

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a congratulatory cable to Viola Amherd, President of the Swiss Confederation, on the occasion of her election as president of her country. His Majesty has also sent a cable of greetings to Gen Abdel Fattah al Burhan, Chairman of the Sovereignty Council of the Republic of the Sudan, on his country's Independence Anniversary. In his cable, His Majesty expressed his sincere greetings and best wishes of good health, happiness and long life to Gen Al Burhan.



ROYAL DECREE RATIFIES STATE'S GENERAL BUDGET 2024

Estimated revenues at RO 11 billion

Decree establishes National Fund for Emergencies

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Monday issued Royal Decree No 2/2024 establishing the National Fund for Emergencies (NFE).

Article (1) stipulates that an independent fund named "National Fund for Emergencies (NFE)" shall be established in the Ministry of Finance, with the prime aim of addressing emergencies and natural disasters, like climatic conditions, floods, earthquakes and other risks that might impact the country or cause damage to public utilities and public infrastructure.

The NFE will undertake the following missions: Lending support to the realisation of the general policy related to procedures necessary for tackling emergencies.

Providing essential funding in accordance with actual needs to secure the restoration of normalcy to public life after the occurrence of an emergency.

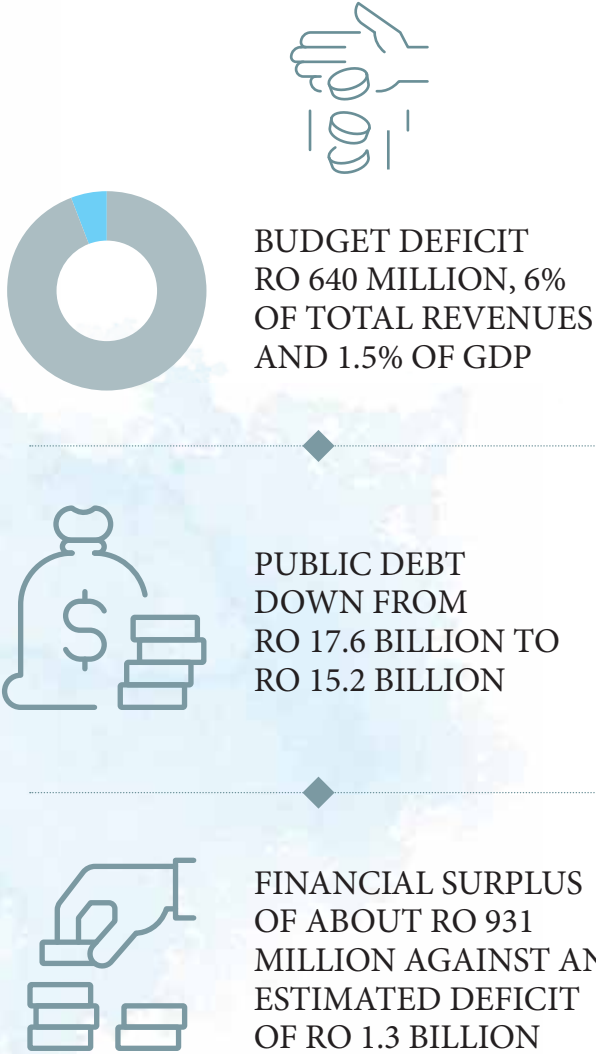
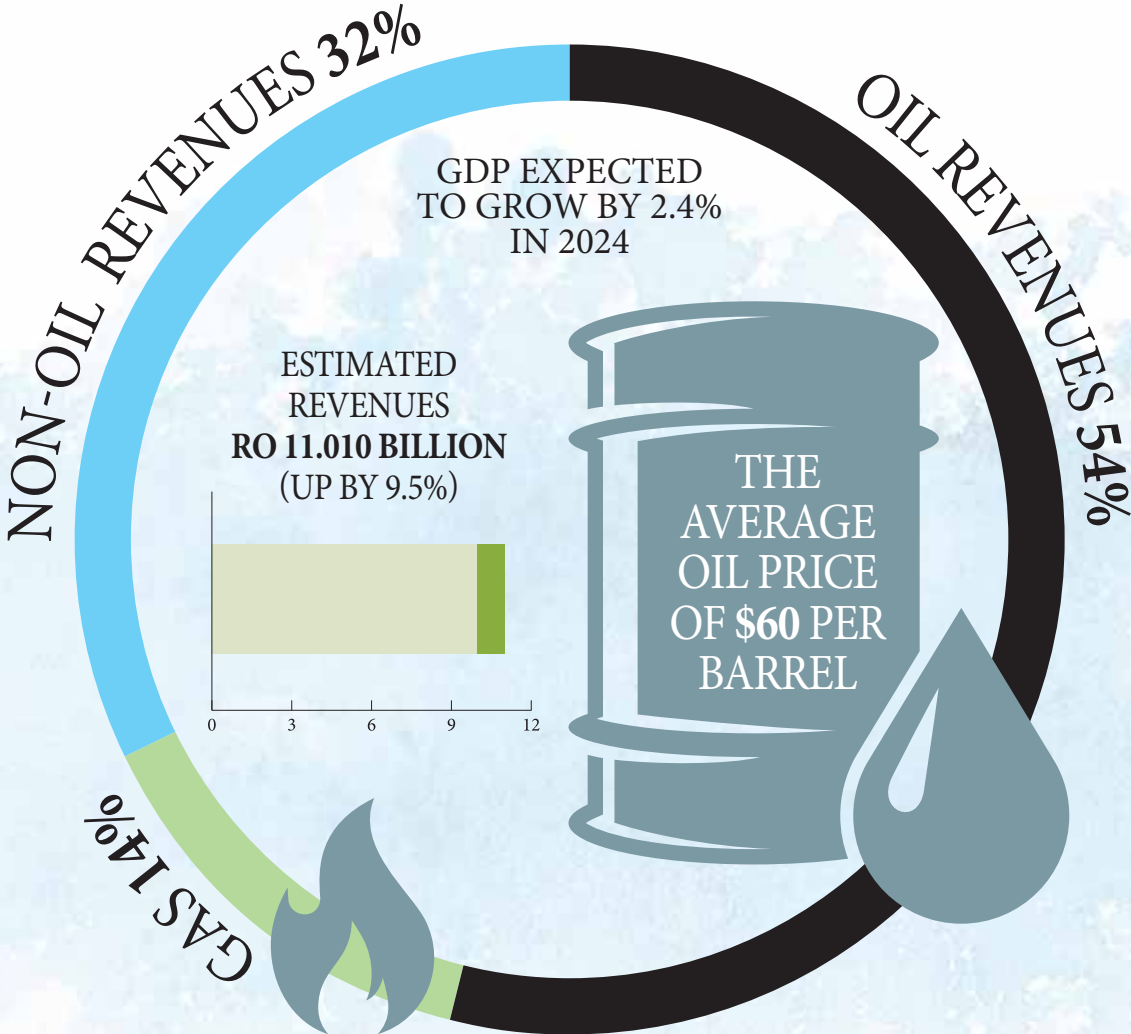
Article (2) states that the resources of the NFE shall consist of the following: Allocations dedicated to the NFE in the State's General Budget. Donations and contributions accepted by the Minister of Finance.

