest intellectual perspective to humans.

I mean, how could you watch 'Gorillas in the Mist (Michael Apted, 1988),' and not be convinced of their innate humanity? We share 98 per cent of the DNA of orang-utans, who have strong social bonds, cognitive skills, and even identifiable cultures.

They have audible and sign languages,



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The writer is a media consultant

WE WILL SOON BE REPLACED AS 'TOP-DOGS,' FROM OUR INTELLECTUAL PERCH, BY THE ANDROIDS OF OUR OWN MAKING, LEADING TO AN ARTIFICIAL RESHAPING OF OUR FUNDAMENTAL EXISTENCE

can both learn and teach, have strong hierarchies, societal frameworks, and most importantly, the ability to sequence and complete complex processes.

Elephants have a brain that is, by comparison with ours, huge, three times the size, and have intense olfactory systems that are the basis of their fight or flight decisions.

Cats and dogs are without peer as household pets, or companions, but you would never guess that pigs are equally trainable, would you? Truly! And who would have believed that the incredible octopus is not only unique, but brainy, capable of problem-solving, navigation, recognition, and discretion.

And rats... I detest rats... yet, they too demonstrate extensive intelligence, hence their having been used in laboratories for scientific experiments for centuries

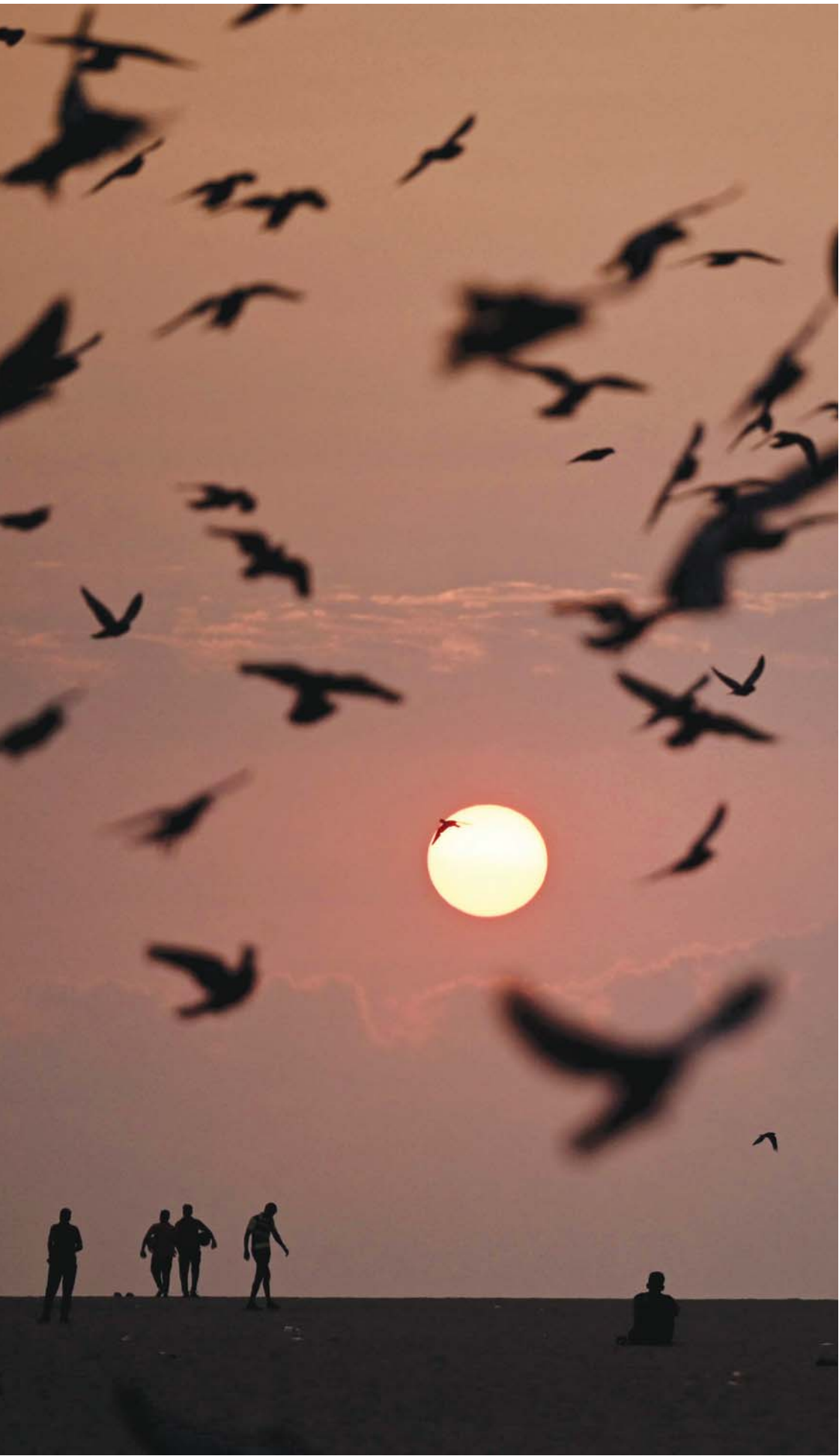
There is no end to this type of discussion, and it's no debate to be won or lost. There is however, an ongoing awareness that we need to maintain, perhaps out of respect for those particular gifts and abilities that demonstrate such humanity, that we are not the be all and end all of the intelligence conversation.

Our human intelligence only has its unique 'superiority,' its ability to continuously, almost predictably, influence the future. We have, interestingly, made our greatest technological and developmental advances when we have been put under immense pressure, prompting the thoughts that research is as response driven as sports. Which may be another talking point for another day.

Keep in mind that we are not the alpha in the intelligence playground any more, as the spectre of artificial intelligence looms large. Those men in white coats tell us that we will soon be replaced as 'top-dogs,' from our intellectual perch, by the androids of our own making, leading to an artificial reshaping of our fundamental existence.

Not that I'll be here to see it, but it's something to look forward to... or not!

WAKE UP CALL



People loiter as pigeons fly during sunrise at the Marina beach in Chennai, India. – AFP

Is globalisation Over?

LATE last year, Morris Chang, the legendary founder of Taiwan's (and the world's) leading semiconductor producer, proclaimed that "globalisation is almost dead." In a world where supply chains have been disrupted by Covid-19 and the deepening Sino-American rivalry, other commentators have echoed this view, and many companies have begun "on-shoring" and "near-shoring" their procurement of goods. But it is a mistake to conclude that globalisation is over. A lot of human history reveals why.

Globalisation is simply the growth of interdependence at intercontinental, rather than national or regional, distances. Neither good nor bad in itself, it has many dimensions, and it certainly is not new. Climate change and migration have been driving humanity's spread across the planet ever since our ancestors began to leave Africa over a million years ago, and many other species have done the same.

These processes have always given rise to biological interactions and interdependencies. The plague originated in Asia but killed a third of the European population between 1346 and 1352. When Europeans journeyed to the Western Hemisphere in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they carried pathogens that decimated the indigenous populations. Military globalisation goes back at least to the days of Xerxes and then Alexander the Great, whose empire



Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

MOREOVER, EVEN IF GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION WERE TO CURTAIL ECONOMIC GLOBALISATION SUBSTANTIALLY, THE WORLD WOULD REMAIN HIGHLY INTERDEPENDENT THROUGH ECOLOGICAL GLOBALISATION

stretched across three continents. And, of course, the sun never set on the nineteenth-century British Empire. Through it all, great religions also spread across multiple continents — a form of sociocultural globalisation.

More recently, the focus has been on economic globalisation: the intercontinental flows of goods, services, capital, technology, and information. Again, the process is not new, but technological changes greatly reduced the costs associated with distance, rendering today's economic globalisation "thicker and quicker." The Silk Road connected Asia and Europe in the Middle Ages, but it was nothing like the vast flows of modern container ships, let alone Internet communications that connect continents instantaneously.

While globalisation came to be seen primarily as an economic phenomenon in the twentieth century, it then became a political buzzword (for proponents and critics alike) in the 2000s. When rioters in Davos broke the windows of a McDonald's to protest labour conditions in Asia, that was political globalisation.

The current globalisation clearly differs from that of the nineteenth century, when European imperialism provided much of its institutional structure,

and when higher costs meant that fewer people were involved directly. Western firms began spreading around the world in the 1600s, and by the end of the nineteenth century, the global stock of foreign direct investment was equivalent to about 10 per cent of global output. By 2010, the worldwide stock of FDI included non-Western companies and was equivalent to about 30 per cent of world GDP.

On the eve of World War I in 1914, there was a high degree of global interdependence, including movements of peoples, goods, and services. There was also inequality, because the benefits of economic globalisation were unevenly shared. But economic interdependence did not prevent the major trading partners from fighting each other (which is why people at the time called it the Great War). After those four years of devastating violence and destruction, global economic interdependence was sharply reduced. World trade and investment did not return to their 1914 levels until the 1960s.

Could the same thing happen again? Yes, if the United States and Russia or China blunder into a major war. But barring that contingency, it is unlikely. For all the talk of economic "decoupling," the breaks so

far have been quite selective and incomplete. Global trade in goods and services made a strong comeback after the Covid downturn in 2020, though not all areas recovered equally.

With the US having established new barriers to hamper the flow of certain sensitive goods to and from China, its imports from China have risen by only 6 per cent above pre-Covid levels, while its imports from Canada and Mexico have risen by over 30 per cent. In the US case, then, regionalisation seems to have recovered more robustly than globalisation. But look more closely and you will find that while China's share of America's imports dropped from 21 per cent to 17 per cent between 2018 and 2022, US imports from Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Thailand rose by more than 80 per cent. Those figures certainly do not suggest that globalisation is dead.

It bears mentioning that this new Asian trade with the US is, in fact, intermediated Chinese trade. The US and its allies are still more deeply intertwined with the Chinese economy than was ever the case with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Western countries can reduce their security risks by excluding Chinese companies like Huawei from Western 5G telecommunications

networks without incurring the inordinately high costs of dismantling all global supply chains.

Moreover, even if geopolitical competition were to curtail economic globalisation substantially, the world would remain highly interdependent through ecological globalisation. Pandemics and climate change obey the laws of biology and physics, not politics. No country can solve these problems alone. Greenhouse gases emitted in China can lead to costly sea-level rises or weather disruptions in the US or Europe, and vice versa.