Revenues of investments of the NFE.

Any other resources approved by the Council of Ministers.

Article (3) states that the Minister of Finance shall issue the decisions necessary for regulating the NFE and that the minister shall possess all powers to run the fund and achieve its objectives, notably the measures listed below: Devising and following up the implementation of the general policy of the NFE. Managing the funds of the NFE, approving its investment plans within the context of established investment policies and endorsing the rules that regulate the investment of the NFE's funds.

Forming the NFE's permanent committees and ad hoc panels in a manner that achieves the fund's goals. [TURN TO P2](#)



MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Monday issued Royal Decree No 1/2024 on the ratification of the State's General Budget for the Fiscal Year 2024, after the same was presented before the Council of Oman.

Article (1) ratifies the State's General Budget for Fiscal Year 2024 according to the tables attached to this Decree. Article (2) instructs all units of the State's Administrative Apparatus and other public legal entities to implement the provisions of this Decree, each within the scope of its prerogatives.

Article (3) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from January 1, 2024.

TOTAL REVENUES

The Ministry of Finance announced that the total estimated revenues of the state's general budget for the fiscal year 2024, which were calculated on the basis of the average oil price of (\$60) per barrel, stood at about RO 11.010 billion, constituting an increase of 9.5 per cent over the estimated revenues for the year 2023.

This was stated during the media briefing held by the Ministry of Finance on Monday. The total public spending for the state's general budget for 2024 was estimated at approximately RO 11.650 billion, constituting an increase of 2.6 per cent over the estimated spending for 2023. The stated total public expenditure

includes the debt servicing cost, which stands at about RO 1.050 billion.