These costs could be enormous. Scientists estimate that both China and the US suffered over one million excess deaths as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic that began in Wuhan, partly owing to both countries' failure to cooperate on policy responses. Success in addressing climate change or future pandemics will require recognition of global interdependencies, even if people do not like it.

Globalisation is largely driven by technological changes that reduce the importance of distance. That will not change. Globalisation is not over. It just may no longer be the kind we want.

sport

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SEEB EDGE BAHLA TO LIFT MG CUP

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 1

Seeb edged Bahla 6-5 in penalties to lift MG Cup at Seeb Stadium late on Friday. The regulation time ended in a goalless draw as both teams failed to break the deadlock.

Bahla could not retain their title as the HM Cup runners-up managed to clinch the only title for this domestic season. Seeb suffered a defeat against Al Nahdha in the final of HM Cup while their hopes are very low to defend their Omantel League title. The Muscat-based team is positioned currently in the sixth position with 29 points.

Bahla could not end their season with a title as they lost the MG Cup final encounter. At top-tier league, the team is currently in fifth place with 30 points and behind the league toppers Al Nahdha by 12 points.

Coach Rasheed Jaber's men dominated the match through their active movements in the field specially in the box. Abdulaziz al Maqbali and Marwan Taeab al Siyabi could not penetrate the net of Bahla goalkeeper Omar al Abri who saved many scoring attempts. Some attacks were created by Bahla players A hero, Abdulsalam al Shukaili and Arnest Ba Ohain but all their chances faced strong defence

of Mohammed al Musallami and Juma al Habsi along with goalkeeper Motasim al Wahaibi.

EID NETS PENALTY WINNER
In the penalties, the draw between the teams continued until Fahad al Abdulsalam from Bahla missed his penalty while Eid al Farsi scored for Seeb.

Mohsin bin Hani al Bahrani, CEO of Automotive, Construction Equipment & Renewable Energy at MHD, was the chief guest for the final and gave away the medals and trophies. The final match of MG Cup was attended by officials of Oman Football Association (OFA), both clubs' representatives and other dignitaries.

Oman head coach Branko Ivankovic attended the final match and noted all his technical comments in presence of coaching staff members. With the completion of 2022-23 MG Cup, the only remaining domestic competition is Omantel League with seven more rounds to go.

In the 20th week of the top flight league, Al Suwaiq will meet Sur on Monday while Al Ittihad will face Al Rustaq and Al Oruba take on Al Bashayer. On Tuesday, Dhofar will play against Oman Club while Al Musannah will meet Bahla. League toppers Al Nahdha will take on Al Nasr on Wednesday.



Seeb prevail over Ahli Sidab in Ministry's Shield



AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, APRIL 1

Al Seeb Club emerged victorious in a thrilling basketball match against Ahli Sidab Club with a score of 59-49. The match was held at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex indoor courts in Bausher, as part of the second group competitions of the 13th edition of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth Basketball Shield for the 2022-2023 season.

The match was an intense and exciting one, with both sides putting up a good fight. Al Seeb dominated the first and fourth quarters of the match, while Ahli Sidab managed to win the second and third quarters. In the end, Al Seeb emerged as the winner of the match. The victory places Al Seeb at the top of their group in the preliminary round.

The match started with a quick attack from Al Seeb, with Muawiyah al Harthy successfully shooting to earn the first two points. Ahli Sidab responded with a three-pointer through Khaled al Hashemi, followed by a basket of two points by Himyar al Hasani. Al Seeb scored 15 points and Ahli Sidab earned 11 points in the first quarter, ending with Seeb leading with a score of

20-16. The second quarter saw Ahli Sidab being more active than they were in the first quarter, scoring 11 points and reducing the difference. Al Seeb scored 9 points but remained in the lead with a score of 29-27 at the end of the first-half.

In the third quarter, Ahli Sidab continued their offensive and pressing performance, taking advantage of the mistakes of Al Seeb. They managed to score 16 points, which enabled them to equalise the score. Al Seeb could only score 10 points, resulting in Ahli Sidab leading with a score of 43-39 at the end of the third quarter.

In the fourth quarter, Al Seeb returned to form, bringing the score closer and advancing by a good margin. Their players managed to add 20 points, while Ahli Sidab scored 6 points, resulting in Al Seeb defeating Ahli Sidab with a score of 59-49.

The match was moderated by Rashid al Mushaifari as the first referee, Mazen al Hilali as a second referee, Ali al Salmani as a third referee, and the table officials included Mahmoud al Ajmi, Ghaleb al Hasani, Fatima al Harthy, and Fares al Khalasi as a technical observer.





annik Sinner (ITA) reacts after winning a point against Carlos Alcaraz (ESP) in the Miami Open. — USA Today Sports

Sinner downs Alcaraz to set up Medvedev final

MIAMI GARDENS: Italy's Jannik Sinner turned on the style to end Carlos Alcaraz's hopes of the 'Sunshine Double' and his reign as world number one, triumphing 6-7 (4/7), 6-4, 6-2 in their Miami Open semifinal on Friday.

Sinner will meet Russian Daniil Medvedev in Sunday's final while Alcaraz will lose his number one ranking to Novak Djokovic.

Medvedev reached his fifth straight ATP Tour final with a 7-6 (7/5), 3-6, 6-3 win over fellow Russian Karen Khachanov.

The disappointment for the 19-year-old Alcaraz, the defending champion in Miami and coming off a title at Indian Wells, will be tinged with frustration after he struggled in the third set with leg cramps.

It had been an enthralling and entertaining power-hitting performance from both men in the first set, with an incredible 25-shot exchange in the seventh game, bring the crowd to their feet. Sinner chose some more conservative strokes and although Alcaraz appeared to recover a little,

MIAMI OPEN ATP/WTN RESULTS

MEN (SEMIFINALS)

Jannik Sinner (ITA x10) bt Carlos Alcaraz (ESP x1) 6-7 (4/7), 6-4, 6-2

Daniil Medvedev (RUS x4) bt Karen Khachanov (RUS x14) 7-6 (7/5), 3-6, 6-3

WOMEN (SEMIFINALS)

Petra Kvitova (CZE x15) bt Sorana Cirstea (ROM) 7-5, 6-4

the Italian ran out the winner in three hours.

Sinner said he could feel just how high the quality of their encounter at Hard Rock Stadium had been.

"When both players play tennis like this it is very nice to play, you can feel it with the crowds. There was just a great energy with everything. It is just nice to be part of matches like this," he said.

Earlier, Petra Kvitova powered into the final of the WTA Miami Open with a straight sets victory over Romania's Sorana Cirstea 7-5, 6-4. — AFP

Gujarat win IPL opener in front of more than 100,000 fans

AHMEDABAD, India: Opener Shubman Gill smashed 63 as holders Gujarat Titans beat Chennai Super Kings by five wickets in the Indian Premier League opener in front of more than 100,000 fans in Ahmedabad on Friday.

Chasing 179 for victory, Gujarat rode on Gill's 36-ball innings to achieve their target with four balls to spare at the world's biggest cricket stadium and their home ground.

The 16th edition of the money-spinning T20 tournament began with a glitzy opening ceremony and fireworks at a ground which has an official capacity of 132,000.

A roar erupted when home captain Hardik Pandya won the toss and elected to field first but it was Chennai opener Ruturaj Gaikwad who soon silenced the home fans with a flurry of boundaries in his 92 off 50 balls.

Ruturaj lost partners Moeen Ali for 23 and then new signing Ben Stokes -- the England all-rounder bought for \$1.96 million in the auction -- for seven but kept up the attack against the opposition bowlers.

But Mohammed Shami, who reached 100 IPL wickets, Rashid Khan and Alzarri Joseph took two wickets each to check the opposition scoring.

Gujarat suffered a blow when new overseas player Kane Williamson jarred his knee while attempting a catch at the boundary and limped off the ground.

"We were very happy because at one point they were looking to go past 200, but we got wickets at the right time," Pandya said.

"Obviously when we lost Kane, we had to make sure we cover those runs and as many less runs



as we can give."

IMPACT PLAYER

Sai Sudharsan replaced Williamson under the new 'impact player' rule, which was

has fewer than four overseas players in their XI, is chosen from one of five substitutes listed with the team.

Other innovations include captains being allowed to announce their XI after the toss and teams being able to review umpires' decisions on no-balls and wides using the Decision Review System.

"Having this impact rule makes my job difficult," said Pandya. "I have too many options, and because of this someone will bowl less."

Deshpande got the prized wicket of Gill after being hit for a six on the previous ball to boost Chennai's hopes of a turnaround but unbeaten cameos from Rashid (10) and Rahul Tewatia (15) steered their team home.

Rashid was named man of the match for his all-round show.

There was more of Chennai's yellow than blue of Gujarat at the stadium, which welcomed 41-year-old MS Dhoni with loud cheers at the start of the game in what could be the last IPL as player for the former India captain.

"We were slightly short," Dhoni said of his team's 178-7. "Another 15-20 runs would have been good. We all know there would be a little bit of dew."

The league, which began in 2008 and this year returns to a home-and-away format following the Covid pandemic, has grown to be the world's richest cricket tournament and a huge revenue earner for the BCCI.

Gujarat pulled off a fairytale title win in their debut season last year in front of a record crowd of 101,566 at the same venue.

The 2023 tournament runs until May 28. — AFP

Super Sunday brings IPL Classico



It's the first Super Sunday of IPL 2023 and it surely has to be a action packed double header, first at 2 pm (Oman Time), it will be two teams that are even on their head-to-head encounters and both will be looking to win this one to have the bragging rights over the other. At 6 pm (Oman Time), it's the 'El Classico' of the IPL and there is already a massive buzz in the social media from the huge fan base of both the teams. So, all in all, your Sunday is going to have a divided attention, with your prime focus being on IPL.

SUNRISERS HYDERABAD vs RAJASTHAN ROYALS

• **TEAM INFO:** It was Rajasthan Royals that had a dream season last year, before they fell short of Gujarat Titans in the final. This season, in the fourth match of the tournament, both the teams will be clashing in the Rajiv Gandhi Stadium at Hyderabad. For SRH, in the absence of Aiden Markaram, Bhuvneshwar Kumar will be seen leading the side. Sanju Samson has a point to prove and he should be looking forward to a big season, to open the doors of Indian team.

• **Head-to-Head:** Played - 16; Won by SRH - 8; Won by RR - 8

• **SRH Expected Playing 11:** Mayank Agarwal, Abhishek Sharma, Rahul Tripathi, Harry Brook, Uppend Yadav, Washington Sundar, Bhuvneshwar Kumar, T Natarajan, Umran Malik, Adil Rashid, Karthik Tyagi

• **RAJASTHAN ROYALS Expected**

Playing 11: Jos Buttler, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Padikkal, Samson, Shimron Hetmyer, Riyan Parag, Ravichandran Ashwin, Trent Boult, Chahal, Kuldeep Sen, Obed McCoy

• **SRH Possible Impact player** - Abdul Samad, Abhishek Sharma, Vivrant Sharma If SRH Bowling 2nd: T Natarajan, Kartik Tyagi

• **RR Possible Impact player** - If RR Batting 2nd: Joe Root, Fonavon Ferreira If RR Bowling 2nd: Murugan Ashwin, Navdeep Saini

PITCH REPORT
The Rajiv Gandhi International Stadium, Hyderabad is known for its flat and hard surface. It generally favours the batsmen with high-scoring matches being common. The pitch tends to slow down as the match progresses making it difficult for the bowlers to get a lot of swing or spin. Team that wins the toss should prefer to chase, as is the trend in IPL over the past few years.

• **Fan Comment** - "Both teams will be looking for a crucial win to boost their chances of making the play-offs. It could be a very close contest with both teams having a mix of experienced and young players. Although, I am going to back SRH to win this one." - Mohamme Rizmi, 39, Operations Manager, Sri Lankan.

MATCH PREDICTION

Rajasthan Royals will be high on confidence from their last season and they would surely like to believe that they have a well settled squad. Although the unpredictable game play of Sanju Samson has often been highly criticised, but then he continues to approach the game that way. When it works, he looks extremely special and we are expecting him to be looking special tomorrow. Jaiswal and Jos Buttler are also in peak form. So, it's going to be Rajasthan Royals in this one.

ROYAL CHALLENGERS BANGALORE vs MUMBAI INDIANS

• **TEAM INFO:** Royal Challengers Bangalore has been a consistent side over the past few years, with respect to making it to the final. Although their quest for their maiden title (even after 15 seasons) still stays as their prime objective. Many fans believe that it's Virat Kohli's excessive aggression that creates a lot of pressure on team members in crunch games. On the other hand, Mumbai are the most successful team of IPL (with 5 titles). Although the last season was one to forget for them. They could only win 4 games and that's something that they would like to change this season. Both the captains are firm believers of momentum and that's exactly what they will be looking for this season.

• **Head-to-Head:** Played - 30; Won by RCB- 13; Won by MI - 17

• **RCB Expected Playing 11** – Faf du Plessis (c), Virat Kohli, Suyash Prabhudesai, Mahipal Lomror, Michael Bracewell, Shahbaz Ahmed, Dinesh Karthik (wk), Reece Topley, Harshal Patel, Mohammed Siraj, and Karn Sharma.

• **MUMBAI INDIANS Expected Playing 11** – Rohit Sharma (c), Ishan Kishan, Cameron Green, Suryakumar Yadav, Tilak Varma, Tim David, Hrithik Shokeen, Kumar Kartikeya, Jofra Archer, Arshad Khan, and Jason Behrendorff.

• **RCB Possible Impact player** – If RCB Batting 2nd: Michael Bracewell, Manoj Bhandage, Mahipal Lomror, If RCB Bowling 2nd: Akash Deep, Reece Topley, Josh Hazlewood

• **MI Possible Impact player** – If MI Batting 2nd: Dewald Brevis, Tim David, If MI Bowling 2nd: Piyush Chawla, Kumar Kartikeya, Jason Behrendorff

PITCH REPORT

The pitch at M Chinnaswamy Stadium

is a belter of a track. The batters enjoy batting on this surface as the ball comes nicely onto the bat. The bowlers often go on a journey on missing their mark and will have to hit the right areas to avoid damage.

• **Fan Comment** – "Been a big fan of RCB right from season 1. Wishing RCB the very best for this season. Hope they win the IPL this season. E Sala Cup Namde!" – Freddie CL, 54, Sales Manager, Indian.

"Clash of the Titans." – M Gibran Khan, 40, HSE Manager, British.

MATCH PREDICTION

Royal Challengers Bangalore are the South-African cricket team of IPL. They are the most unpredictable team in the IPL. They are capable of winning the toughest of matches and on other days they can lose the easiest of matches. RCB had a decent last season, and with MI missing a few big names and few other big players not having form on their side, they should be able to corner Mumbai Indians and secure a win to start their campaign in a nail-biting encounter. So, it's going to be Royal Challengers Bangalore to win.

SEND US YOUR COMMENT FOR NEXT DAY'S MATCH BEFORE 12 NOON ON WHATSAPP ON '00968 92470544' AND THE BEST COMMENTS WILL BE INCLUDED IN OUR ARTICLE. – 30 words on the team that you support" + FULL NAME + DESIGNATION + AGE + NATIONALITY. You could post us your views and question on our social media handles and we will pick the best question in our future articles, TWITTER - @OmanObserver @PranavMehtaOman OR INSTAGRAM - @OmanObserver @pranav_mehta_18. DON'T FORGET TO USE THE #OOIPL2023 FOR BETTER REACH.



Rajapaksa helps Punjab bag opening win

MOHALI, India: Sri Lanka's Bhanuka Rajapaksa smashed 50 to set up a seven-run win for Punjab Kings in their rain-hit opening Indian Premier League match against Kolkata Knight Riders on Saturday.

The left-handed Rajapaksa's 32-ball knock and a late charge by big-buy Sam Curran, who hit an unbeaten 26, powered Punjab to 191-5 after being invited to bat first in Mohali.

Left-arm quick Arshdeep Singh led the bowling charge with three wickets to restrict two-time champions Kolkata to 146-7 in 16 overs when rain stopped play and Punjab won by the DLS method.

Rajapaksa set the tone for the team's domination with skipper

Shikhar Dhawan, who made 40, in an 86-run second-wicket stand before the Sri Lankan big-hitter departed.

Curran, a left-handed all-rounder who became the most expensive IPL player when Punjab paid \$2.23 million in the December auction, proved his worth with a 17-ball blitz including two sixes.

Punjab replaced Rajapaksa with fast bowler Rishi Dhawan under the new "impact player" rule among other innovations in the T20 tournament.

The impact player, who can only be an Indian unless the team has fewer than four overseas players in their XI, is chosen from one of five substitutes listed with the team. — AFP

Oman Desert Marathon confirms dates for 9th edition

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, APRIL 1

Oman Desert Marathon (ODM), Oman's unique desert challenge marathon through the golden sands of Bidiyah, announced that its ninth edition will be held from January 20-24, 2024.

For the first time, the last edition of ODM had been recognised by the International Trail Running Association (ITRA) so that the athletes got international ranking points for their participation.

The world trail running body had approved the race with 3 ITRA points, 1 Mountain point, and confirming the distance of 164.40 km with a positive 1570 m elevation gain.

First edition with the ITRA ranking points, the eighth ODM attracted some of the top runners.

"We are one of the top international desert marathons as ODM runs into the ninth edition. We hope to get more elite athletes joining the marathon than the last edition," Said al Hajri, race owner and director of ODM, told the Observer.

Al Hajri said registrations would continue until one month before the competition.

"We are happy to confirm the dates in January and we hope good response from top athletes and trail runners," he said.

The 165 km, self-sufficient four-stage race has been held in Oman's spectacular deserts since 2013, and it presents runners with a great opportunity to course through the Sultanate of Oman's unique landscape and enjoy its rich culture and world-renowned hospitality.

The race is divided into four stages: 42 km on day one, 55 km on day two, 47 km on day three, and 21 km on the fourth and final day.

The last edition saw good participation of Omani runners as well as athletes from Spain, France, Ukraine, Italy, Germany, Poland, Britain, Belgium, Switzerland and Morocco.

BEAUTIFUL DUNES

In the eighth edition, Mohammed El Morabity, brother of six-time champion Rachid El Morabity, claimed the top spot



Oman Desert Marathon during the eighth edition. – Pics by Ian Corless

in the men's category with an overall time of 14 hours 13 minutes and 15 seconds.

Switzerland's Corina Sommer took home the women's prize with an overall time of 19 hours 39 minutes and 28 seconds.

"The dunes were beautiful, however the night race was a bit scary. I was on my own for so long that it made me pick up my speed. This was my first desert run as well as my first night run," Sommer had said after the night race in the previous edition.

Morocco's TGCC team, which consisted of international champions Mohammed and Rachid El Morabity, emerged team champions.

Saleh al Saidi was the first Omani with a finishing time of 15:31:30.

Sami al Saidi and Hamdan al Khatri were in the top three in the section.

The 165 km desert run started on January 21 from Al Wasil Fort with 42



runners, and it ended in Jawharat Bidiyah Resort on January 24 with 37 runners, after five had quit during the race.

The race also included a children's 2 km run, a 5 km run, and 10 km, which were run on day one.

In the ninth edition, which is taking place in Bidiyah as per ODM traditions, there will also be shorter races in addition to the main event, which will start one



day earlier, on January 19. The shorter races are for distances of 10 km, 5 km and 2 km, which proved to be quite popular in the last edition.

Racers who wish to run longer distances of 42 km and 21 km will also have the chance to do so on January 20.

The perfect weather conditions in January help runners to enjoy the desert to the fullest. With an average high

temperature of 25 degrees during the day, participants are sure to get an enjoyable experience that will forever be etched into their memories.

NIGHT DESERT RUN

For those in Muscat, there will also be a chance to participate in a night desert run, which will take place in October 2024 in Ghala. This will be the second edition of the 5 km Night Trail charity race, and it will give participants the unique opportunity to enjoy a run (or a walk) under the beautiful starlit desert sky. ODM donated 100 per cent of its profits to the Environment Society of Oman.

The 165 km Oman Desert Marathon Classic also has a night stage.

The route takes runners across the spectacular Omani land, with all its various landscapes, from the Al Wasil oasis and the vast desert to Jawharat Bidiyah Resort.

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Oman oil exports reach 49.7 million barrels by February-end 2023



MUSCAT: Oil production in the Sultanate of Oman increased at the end of February by 3 per cent, recording 62.75 million barrels. The preliminary data of National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI), showed that the Sultanate of Oman's oil exports decreased by 6.9 per cent at the end of February with 49.71 million barrels.

Crude oil production reached 49.39 million barrels at the end of last February, up by 2.9 per cent compared to the same period in 2022.