The budget deficit was estimated at approximately RO 640 million, representing 6 per cent of total revenues and 1.5 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP).

BALANCE

Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, said that the state's general budget for the fiscal year 2024 takes into account the balance between a set of determinants and priorities while continuing to pay the public debt and reducing it as much as possible.

Al Habsi added that the 2024 state budget aims to improve the business environment and expand

the participation of the private sector in the economic development, in addition to supporting the social aspect by enabling the Social Protection Fund to play its desired role as an umbrella for initiatives aimed at upgrading the level of insurance coverage and social protection for citizens, as well as maintaining the level of spending in basic services, such as education, health and housing.

The minister said that oil revenues in the 2024 budget constitute 54 per cent of total revenues, while the gas sector's contribution amounts to 14 per cent and non-oil revenues represent 32 per cent of total public revenues. [TURN TO P4](#)

■ RAFO CONDUCTS 'FALCON TALON 1/2024'



The activities of the military drill 'Falcon Talon 1/2024' kicked off on Monday. It is conducted by the Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) with its different air bases and with the support of the Sultan's Special Force (SSF). This drill comes within the framework of the RAFO plans to sustain preparedness and in a bid to achieve its goals in line with RAFO's national duties.

Powerful quake slams Japan, residents flee coastal areas

TOKYO: Tsunami waves over a metre high hit central Japan on Monday after a huge earthquake that damaged homes, set off a major fire and prompted authorities to urge people to run to higher ground.

Media reports said two people were feared dead after the 7.5-magnitude quake struck Ishikawa prefecture on the Sea of Japan side of the main island of Honshu at 4:10 pm, according to the US Geological Survey (USGS).

Japanese authorities put the magnitude at 7.6 and said that it was one of more than 50 quakes of 3.2 magnitude or more to rock the region on the New Year's Day holiday -- when families get together and visit shrines -- over several hours. Television channels interrupted normal services with



A view of a collapsed road and houses because of an earthquake in Wajima, Ishikawa prefecture on Monday. - Reuters

special programming including of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida urging people in danger areas to "evacuate as soon as possible" to higher ground.

"We realise your home, your belongings are all precious to you, but your lives are important above everything else! Run to

the highest ground possible," an alarmed presenter on broadcaster NHK told viewers.

Waves at least 1.2 metres high hit the Wajima port and a series of smaller tsunamis were reported elsewhere, including as far away as the northern island of Hokkaido. **SEE ALSO P6**



Decree establishes fund for emergencies

FROM P1

Drafting rules and determinants for awarding projects necessary for achieving the fund's objectives.

Endorsing reports on the NFE's fiscal position.

Drafting an Emergency Report after the emergencies are over and their related missions accomplished, while at the same time liaising with the departments concerned to conduct research and studies to gain insights on limiting future risks of such emergencies.

Regulating the reception of cash donations from companies, establishments or individuals during emergencies and in the aftermath of emergencies or natural disasters.

Opening one or more accounts for the NFE in banks within Oman and abroad, with the aim of directing the depositing of funds allocated to the NFE from the State's General Budget and donations, in addition to disbursing from the same.

Article (4) stipulates that the NFE shall have an independent annual budget whose surplus shall be carried forward, year after year, but not to the State's General Budget.

Article (5) states that the NFE's funds are deemed public funds subject to the provisions of the Penal Law, State's



Financial and Administrative Audit Law, the system for collecting taxes, fees and other dues to which the units of the State's Administrative Apparatus are eligible.

Article (6) states that, without prejudice to the provisions of Article (5) of this decree, the decisions issued by the Minister of Finance and the contracts that the minister concludes within the framework of immediate and direct handling of the emergency situation -- in order to achieve the objectives of the

NFE -- are exempt from all general and special provisions stipulated in the laws and Royal decrees.

Article (7) stipulates that it is not permissible to spend money from the NFE for purposes other than those for which the fund was established.

Article (8) cancels all that contravenes this decree or contradicts its provisions.

Article (9) says that this decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from the day following its date of publication. — ONA

'Side hustles' more common in Oman



The number of individuals with 'side hustles' is growing in Oman

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, JAN 1

Have you heard of the term 'side hustle'? According to Merriam Webster, it refers to work performed for supplementary income on top of a person's primary job. And while it hasn't been researched properly in Oman, side jobs are more common than you think.

According to data released last year, the number of registered home businesses at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion reached 13,780. While the number of registered freelancers in Oman reached 355 as of November 2023.