Oil condensate production also increased by 3.5 per cent, reaching 13.35 million barrels, compared to 12.91 million barrels for the same period in 2022. The average daily oil production increased by February-end to 163,600 barrels, at a rate of 3 per cent, compared to the same period in 2022, which was 132,700 barrels.

The monthly bulletin showed that the average price per barrel at the end of February 2023 reached \$81.8, an increase of 6.6 per cent compared to the same period in 2022, when the price

per barrel reached \$76.7. China topped the list of countries importing Omani oil with 44.49 million barrels, followed by India with 1.71 million barrels then Japan with 1.26 million barrels. The data issued by NCSI indicated that the domestic production of natural gas (including imports) in the Oman increased by 10.3 per cent by February-end, reaching 8.55 billion cubic metres, compared to 7.74 billion cubic metres during the same period in 2022.

The production of associated gas increased by 9.4 per cent to reach 1.71 billion cubic metres, and the production of non-associated gas, including imports, increased by 10.6 per cent to reach 6.84 billion cubic metres.

The data showed an increase in natural gas consumption in industrial areas by 16.5 per cent, followed by electric power plants by 15.5 per cent, oil fields by 11.9 per cent and gas consumption in industrial projects plants increased by 8.9 per cent.

— ONA

S&P revises Oman’s outlook to positive, affirms ratings at ‘BB’

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, APRIL 1

S&P Global, the world’s foremost provider of credit ratings and financial analytics, announced on Friday night that it has revised Oman’s outlook to positive, while affirming its ratings at “BB”.

The New York based international agency cited in this regard the Sultanate of Oman’s continuously improving fiscal performance.

It noted in particular the Omani government’s efforts to bolster the country’s financial performance and sustain economic development — measures that have contributed to a significant strengthening of Oman’s fiscal position far exceeding expectations.

These successes, the agency further pointed, would enhance the economy’s resilience to potential shocks brought on by instability in oil markets.

The steadily improving fiscal performance, underpinned by supportive policies and programmes, was reflected in the significant reductions in public debts, the agency said.

This was also evident from the strong growth witnessed by the nominal GDP and the decline in total debt to GDP from more than 60 per cent in 2021 to about 40 per cent in 2022, it stated.

According to S&P Global, Oman’s public debt is projected to decline to around RO 16.5 billion, representing 37 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) by the end of this year.

The diminishing public debt



trend, coupled with financial surpluses expected during 2023 and 2024, will further improve Oman’s financial situation, it said.

The agency also cited the government’s success in rationalising public spending in 2022 notwithstanding buoyant international oil prices and strong revenue earnings from oil exports.

Consequently, real GDP growth is anticipated to average at around 2.5 per cent during the 2023-2026 period, with the non-oil sector expected to grow by an average of about 3.5 per cent during the 2025-2026 timeframe.

S&P Global also pointed out that the price of Brent crude is expected to reach \$90 per barrel in 2023, \$80 per barrel in 2024, and \$55 per barrel in 2025.

Oman’s credit rating, it further noted, may see further improvement in the future if the

measures currently adopted by the government continue to translate into dividends for the country’s financial position, as the public debt rate and the cost of servicing the borrowing portfolio continue to decline.

At the same time, the agency warned that the credit rating could be impacted if financial measures are slackened or if other unforeseen circumstances contribute to an increase in the fiscal deficit, thereby affecting the balance of payments situation.

Notably, the Omani government has managed to reduce the public debt to RO 16.6 billion during the first quarter of 2023.

Welcoming the latest outlook statement by S&P, Omani economic expert Mohammed al Mudhiani said: “The optimistic outlook highlights Oman’s adaptability to anticipated future

oil market fluctuations.”

Speaking to the *Observer* Al Mudhiani underlined the importance of the positive credit rating to Oman’s efforts to tap international debt markets at competitive costs.

“The credit rating plays a critical role in determining loan interest rates — the cost of interest is influenced by several factors, one of which is the credit rating.”

According to the economist, the improved rating will enable Oman to benefit from reduced interest rates through refinancing.

“The ongoing progress will contribute to lowering interest rates on specific loans. Furthermore, due to the Sultanate of Oman’s continuous improvement and exceptional management, it has saved more than RO 380 million and RO 127 million during the previous year,” he added.

Oman’s green hydrogen ambitions showcased to French investors

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 1

An overview of the Sultanate of Oman’s National Hydrogen Strategy was presented to leading French energy firms at an executive roundtable organised recently by the Global Diwan, an international business club that connects leaders from the East and the West.

The event was held under the patronage of the Omani Embassy in Paris in cooperation with well-known consultancy firm Haltiqa and Club France-Oman.

France is the latest member of the European Union to evince interest in Oman’s emerging world-scale green hydrogen industry, targeting the production of at least 1 million tonnes of green hydrogen (or its derivatives) by 2030 with an investment of over \$40 billion.

Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands are among a number of European countries that have already embarked on strategic discussions with Oman aimed at securing a share of the latter’s



green energy exports.

In attendance at the roundtable, focusing on hydrogen as the subject of bilateral cooperation between Oman and France, were representatives of top-tier companies in France’s energy and investment sectors.

Speaking at the event were Dr Abdullah al Abri, IEA Consultant and former Energy Renewal director at Petroleum Development Oman (PDO); Amir Sharifi, COO of Hy24, billed as the world’s largest clean energy

investment platform; and Lionel Rabin, MD of Haltiqa Consulting.

The presenters shared their perspectives on Oman’s singular appeal as a destination for clean energy investment in light of its abundant renewable energy resources, world-class logistics and infrastructure, and advantageous investment regime.

They also underscored the potential for the localisation of industries, including those pertaining to hard-to-abate sectors, once plentiful quantities of

USUFRUCT AGREEMENTS FOR THE FIRST BATCH OF GREEN HYDROGEN PROJECTS, ENVISIONING INVESTMENTS OF AROUND \$40 BILLION, WERE SIGNED LAST MONTH, IT WAS REVEALED

green hydrogen or its derivatives become available in the next decade.

The delineation of 50,000 sq kilometres of land for green hydrogen development and new industries attests to the scale of Oman’s green energy ambitions, the audience was told. This acreage is distributed throughout the country, but located predominantly in solar and wind-rich Al Wusta and Dhofar governorates.

Usufruct agreements for the first batch of green hydrogen projects, envisioning investments of around \$40 billion, were signed last month, it was revealed.

Further auctions of blocks for investments are lined up in Q2 of this year, with awards for another round of auctions slated by around the end of 2023.

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 1

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) will begin providing approval services for electrical energy measuring devices (electric meters) in cooperation with the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR) and the Distribution Code Review Panel (DCRP).

The initiative will help promote the manufacture and marketing of measurement tools that are compatible with the requirements of Omani Standard Specification No. (OS 1648) for prepaid electric meter systems and Omani Standard Specification No. (OS 1647) for electric meter systems.

It will also contribute to strengthening the national quality infrastructure, which supports the local economy, as well as enhance trade in such devices.

A framework agreement signed with APSR and DCRP assigns the service of checking documents



related to the type approval request for electric meters to the DCRP in coordination with the Directorate General of Standards and Metrology at the ministry.

Faiza bint Hamad al Mashrafiyya, Director of the National Center for Measurement and Calibration in the Directorate General of Standards and Metrology, said: “The approval of type of electric meters is based on the standard specifications and technical requirements set by the Omani standard specifications for electric meters issued by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, and technical standards of the electrical energy measurement systems and the adopted standards in the electricity sector.”



Private collection of elegant villas launched on Al Mouj Muscat’s last island

MUSCAT: Al Mouj Muscat has launched Jinan Island, a private collection of 43 five and six-bedroom luxury villas which surrounded by a lake and centred around lush parkland offer a serene lifestyle at the heart of Oman’s premier oceanfront lifestyle destination.

Jinan Island villas are exceptional homes that inspire the senses and offer a new dimension in exclusivity. These elegant lake and park-side retreats presents families with a chance to escape the ordinary and feel connected to nature yet with the freedom to embrace an abundance of leisure amenities close by.

Linked by a single road to the vibrant Ghadeer District, the island is in a central location between Al Mouj Marina with its neighbouring waterside cafes and restaurants, and Al Mouj Golf, the region’s leading championship course and the 5-star St Regis Kempinski Hotel.

Jinan Island residents will also benefit from being only a short stroll from Al Mouj’s pristine golden sands beach and can enjoy an active lifestyle given they will be surrounded by interconnecting landscaped pedestrian walkways and cycleways.

GRAND HAVENS OF STYLE, PEACE AND SERENITY

The residents-only neighbourhood is an oasis of calm with three different styles of villa each a balance of contemporary luxury, style and comfort and a splendid union of indoor and outdoor living. All are

superbly appointed with grand entrances, floor to ceiling windows, walk-in wardrobes, guest suites, offices, spa-style ensuite bathrooms, swimming pools and garages, two kitchens and staff accommodation.

Inspired by their natural surroundings, they provide the perfect environment for a supremely peaceful lifestyle, bathed in natural light and seamlessly connected to beautiful gardens and terraces.

All have open plan living areas enhancing the possibilities of modern family life while providing options for formal and special occasions.

A CHOICE OF THREE

Jinan Island homes Jinan Island comprises of 18 six-bedroom **Alaya Villas**, all grand in scale at around 906 sqm and with a mesmerising outlook across the lake.

Set over three floors, there is an elevator and a stunning top floor penthouse suite plus covered parking for up to four cars. Unique to Alaya is a separate Zen Garden Suite which set overlooking the pool, can be used as an entertainment, exercise or work space.

There are eight **Ayana** style homes, also with six-bedrooms and set over two floors with sublime lake views. Comprising over 606 sqm of space, exclusive elements include a gym, parking for up to three cars plus driver’s accommodation.

Overlooking the island’s verdantly landscaped central park, are 17 five-bedroom **Amara Villas** each offering over 455 sqm of space plus parking for up to three cars and driver’s accommodation.

Toyota honours Saud Bahwan Automotive with ‘Gold Award’

MUSCAT: Toyota Motor Corporation recently honoured Saud Bahwan Automotive with the prestigious ‘Gold Award’ for being the ‘Distributor in the Middle East & Central Asia’.

The award recognised Saud Bahwan Automotive’s excellence in Sales, Spare Parts and Service and placed it among the top distributors in the world. The award was presented by Akitoshi Takemura, CEO, East Asia, Oceania & Middle East Region, Toyota Motor Corporation.

The award recognises Saud Bahwan Automotive’s performance in areas like Sales & After-Sales, Customer Centric Initiatives, Carbon Neutrality, Best-in-Town Activities among various other targets.

Receiving the award was Abdullah Mohammed Bahwan, Managing Director — Corporate, Saud Bahwan Group. Sharing his thoughts, Abdullah Mohammed Bahwan said, “This is a historic moment and moment of pride for all of us at Saud Bahwan Automotive. This distinction of



being the distributor in the Middle East and Central Asia, is possible only due to the trust that our valued customers have continued to place on us for years together.

We thank our customers and take this opportunity to reiterate our commitment towards offering high levels of customer satisfaction by taking overall customer experiences to even greater levels.”

Thanking Toyota Motor Corp for the award, he said, “We also take this opportunity to gratefully acknowledge the wholehearted support and guidance extended to

us by Toyota Motor Corporation, at all times. A historic achievement like this would not have been possible without it.”

In Oman, Toyota is more than just a high quality, Japanese automotive brand. It is a household name. A place earned through decades of trust that customers have placed on Saud Bahwan Automotive.

At Saud Bahwan Automotive, customer satisfaction has always been a top priority. Towards this, considerable investments have been made in state-of-the-art

facilities across the country and a nationwide network of branches. Ensuring that wherever a Toyota customer is in Oman, they are always close to a Saud Bahwan Automotive facility. This objective has been backed by innovative marketing strategies, strong after-sales support and extensive customer care activities.

Going forward, Saud Bahwan Automotive will continue to focus on offering high levels of overall customer experiences and achieve high levels of customer satisfaction.



Lulu’s Convoy of Goodness spreads joy across Oman



MUSCAT: In a bid to deliver joy and happiness during the Holy Month of Ramadhan, Lulu group rolled out an initiative to distribute special Ramadhan grocery kits to 1,000 deserving families across Oman.

A special Convoy of Goodness journeyed across four major governorates in Oman to meet families and distribute Ramadhan essentials needed for the holy month. The campaign was a reflection of Lulu’s continued commitment to engage in charitable and humanitarian initiatives and to create a positive impact in the community in which it operates.

Lulu joined hands with N7N volunteer team to implement this four-day charity campaign.

The volunteers travelled across the city as well as the remote areas of Oman and distributed Ramadhan kits consisting of a month’s worth of groceries needed for an entire family during Ramadhan. The convoy covered governorates such as Muscat, Dhofar, Al Sharqiyah and Al Batinah North.

Speaking about the initiative, Shabeer K A, Regional Director — Oman stated, “Ramadhan is an occasion that emphasises the values of empathy and generosity. Lulu’s aim behind implementing such an initiative was to highlight the importance of sharing and being socially responsible by creating an opportunity to spread happiness to people across Oman during Ramadhan.”

A’Sharqiyah University launches internal research grants programme

MUSCAT: A’Sharqiyah University (ASU), represented by the Research, Innovation and Technology Transfer Center (RITTC), has recently launched the Internal Research Grants (IRG) Programme, which aims to enrich the research activities at the University; build the research capabilities of the University’s employees and enhance their research skills; encourage research collaboration; and improve the quantitative and qualitative institutional research output in a way that enhances the University’s positioning nationally, regionally and internationally.

The new programme for internal research grants at ASU comes within the framework of the University’s vision, mission, and relentless endeavour to promote a culture of research and innovation, and to build a knowledge society in such a way that integrates with the objectives of other research programmes funded externally by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI) such as the Block Funding Programme, the Strategic Research Programme and others.

The IRG Programme at ASU falls within its research strategy as well as its ambitious strategic plan 2020-2025, which adopts in its research section various internally funded research initiatives such as its programmes to support participation in highly reputed and specialised international conferences; support research visits to international institutions and research centres and reward researchers for their patents, books and research articles published in high-quality refereed research journals.

‘Golden Gift’ offers from Malabar Gold & Diamonds

MUSCAT: Malabar Gold & Diamonds, the 6th largest jewellery retailer globally with an extensive retail network of 312 outlets across 10 countries, has just unveiled their ‘Golden Gift’ offers ahead of the festive season.

With this offer, customers can get assured gold coins with gold & diamond jewellery purchase. Malabar Gold & Diamonds will also be showcasing an exquisite array of jewellery collections in gold, diamond and precious gems across their numerous sub brands such as Mine, Era, Precia, Viraz, Ethnix & Divine etc., which are assured to be a huge hit amongst their customers.

The limited period offer can be availed

across all Malabar Gold & Diamonds outlets in the Middle east, Far east and the USA from March 30 to April 23.

For every diamond or precious gem jewellery purchase worth RO 500 will get free 1gm gold coin and for diamond and precious gem jewellery purchase worth RO 300 they will be eligible for ½ gm gold coin.

The special array of jewellery collection that the brand has unveiled ahead of the festive season presents jewellery lovers with an enthralling array of designs in gold, diamond and precious gem jewellery.

The special design has been made available across a wide range of sub-



brands such as Mine, Era, Precia, Viraz, Ethnix and Divine, comprising of 22k gold, diamonds and precious gem jewellery. Elegant designs crafted in contemporary fashion have also been introduced in the 18K gold category.

Furthermore, Malabar Gold & Diamonds is also offering 8g gold coins with zero making charges as part of the offers.

“As Malabar Gold & Diamonds celebrates 30 years of providing an exemplary jewellery shopping experience to its customers all over the world, the Golden Gift offer that we have unveiled is yet another example of our ardent commitment towards adding joy to their celebrations.

The immense collection of festive jewellery that we have launched for the season combined with the free gold coin offers on diamond and precious gem jewellery will ensure that festive shopping becomes even more exciting,” commented

Shamlal Ahamed, Managing Director — International Operations, Malabar Gold & Diamonds.

Malabar Gold & Diamonds has also introduced gold rate protection offers, wherein customers can protect themselves from fluctuating gold rates by paying just a 10% as advance, valid till April 23.

If the gold rate goes up during this period, customers can purchase at the blocked rate and if the rate happens to go down, customers can draw mileage from the low rates.

Customers can also block gold rates by paying a 50% or 100% advance, which will be valid for a period of 3 months and 6 months respectively.

The importance of diversification in Oman’s economy



STEFANO VIRGILLI
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The author is a member of the International Press Association.

During my time living in Oman, I was continually impressed by the speed at which the government executed its initiatives. This proactive approach demonstrates a clear commitment to diversifying the economy and a willingness to adapt to changing global economic dynamics. The swift implementation of development projects, infrastructure improvements, and policies to attract foreign investment are a testament to the Omani government’s dedication to achieving its goals outlined in Oman Vision 2040. This level of efficiency not only inspires confidence among the local population but also among international investors, further reinforcing Oman’s position as a

promising investment destination. In today’s fast-paced world, countries must remain agile and adaptive in order to maintain their economic competitiveness. Oman, a nation known for its strategic location and rich cultural heritage, is no exception. With a growing need to diversify its economy and decrease reliance on oil, the Sultanate of Oman has been making significant strides to expand its economic horizons. In this week’s business column, we will delve into the importance of diversification in Oman’s economy and explore the initiatives taken by the government to achieve this goal. **The need for diversification** The global oil market is becoming increasingly unpredictable, with fluctuating oil prices and the growing demand for renewable energy sources. As a result, Oman,

like other oil-producing nations, has experienced the consequences of over-reliance on a single industry. Diversifying the economy is essential to ensure stability, create new job opportunities, and drive sustainable growth for the country. **Oman Vision 2040: A roadmap for economic diversification** In response to these challenges, the Omani government launched Oman Vision 2040, a long-term economic development plan aimed at reducing dependence on oil and gas revenues. The plan focuses on key sectors like tourism, manufacturing, logistics, fisheries, and mining, with the aim of creating a robust and diversified economy. **Investment in tourism** Oman’s unique blend of natural beauty, historic sites, and cultural experiences make it an attractive destination for tourists.

The government is capitalising on this potential by investing in infrastructure development, such as airports, hotels, and tourist attractions. The recently opened Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre, for example, is expected to boost the MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions) segment and enhance Oman’s appeal as a tourist destination. **Manufacturing and logistics** Oman’s strategic location at the crossroads of international trade routes presents an opportunity to establish the country as a regional manufacturing and logistics hub. The government has been promoting the development of industrial parks, free zones, and Special Economic Zones (SEZs), such as the Duqm Special Economic Zone, to attract foreign investment

and encourage the growth of non-oil industries. **Sustainable fisheries and aquaculture** As a nation with a rich maritime history, Oman has significant potential in the fisheries sector. The government is working to develop a sustainable fishing industry, investing in modern fishing fleets, fish processing facilities, and aquaculture projects to create jobs and stimulate economic growth. **Mining and mineral resources** Oman is endowed with various mineral resources, such as limestone, gypsum, and copper. The government is exploring ways to exploit these resources in an environmentally friendly manner. The Ministry of Energy and Minerals is overseeing the sector’s development and attracting foreign investment.

ECB’s inflation battle has a 550 billion euro problem

FRANCESCO GUERRERA

Euro zone lenders have so far weathered the financial storms blowing in from the United States and Switzerland. That has allowed the European Central Bank to keep raising rates to combat inflation. President Christine Lagarde’s job, however, is about to get harder. June 28 is a pivotal date on the European banking calendar. On that day, lenders must repay 549 billion euros they borrowed from the ECB’s targeted longer-term refinancing operations (TLTROs) three years ago, during the pandemic. On the face of it, this should be welcome news for the ECB. The bank is already shrinking its balance sheet by letting its bond portfolios mature. Those TLTROs were made with very favourable interest rates of around minus 1 per cent, making them an anachronism in an era of tighter policy. The ECB once estimated the loans drove down lending rates by as much as 60 basis points, equivalent to a big rate cut. Yet allowing the TLTROs to simply mature would force banks to fund elsewhere, driving up funding costs. And they are already facing a squeeze, as investors fret more over the impact of higher rates and real estate losses. The extra return, or spread, that investors require to hold bank debt over government securities has risen by some 35 basis points since early March, according to an ICE Bank of America index. Lagarde has said that euro zone banks are well capitalised and have plentiful liquidity. The problem is that stubbornly high inflation, which hit 6.9 per cent in March, will force her to push the deposit rate higher than the current 3 per cent. That will also make debt financing more expensive for banks. Policymakers could find a way to ease that pain, without undermining their fight against inflation. To bridge the 550 billion euro repayment, the ECB could offer loans but with a shorter maturity than the original three years and higher interest rates. One option would be to charge banks a premium on the main refinancing operations rate. The MRO – the rate lenders pay for one-week loans from the ECB – is currently set at 3.5 per cent, 50 basis points above the benchmark deposit rate. Such pricing would ensure that only lenders that really need the funds apply. And it would limit the risk that a splurge of liquidity drives up inflation. Doing nothing may be appealing for the ECB because, as executive board member Isabel Schnabel said this week, lower bank credit would reinforce the effects of rate rises. In the current environment, though, starving banks of liquidity doesn’t seem a risk worth taking. — Reuters

TO BRIDGE THE 550 BILLION EURO REPAYMENT, THE ECB COULD OFFER LOANS BUT WITH A SHORTER MATURITY THAN THE ORIGINAL THREE YEARS AND HIGHER INTEREST RATES.