"Life is difficult and salaries are often not enough. A person cannot rely on monthly salary alone, and must search for other sources of income," shared 40-year old business owner Huwaida al Shaikhani.

Huwaida, an administration employee at a government entity, owns a home cooking business,

where she supplies different kinds of food in a store and also takes orders from various clients.

She started her business when she was 19 after graduating high school when she could not finding a job. However, even after getting a full time job, she decided to keep her business running.

"Business is a hobby that I have invested time in and I enjoy it, but it also allows me to live comfortably especially amidst rising living cost." 32-year-old Hilal al Battashi shared a similar sentiment. He's a full time graphic designer at a government entity, and accepts freelance clients regularly.

"I started freelancing at the start of my career, and it allows me to have more income to spend on myself," he said.

According to him, the lack of financial incentives at government establishments is another driver behind his decision to accept freelance work. "Unlike the private sector, the government sector does not

offer any bonuses which makes the working environment very unmotivating," he said.

Al Battashi first started freelancing at the time of beginning his full time employment and has grown to dependent on it. "I don't think I can imagine my life without my freelance practice now," he said.

According to him, the number of individuals with side hustles is growing in Oman. "There are so many companies in Oman who are searching for skilled freelancers.

Companies these days are more interested in hiring freelancing as opposed to hiring full or part time workers," he said.

While the number of individuals with 'side hustles' in Oman still remains unknown, the government has been promoting freelancing as a source of primary or supplementary income. The National Employment Programme recently released a package to support self-employed individuals in Oman.

Fuel prices in Oman set to continue at October 2021 rates



MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman has taken a decision to re-stabilise fuel prices at October 2021 rates.

This was announced in a press conference held by the Ministry of Finance, on Monday. According to officials at the ministry, the government will continue ceiling fuel prices with the same rates that have been followed since October 2021.

The prices will be capped at October's rates, which are as follows: M91 at 229 baisas/litre, M95 at 239 baisas/litre and diesel at 258 baisas/litre.



Tender Notice

The Social Protection Fund (SPF) announces following E-Tender for 2024:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Deadline for Specifications Request	Deadline for tender bids	Tender Price
01/2024	Qlik Data Integration Platform For Data Warehouse Automation With Near-Real Time Data Replication	07 Jan 2024	16 Jan 2024	50 RO

Interested companies registered with Tender Board may obtain Tender document from the E-Tendering website: <http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>. The Vendors must provide electronic proposal valid for (120) days and addressed to Social Protection Fund on mentioned website.

CORRESPONDANCE:

- Tender inquiry : All correspondence pertaining to the TENDER Inquiry must be online at eTendering system (<http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>)
- E-Tendering system inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the e-tendering system technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number:
Tel : +968 24402200 E-mail : etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om

SPF is not obliged to accept the lowest or any tender that may be received

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Sur — The city of monsoon ships



LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

The ancient port city in the eastern part of Oman, Sur, is in the spotlight as it is the Arab Tourism Capital of 2024.

A two hour drive from Muscat, Sur lies on the Sea of Oman coast. The shore of this city, once upon a time, saw launching of traditional Omani wooden dhows and arrival of sailors after anchoring across its Khor.

Sur's wooden dhows and doors speak volumes of the craftsmanship of shipbuilders and carpenters. The songs and stories of Sur narrate the rich heritage of the land and sings of ship captains, sailors and traders.

The city's Sunaysilah Fort marks its strategic position, Al

Ayjah Lighthouse symbolises the journey of sailing to distant coasts and lands and Al Ayjah hanging bridge represents the modern Sur.

The seafaring history was renewed with the onset of Oman LNG. At the same time, Qalhat continues to take one back into world history as its archaeological findings have thrown light on the trade between the Indus Valley civilisation and Qalhat.

According to Sur University College, 'By the sixth century, Sur was an established centre for trade with East Africa. In the 16th century, it was under Portuguese rule but was liberated by the Omani Imam Nassir bin Murshid al Yaarubi and underwent an economic revival, as a trade centre with

India and East Africa. Before the Suez Canal, Sur was the hub for trade and was an important destination for international sailors."

For many years, one could see the point of sweet water collection where the sailors would come down their anchored ships to collect fresh water.

Today the shipyard reminds everyone about Sur's past and a place to relive the glory is the Sur maritime history.

For tourists today, Sur has the elements of cultural, heritage, adventure and eco tourism as in the case of Ras Al Had and Ras Al Jinz.