The Fed’s role in the bank failures



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The recent bank collapses in the United States seem to have an obvious cause. Ninety per cent of the deposits at Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) and Signature Bank were uninsured, and uninsured deposits are understandably prone to runs. Moreover, both banks had invested significant sums in long-term bonds, the market value of which fell as interest rates rose. When SVB sold some of these bonds to raise funds, the unrealised losses embedded in its bond portfolio started coming to light. A failed equity offering then set off the run on deposits that sealed its fate. But four elements of this simple explanation suggest that the problem may be more systemic. First, there is typically a huge increase in uninsured bank deposits whenever the US Federal Reserve engages in quantitative easing. Because it involves buying securities from the market in exchange for the central bank’s own liquid reserves (a form of cash), QE not only increases the size of the central-bank balance sheet, but also drives an expansion in the broader banking system’s balance sheet and its uninsured demandable deposits. We (along with co-authors) called attention to this under-appreciated fact in a paper presented at the Fed’s

annual Jackson Hole conference in August 2022. As the Fed resumed QE during the pandemic, uninsured bank deposits rose from about \$5.5 trillion at the end of 2019 to over \$8 trillion by the first quarter of 2022. At SVB, deposit inflows increased from less than \$5 billion in the third quarter of 2019 to an average of \$14 billion per quarter during QE. But when the Fed ended QE, raised interest rates, and switched quickly to quantitative tightening (QT), these flows reversed. SVB started seeing an increase in outflows of uninsured deposits (some of which were coincident with the downturn in the tech sector, as the bank’s stressed clients started drawing down cash reserves). Second, many banks, having benefited from the firehose of deposits, purchased liquid longer-term securities such as Treasury bonds and mortgage-backed securities, in order to generate a profitable “carry”: an interest-rate spread that provided yields above what the banks had to pay on deposits. Ordinarily, this would not be so risky. Long-term interest rates had not moved up much for a long time; and even if they did start to rise, bankers understand that depositors tend to be sleepy and will accept low deposit rates for a long time, even when market interest rates move up. The banks thus felt protected by both history and depositor complacency. Yet this time was different, because these were flighty uninsured deposits. Having been generated by

Fed action, they were always poised to flow out when the Fed changed course. And because large depositors can coordinate easily among themselves, actions taken by just a few can trigger a cascade. Even at healthy banks, depositors who have woken up to bank risk and the healthier interest rates available at money-market funds will want to be compensated with higher interest rates. The juicy interest-rate spreads between investments and somnolent deposits will be threatened, impairing bank profitability and solvency. As an apt saying in the financial sector goes, “The road to hell is paved with positive carry.” The third concern is that these first two elements have been magnified today. The last time the Fed switched to QT and interest-rate hikes, in 2017-19, the increase in policy rates was less sudden and sizable, and the volume of interest-sensitive securities held by banks was smaller. Consequently, the losses that bank balance sheets needed to absorb were small, and there were no depositor runs, even though many of the same ingredients were in place. This time, the quantum of interest-rate increases, their rapidity, and bank holdings of rate-sensitive assets are all much larger, with the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation suggesting that unrealised losses on available-for-sale and held-to-maturity bank securities holdings alone could exceed \$600 billion. The fourth concern is unwitting supervisory coordination with

the industry. Clearly, too many supervisors failed to see banks’ rising interest-rate exposure, or they were unable to force banks to reduce it. Had supervision been more forceful (we still are trying to gauge the extent to which it fell short), fewer banks would be in trouble today. Another problem, however, is that supervisors did not subject all banks to the same level of scrutiny that they applied to the largest institutions (which were subject to stress tests, among other things). These differential standards may have caused a migration of risky commercial real-estate loans (think of all those half-empty office buildings during the pandemic) from larger, better capitalised banks to relatively weakly capitalised small and midsize banks. The upshot is that while many vulnerabilities in the banking system were created by bankers themselves, the Fed also contributed to the problem. Periodic bouts of QE have expanded banks’ balance sheets and stuffed them with more uninsured deposits, making the banks increasingly dependent on easy liquidity. This dependency adds to the difficulty of reversing QE and tightening monetary policy. The larger the scale of QE and the longer its duration, the more time the Fed should take when normalising its balance sheet and, ideally, raising interest rates. Unfortunately, these financial-stability concerns conflict with the Fed’s inflation-fighting mandate. © Project Syndicate, 2023



A man rides a bike in front of the Federal Reserve Board building on Constitution Avenue in Washington. — Reuters

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Omani students shine in Dubai wooden bridge competition

For the annual Wooden Bridge Competition organised by the American Society of Civil Engineering and American Concrete Institute at the American University in Dubai, the team from Sultan Qaboos University has proven that they have what it takes to think creatively and mathematically after winning first place in the competition.... **P20**



QURAN VERSE OF THE DAY

Say, "Shall I take for myself a master other than Allah, Originator of the heavens and the earth, who feeds, and is never fed?" Say, "I am commanded to be the first of those who submit." And do not be among the associators.

Surah Al An'am

HADITH A GUIDE FOR THE FAITHFUL

A'isha reported that the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, "Bring me blocks of iron." And when he had levelled the two cliffs, he said, "Blow." And when he made it as fire, he said, "Bring me tar to pour over it." So they could not climb it, nor could they dig through it. He said, "This is a mercy from my Lord. But when the promise of my Lord comes true, He will crumble it to dust. And my Lord's promise is true." (18:83-98) Surah Al Kahf

HEALTH TIPS

If you eat dessert right after Iftar, your stomach will become bigger and your digestion will take longer. Moreover, it will alter your blood glucose level, which will increase your desire for sweets. It is advised to consume sweets in moderation 2-3 hours after Iftar because of this.

Dhul-Qarnain

Allah the Almighty says "And they ask you about Dhul-Qarnain. Say, 'I will tell you something about him. We established him in the land, and we gave him the means of everything so he pursued a course. Until, when he reached the setting of the sun, he found it setting in a murky spring, and he found a people in its vicinity. We said, 'O Dhul-Qarnain: you may either inflict a penalty, or else treat them kindly.'"

He said, "As for him who does wrong: we will penalise him, then he will be returned to his Lord, and He will punish him with an unheard-of torment." "But as for him who believes and acts righteously: for him is the finest reward, and we will issue easy commands for him."

Then he pursued a course. Until, when he reached the rising of the sun, he found it rising on a people for whom we had provided no shade from it. So it was. And We had full knowledge of everything he had. Then he pursued a course. Until, when he reached between the two barriers, he found beside them a people who could hardly understand a word.

They said, "O Dhul-Qarnain! Ya'juj and Ma'juj are spreading chaos throughout the land. Can we pay you, to build between us and them a wall?" He said, "What my Lord has empow-

ered me with is better. But assist me with manpower, and I will build between you and them a dam." "Bring me blocks of iron." And when he had levelled the two cliffs, he said, "Blow."

And when he made it as fire, he said, "Bring me tar to pour over it." So they could not climb it, nor could they dig through it. He said, "This is a mercy from my Lord. But when the promise of my Lord comes true, He will crumble it to dust. And my Lord's promise is true." (18:83-98) Surah Al Kahf

Dhul-Qarnain was a man endowed by Allah with many talents and abilities, including military prowess, the ability to rule kingdoms, and extensive practical knowledge of many aspects of life.

He was also a pious and steadfast Muslim who constantly contemplated the signs of Allah and lived his days travelling from one destination to the

next in order to establish justice in the land and alleviate the suffering of the people. Dhul-Qarnain travelled extensively in his life. He ruled the earth from east to west.

One of these travels brought him to the West, where he found the sun setting as if in a spring of dark mud. In this location, he discovered a community who were living under oppressed conditions. Therefore, Dhul-Qarnain led them to the correct path and ways of life in accordance with the rulings of the Almighty. He liberated the community from the oppression that they were subject to, inflicted punishment upon the oppressors, and criminals, and aided the weak and oppressed until justice was established in the land.

Having completed his task, he and his army continued on their journey, until one day, against the rising sun, he

found a people who were backward and ignorant, living in the open without any shelter or protection against the sun. He educated the community there on what they needed to do. He shared and imparted his knowledge to them, taught them the skills required such as carpentry and agriculture, and then continued on his journey.

The next part of his journey is the most astounding, where he met a curious community, so far removed that he barely understood their language.

They were suffering from some creatures called (Ya'juj and Ma'juj), and they asked Dhul-Qarnain for help. Allah gave Dhul-Qarnain the knowledge to solve the predicament of the people there, and so he instructed them to build a gigantic wall or dam of iron between the two mountains and then pour molten copper to strengthen and increase its impenetrability.



STORIES FROM THE QURAN

RECIPE

Try this Nigerian Jollof Rice this Ramadhan



LOOKING FOR A NEW recipe to try this Ramadhan? The most popular Ramadhan dish in Nigeria is probably Jollof Rice. It is popular because it is filling, flavourful, and easy to make in large quantities for families and communities to share. Here is a recipe for Jollof Rice:

- INGREDIENTS:**
- 2 cups long-grain rice
 - 1 large onion, chopped
 - 2 large tomatoes, chopped
 - 2 tablespoons tomato paste
 - 2 tablespoons red palm oil
 - 2 teaspoons dried thyme
 - 2 teaspoons curry powder
 - 2 teaspoons smoked paprika
 - 1 teaspoon garlic powder
 - 1 teaspoon onion powder
 - 1 teaspoon salt
 - 1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper
 - 3 cups chicken broth or water
 - 1/2 cup frozen green peas
 - 1 red bell pepper, diced
 - 1 green bell pepper, diced

INSTRUCTIONS:

Rinse the rice in cold water until the water runs clear. Drain and set aside.

In a large pot, heat the palm oil over medium-high heat. Add the onions and sauté

until soft, about 3 minutes.

Add the tomatoes and cook until they have broken down, about 5 minutes.

Add the tomato paste and spices, stirring to combine. Cook for 2 minutes.

Add the rice to the pot, stirring until the rice is well-coated in the tomato mixture.

Add the chicken broth or water and stir to combine. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to low.

Cover the pot and let the rice cook for 20-25 minutes, or until the liquid has been absorbed and the rice is tender.

Stir in the frozen peas, diced red and green bell peppers, and cover the pot. Cook for an additional 5-10 minutes or until the vegetables are tender.

Remove the pot from the heat and let it sit for 5-10 minutes before fluffing the rice with a fork.

Serve hot and enjoy!



Tracing the history of Islam in Nigeria

ISLAM WAS INTRODUCED to what is now modern-day Nigeria as early as the 9th century through trans-Saharan trade routes, and it quickly spread throughout the region. Over the centuries, Islam has had a significant impact on Nigerian society, culture, and politics.

Islam was first introduced to what is now modern-day Nigeria through contact with traders from North Africa and the Middle East. The earliest record of Islam in Nigeria dates back to the 9th century when a Muslim trader named Ali ibn Ghanim visited the kingdom of Kanem-Bornu in present-day Chad.

Over time, Islam spread to other parts of Nigeria through trade, intermarriage, and

cultural exchanges. The 14th century saw the rise of the Songhai Empire, which was heavily influenced by Islam. The empire was known for its powerful Muslim rulers, such as Sunni Ali Ber and Askia Muhammad.

The arrival of European colonisers in Nigeria in the late 19th century had a significant impact on the spread and development of Islam in the region. Many Muslim scholars and leaders resisted colonialism, and some even launched revolts against the British.

The Sokoto Caliphate, which was established in the early 19th century by the Fulani scholar Usman dan Fodio, was one of the most significant Islamic states in Nigeria. The

caliphate was able to resist British colonisation for many years, but it eventually fell to British forces in 1903.

Nigeria gained its independence from Britain in 1960, and Islam continued to be a significant part of Nigerian society and politics. Nigeria is currently the most populous Muslim-majority country in Africa, with over 90 million Muslims.

Islam has had a significant impact on Nigerian politics, with Muslim leaders playing key roles in the country's history. In 1999, Olusegun Obasanjo became Nigeria's first democratically elected president after several years of military rule. Obasanjo is a Christian, but his vice president, Atiku Abubakar, is a Muslim.

As of 2021, the estimated population of Muslims in Nigeria is approximately 95 million, making it the country with the largest Muslim population in Africa and the fifth-largest Muslim population in the world.

According to the Pew Research Center's 2015 report on "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050", Nigeria is projected to have the world's third-largest Muslim population by 2050, behind only Indonesia and Pakistan.

During Ramadhan, Muslims in Nigeria wake up early to eat a meal before the sunrise,

known as Suhoor. They then fast throughout the day, refraining from food, drink, and other physical needs, until sunset, when they break their fast with a meal called Iftar.

In addition to fasting, Muslims in Nigeria also engage in other spiritual practices during Ramadhan. They read the Quran more frequently, attend extra prayers at the mosque, and engage in acts of charity and kindness to their fellow Muslims.

One unique aspect of Ramadhan in Nigeria is the Taraweeh prayers, which are performed every night during the month. These prayers are recited in a slow, rhythmic manner, and they can last for several hours.

Another important tradition during Ramadhan in Nigeria is the breaking of the fast with family and friends. Muslims often gather together to share meals and exchange gifts, and it is a time for celebration and community.

Despite the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, Muslims in Nigeria have continued to observe Ramadhan in accordance with their customs and traditions. Many mosques have implemented safety measures such as social distancing and mask-wearing, and virtual events have been organised to allow Muslims to participate in Ramadhan activities from the safety of their homes.

Sharks, tourists jostle for space around Thai destination island

SAIF EL ISLAM al Ahmed Mahmoud sat cross-legged on a sheepskin and gingerly turned the pages of an ancient manuscript.

"What would the world be without poetry?" he asked, using cotton gloves to handle the thin paper document, written in an ink concocted from charcoal and gum Arabic.

The manuscript is one of 700 that his family owns — in turn, part of a priceless legacy of knowledge, art and philosophy

stored in Chinguetti, a town in the heart of the Mauritanian Sahara.

Across the UNESCO-listed city are 13 privately-owned libraries holding around 6,000 Arabic manuscripts, many dating from the Late Middle Ages.

The documents are a time capsule of human culture and advancement, dwelling on themes ranging from Islam and astronomy to law, mathematics and poetry.

Most of the manuscripts are



paper or parchment, although some texts are written on sheepskin. Chinguetti's treasure derives from its position straddling a trade route linking the Western shores of the African continent to Mecca, the centre of the Muslim world.

It was also historically a route well travelled by pilgrims on the way to the holy city for the annual Haj pilgrimage.

The manuscripts were collected by local families, who have been their custodians for generations.

"We are preserving the memory of the world which once crisscrossed these ancient streets," said Al Ahmed

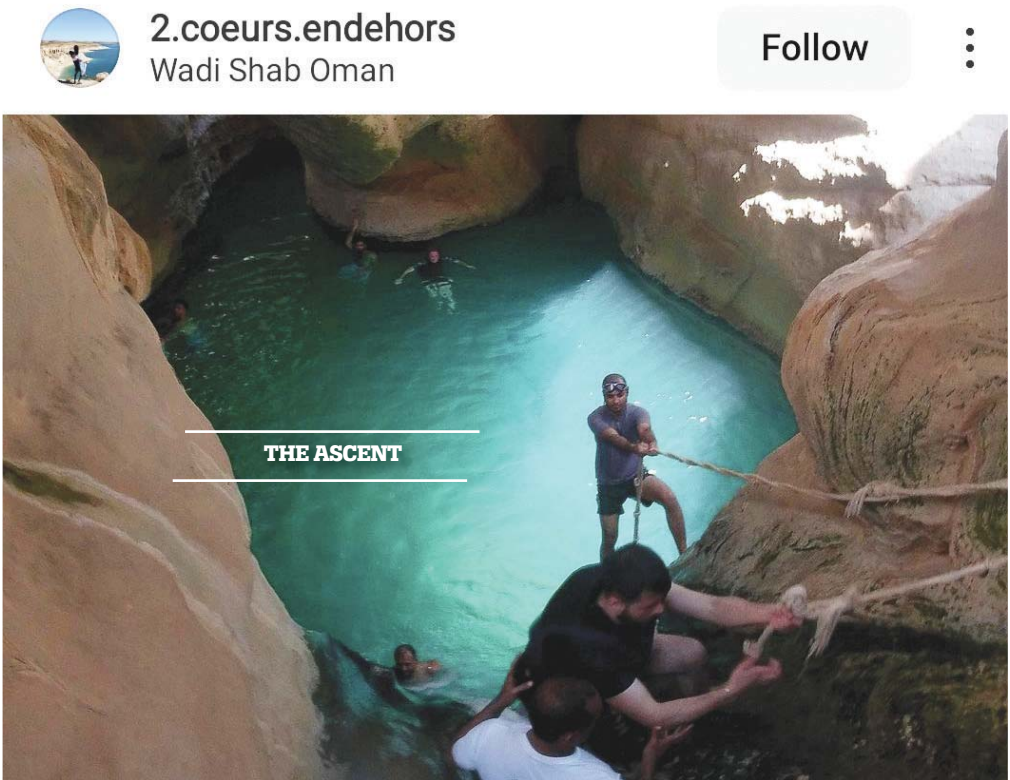
Mahmoud, with a theatrical gesture.

In Chinguetti's main square, Abdullah Habbot opened the doors of another library, which his family owns.

He said his family acquired its more than 1,400 documents thanks to the travellers who halted in the dusty city.

But the manuscripts are facing a modern threat: climate change is causing flash floods that threaten the old structures housing the documents.

If the libraries collapse, Al Ahmed Mahmoud warned, "ancient memories will be erased, and we will all be poorer." — AFP



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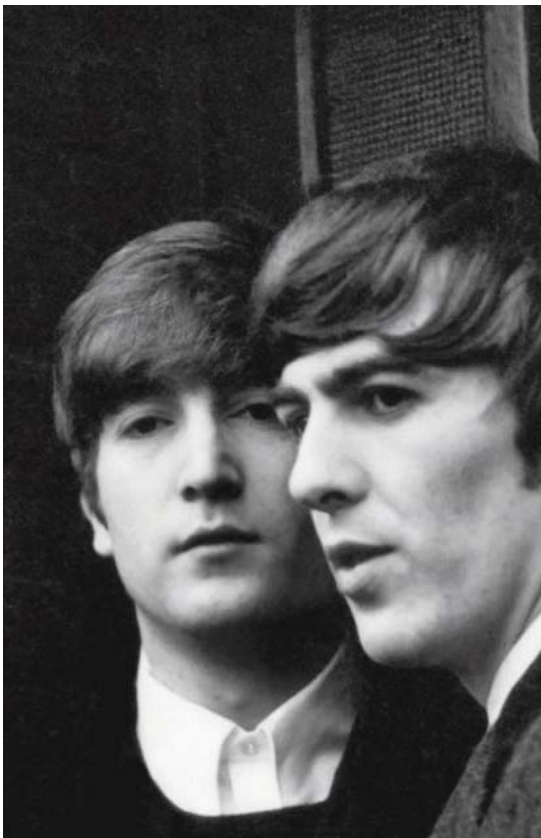
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AROUND THE WORLD

ENTERTAINMENT

Beatles photos shot by Paul McCartney unveiled ahead of exhibition



A UK ART GALLERY on Thursday released a handful of previously unseen photographs taken by Paul McCartney, ahead of a major display later this year showcasing how he captured Beatlemania through his own lens.

The National Portrait Gallery unveiled the five photos from an archive of more than 250 images shot by McCartney between November 1963 and February 1964 which will feature in its exhibition opening in late June.

They include black-and-white self-portraits shot in a mirror in Paris, John Lennon also in the French capital, George Harrison wearing sunglasses in Miami Beach, and Ringo Starr in London.

The exhibition, "Paul McCartney Photographs 1963-64: Eyes Of The Storm", will run for three months from June 28 to mark the famous London gallery's reopening after three years of refurbishments.