AL AYJAH LIGHTHOUSE

It is also known as Sur lighthouse and is located on Ras Ayqah, which is considered to

be the highest east side point in Sur Harbour Square. The three storied, 18 metre tower has a story. The lighthouse was made in 1996 commemorating His Majesty Sultan Qaboos visit to Sur.

The location of the lighthouse is highly significant, said Khalid al Mukhaini, retired naval officer from Sur who has been authoring books on Sur's maritime history.

"In the ancient days, there was no lighthouse at this spot but rather cannons and mast flag because this was the place that controlled the Khor which was the entrance to the Sur Bay," he said. He explained that this was where the wooden ships from India, East Africa and North of the Gulf used to come during the monsoon season.



Two Omani social welfare projects find space in EU magazine

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

Two of Oman's social entrepreneurship programmes, 'Ard Alloban' and 'Disabled Divers' have been included in the INSPIRE, collection of selected case studies published in cooperation with vocational education and training, Innovation for Social Entrepreneurship Project co-founded by the Erasmus+Programme of the European Union (EU).

The two of Oman's projects that make an impact to the society found their place in the coveted magazine which also featured 9 countries including Brazil, France, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Ireland, Switzerland, and Turkey, besides Oman and elucidates the major Social Entrepreneurship Projects that made a difference to the society.

Ard Alloban (Land of Frankincense) is a free hiking social enterprise that is engaged in encouraging the communities to form walking programmes, walking teams and to avail the blissful ample natural blessings.

Founded by Mundhar Nasir Umer al Zaheen, it aims to create and nurture a soul-soothing walking culture. It enables the local communities to lead healthy and socialised lives by overcoming sorts of isolations.

"Social entrepreneurship takes many forms reflecting the great diversity of social entrepreneurs themselves – their backgrounds, their motivations, their aims, and the settings in which they operate. This diversity of experience and practice represents a powerful learning resource, both for established social entrepreneurs in comparing their own journeys and achievements with those of others, and as a source of inspiration and practical guidance for those just setting out," said Peter Totterdill, Workplace Innovation Europe CLG, in charge of the publication.

Oman Disabled Divers, an Inspire So-

Having been recognised by such a magazine of global repute, this gives us an impetus to march forward with confidence

TARIQ AL KHABOURI
Founder of ODD

cial Enterprise, is a group of people that has dedicated itself to improving the physical and social well-being of the people with disabilities through the sport of scuba diving. This enhances their confidence in life and brings a smile on the faces of their family members too. ODD has been able to brighten up the lives of many people through its aquatic activities conducted by trained professionals and state-of-the-art facilities for disabled divers in the Sultanate of Oman.

Tariq bin Jawad al Khabouri, the founder of the ODD, is a man with dreams of seeing a society where physically and mentally challenged people will be considered effective members who can contribute productively in their own capacities.

"I have always been supporting the disabled people in the society and in 2009, Stephanie Trier and I formed ODD to fulfil the idea of making such people swim. With the support of many like-minded people, schools, colleges, ministries, our dream came true and today, hundreds of children with special needs, autism, cerebral palsy and the like are fulfilling their dreams of swimming with the help of a trained specialist. Having been recognised by such a magazine of global repute, this gives us an impetus to march forward with confidence," Tariq al Khabori told the Observer.



“Tender Announcement”
Supply of Food Parcels for the “Ramadan Iftar Program”
for the Year 1445 AH / 2024 AD for
Al Mahrah Governorate and Surrounding Areas
in the Republic of Yemen
Tender No. 1/2024

Oman Charitable Organization (O.C.O.) announces a tender for the supply of 27,900 (Twenty Seven Thousand and Nine Hundred) food parcels for the “Ramadan Iftar Program” for the year 1445 AH / 2024 AD, and distributing them to all the districts of Al Mahrah Governorate and the surrounding areas according to the attached list of locations (16 locations).

Specialized merchants and suppliers wishing to submit their bids for this tender can obtain the terms and conditions from the Financial Department of Oman Charitable Organization against payment of nominal fees, during the period from Monday 1 January 2024 to Thursday 04 January 2024. The last date for bid submission and acceptance shall be Wednesday 10 January 2024.

Bids shall be deposited in the tender box at the Financial Department, O.C.O. Headquarters Building at the Wilayat of Bausher, Muscat Governorate, Al Khuwair 33, Southern Street No. 47, near Sultan Said bin Taimur Mosque. Bids shall be placed in closed envelopes sealed with red wax and addressed to H.E. the Chairman of the Projects and Tenders Committee of O.C.O. before the specified date.