Curators have drawn from more than 250 photographs in McCartney's personal archive, taken on his Pentax camera, as the so-called Fab Four were being propelled to global stardom.

McCartney called their exhibition at the country's foremost portrait space "humbling yet also astonishing."

"Looking at these photos now, decades after they were taken, I find there's a sort of innocence about them," he said in a statement released by the gallery.

"Everything was new to us at this point. But I like to think I wouldn't take them any differently today.

"They now bring back so many stories, a flood of special memories, which is one of the many reasons I love them all, and know that they will always fire my imagination."

McCartney approached the gallery in 2020 about staging a display after stumbling across the images, which he thought were lost.

They chronicle a critical period in the evolution of the band, beginning with portraits taken backstage in Liverpool and culminating with their performance on The Ed Sullivan Show in New York for an audience of millions.

National Portrait Gallery director Nicholas Cullinan said the exhibition will give people a sense of what Beatlemania looked and felt like "for the four pairs of eyes that lived and witnessed it first-hand".

"McCartney's intimate photographs have more in common with a family album, capturing people caught in off-guard moments of relaxation and laughter," he added.

An accompanying book of photographs and reflections will be published on June 13. — AFP

TRAVEL TALES

China's 'art factory' painters turn from fakes to originals



PAINTERS IN A CHINESE village once known for churning out replicas of Western masterpieces are now making original art worth thousands of dollars, selling their own works in a booming domestic art market.

Home to more than 8,000 artists, southern China's Dafen has been producing near-perfect copies of timeless masterpieces for years.

In its heyday, three out of five oil paintings sold worldwide were made in the village, and for years village painters sold their copies to buyers across Europe, the Middle East and the United States.

Exports began to dip after the 2008 global financial crisis, and all but dried up when China slammed shut its borders in 2020 because of the Coronavirus pandemic.

A few artists gave up and closed their studios. But others saw in the obstacles an opportunity to establish themselves as painters in their own right by catering to China's art market — the second-biggest in the world, with sales jumping by 35 per cent in 2021.

Self-taught artist Zhao Xiaoyong used to sell replicas of Vincent van Gogh's work for about 1,500 yuan (\$220) each, while his original pieces fetch up to 50,000 yuan, he said.

When Zhao moved to Dafen from central China in 1997, his family shared a tiny two-bedroom apartment with five other tenants.

"Those days, there was an assembly line-style system, with each artist painting a small section of a larger piece, like an eye or a nose, before passing the piece to another painter to draw a limb or a shirt sleeve," he said.

After years of cranking out mock masterpieces, Zhao eventually saved enough money to visit the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and the Saint-Paul Asylum in southern France, where the artist famously painted "The Starry Night".

"I felt I could finally enter into his world instead of just copying his brush strokes," Zhao said.

"I realised I had to come out of Van Gogh's shadow and give life to my thoughts."

Now he chronicles how the Dafen oil painting village has changed, using Van Gogh's style: one canvas shows Zhao in a crowded workshop holding one of the Dutch painter's self-portraits, while fellow artists nap on their desks.

TOURIST BOOST

Since China's dismantling of its Zero-Covid policy in late 2022, the streets of Dafen are once again bustling with visitors, crouched in front of easels, slapping paint on canvases.

As well as immersing themselves in the artistic culture with painting lessons, many of the tourists come to buy pieces from the villagers, but their hunt for a good deal is another factor behind the fading market in handmade fakes.

In one alleyway, workers brush paint onto printed canvases of Duccio's "Madonna and Child". These are sold for a knock-down price as low as 50 yuan per piece, while a hand-painted copy costs up to 1,500 yuan.

"We paint a few strokes over

the printed image to make it look like an authentic oil painting," said one artist, who declined to be named.

"Buyers think the printed background is painted using watercolours."

CHINESE AESTHETIC

Another Dafen-based artist on a mission to move on from painting imitations is Wu Feimin, who has carved out a niche selling Buddhist-themed art.

"I used to copy Picasso's work, and now I have my distinct style," Wu said, painting a giant face of the Buddha with a palette knife.

"It takes weeks, sometimes months, to complete one painting," the artist said as he was getting ready for exhibitions in the village and the rich industrial hub of Guangzhou.

"It's risky, but the margins are better."

Other artists said that they went back to school during the pandemic to learn how to draw mountains and weeping-willow trees seen in traditional Chinese landscape paintings.

"Wealthy Chinese buyers want art that reflects a Chinese aesthetic," said Yu Sheng, a fine-art teacher who used the opportunity to retrain in the classical style.

While he continues to make ends meet by exporting replicas of Western works, he also creates his own pieces, determined to crack the more lucrative domestic market and become a portrait painter for the wealthy.

And he is confident in his abilities over those of artists from well-known schools.

"Our technique is better because we paint everyday, but we don't have contacts with art dealers in big cities," he said.

"Our survival depends on whether our work is recognised by China's art buyers — we must learn to bend like bamboo."

— AFP

LIFESTYLE

Massive dinosaur replica takes over from London's beloved 'Dippy'



A cast of one of the largest dinosaurs ever to stride the Earth goes on display in London on Friday, the first time the star exhibit has been seen in Europe since the original was discovered in Patagonia.

At 122 feet (37.2 metres) long, the titanosaur — named Patagotitan mayorum — only just fits into the exhibition hall at London's Natural History Museum.

With its neck extended upwards, it would have been tall enough to poke its head into a five-storey building, according to researchers.

Titanosaurs were the last remaining long-necked sauropod dinosaurs still thriving at the time the species went extinct.

Patagotitan will be a welcome replacement for the museum's longtime dinosaur attraction, the popular Diplodocus "Dippy" replica which was on display until 2017.

The new cast is a replica of one of six titanosaurs found after a farmer in the Argentinian region spotted a giant thigh bone sticking out of the earth in 2010, leading to excavations over a number of years.

"They discovered a graveyard of these animals with six different individuals in the ground," Paul Barrett, the exhibition's science lead said.

"Over about three years, they excavated all these bones... and were able to reveal that they had a new type of gigantic dinosaur... one of the largest animals that's ever walked the Earth," he added.

The titanosaurs lived in the forests of modern-day Patagonia 100 to 95 million years ago during the Late Cretaceous period.

Researchers estimate that in addition to its extraordinary length, it would also have weighed about 57 tonnes.

MYSTERIOUS DEMISE

The recently discovered herbivore would have had four column-like legs, and an extremely long neck and tail. To sustain itself, it would have needed to eat around 130 kilograms (286 pounds) of vegetation everyday.

All six dinosaurs, which were discovered at the same site, are believed to have died at the same time although the reason for their demise remains a mystery.

"We don't know why they died... It could be that they were taken out by a flood. It could be they were taken out by some other environmental problem like maybe a drought," Barrett said, adding that research was ongoing. Following the discovery in Argentina, dinosaur experts did 3D scans of each individual bone to create replicas made out of polyester resin and fibreglass, which they mounted on a steel structure.

The giant cast took a firm in Canada more than six months to make, based on the scores of excavated fossil bones. The real bones would have been far too heavy to put on display, but the fact that they are replicas means visitors are allowed to touch the exhibit.

The replica arrived in London in 32 separate crates meaning "each piece had to be put together like a giant jigsaw puzzle", said Sinead Marron of the Natural History Museum.

Marron said the wider aim of the exhibition was to "tell the story of how an animal like this grew up from an egg that's smaller than a football into this amazing 57-tonne giant."

Interactive games and touchable replicas help bring the story to life.

Visitors will be able to touch the teeth of one of the titanosaur's predators or even step inside its internal organs to see how its lungs, heart and gut all worked together, she added. — AFP



Omani students shine in Dubai wooden bridge competition

By Buthaina Al Riyami'ya

It may look like fun and games, but a wooden bridge competition is actually very challenging, testing the innovation and creativity of participants as well as their intelligence and education.

For the annual Wooden Bridge Competition organised by the American Society of Civil Engineering and American Concrete Institute at the American University in Dubai, the team from Sultan Qaboos University has proven that they have what it takes to think creatively and mathematically after winning first place in the competition.

The team comprised five civil engineering students, namely Ahmed al Fahdi, Ammar al Hatmi, Mujahid al Subhi, Nabras al Mashrafi, and Shaith al Shereiqi. They were judged the winners

because of the durability, strength, and integrity of their designs.

A wooden bridge competition can be organised as a way to teach students or participants about the principles of engineering, physics, and material science. The competition can challenge the participants to design, build, and test a wooden bridge that can carry a certain weight or withstand certain forces. Through this process, the participants can learn about structural mechanics, load-bearing capacity, deflection, and other important concepts.

For this competition, a set of restrictions was put in place, including the amount of wood and nails used, and the second weight measured the carrying power of the wooden bridges.

Participants were

challenged to come up with novel solutions that are not only functional but also aesthetically pleasing, sustainable, and cost-effective, inspiring new ideas and approaches in the field of bridge engineering.

Three teams from the civil, architecture, and engineering departments got nominated, and one of the teams emerged as the winner.

The team acknowledged that they encountered numerous challenges and struggles and initially thought that winning the competition was difficult.

While they were busy preparing for the competition by coming up with unique designs and building solutions, they were also busy with their studies.

They also shared that, while they have access to the best machines and equipment, there is a

need for precision that requires a lot of focus and concentration.

The team shared that it took sheer will, dedication, and determination to complete and create the winning design.

Wooden bridge competitions serve as a way to engage the local community and promote teamwork and collaboration. The competition is the best place to showcase the skills and expertise of participants to potential employers or clients. Winning the competition is a prestigious achievement that enhances one's professional profile and reputation.

For the winners, what they treasured the most was having been given the opportunity to put their theoretical skills into use as well as challenge their understanding of the practical application.

Nabras al Mashrafi, a member of the winning team, shared that he was very happy to have the opportunity to

experience what they went through and have something to show for it.

Al Mashrafi added, "My participation in this competition taught me to devote my efforts to achieving my goals and aspirations and expanded my capacity to work under pressure, practice time management, and cooperate with others."

"We learned many crucial skills related to our major," he said.

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) and American Concrete Institute (ACI) student chapters at the American University in Dubai (AUD) had been instrumental in organising the competition.

They designed the competition to provide an opportunity for engineering students to shine outside the confines of classrooms and provide them with an event that brings together a wide variety of students for a friendly competition centred on bridge design and testing.