“O.C.O. is not obligated to award the tender in whole or in part or to consider the lowest price.”

SPF opens investment building

MUSCAT: The Social Protection Fund (SPF) opened a multi-purpose investment building in Ghala in the Wilayat of Bausher, on Monday.

Nasser bin Khamis al Jashmi, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Finance and Chairman of the SPF, presided over the inaugural ceremony. He and a number of officials took a tour around the building and viewed the facilities and services it provides. The building occupies a total space of 146,667 sq metres.

The 5-storey building comprises a hotel that will be managed by the international company Accor under the well-known brand Mövenpick Hotels and Resorts. It has 282 hotel rooms and suites, 58 luxury hotel apartments, international restaurants as well as spaces and halls for meetings, conferences and events and a gym.

The investment project will provide spaces for stores and international brands on an estimated area of 3,897 sq metres offering an opportunity for shopping lovers to get a wide variety of options under one roof. The ground floor comprises a large façade of restaurants and cafes with options that meet the desires of visitors to spend fun family times.

The project will be a destination for business owners and includes commercial offices suitable for those looking for an ideal place to manage their businesses in addition to 144 residential apartments.

The project is distinguished by a prime location near the Sultan Qaboos Road and Muscat Expressway. It's also close to Muscat International Airport and the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre. It has three-level parking with a capacity of 1,170 parking spaces.



Tender

The Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madaayn) announces the following Tender:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Last date of Buying	Date of Submission	Type of Work	Register Degree	Fee (R.O)
1/2024/ PEIE/ HQ-1	Replace the Existing Lighting Lamps to LED Using Solar Energy at Suhar Industrial City	15-01-2024	08-02-2024	Supply	Third and above	50
2/2024/ PEIE/ HQ-2	Cleaning and Maintenance Works at Al Wadi Al Kabir Industrial City	15-01-2024	31-01-2024	Electromechanical and Telecommunications Contracting and Maintenance	Third and above	25

Interested Companies registered with Tender Board may obtain the Tender documents from the E-Tendering website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> against non-refundable payment as mentioned above for each set of document. Tenders should be submitted on line on given website.

1. Tender Inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the TENDER Inquiry must be online at eTendering System.

2. eTendering System Inquiry: All correspondence pertaining to the eTendering System technical support must be directed to the following helpdesk email address and phone number: etenderhd@mtcit.gov.om and +968 24402200

Note: Bid Submission will be online only.

Madaayn is not bound to accept the lowest or any other Offer and has the right to cancel these tenders and the tenderers have no right to claim for any compensations.





The Ministry of Finance announced that the total estimated revenues of the state's general budget for the fiscal year 2024, which were calculated on the basis of the average oil price of USD 60 per barrel, stood at about RO 11.010 billion.

ESTIMATED REVENUES AT RO 11 BILLION

FROM P1

He added that estimating these public revenues comes within the framework of the precautionary approach to reduce the burden of any financial challenges that may arise during the fiscal year 2024 and ensure that financing needs are met in the event of a decline in oil prices.

The minister pointed out that the total financing needs for the fiscal year 2024, based on the oil price approved in the budget, will stand at RO 2.2 billion, including the deficit and loan installments expected to be repaid during this year.

He noted that the ratio of public debt to the GDP stood at about 35 per cent, lower by 50 per cent by the end of 2023 than the ratio it reached at its peak in 2020, when it stood at about 70 per cent of the GDP.

FINANCIAL SURPLUS

The Minister of Finance said that the financial surpluses achieved as a result of the rise in oil prices were utilised to implement a solid plan according to which a large percentage of the debts were paid, in addition to implementing a number of postponed development projects. This was reflected in the projects of the 10th Five-Year Plan, whose commitments increased from RO 5 billion as it was at the beginning to more than RO 8 billion by the end of 2023. Priority was given to projects with a social dimension, such as education, health and social housing projects.

He pointed out that the total sums approved for these sectors in the 2024 budget stood at RO 4.635 billion, representing 40 per cent of the total spending.

The minister stated that the government measures taken during the last period were met by credit rating agencies with a series of positive credit rating reports. This contributed to mitigating the increase in interest rates that were supposed to be paid on loans. The total amounts paid for debt service from 2020 until the end of 2023 stood at RO 4.062 billion.

Al Habsi said, "In order to achieve the



SULTAN BIN SALIM AL HABSI
Minister of Finance

objectives of the 10th Five-Year Plan to realise "Oman Vision 2040", and within the framework of the policy of supporting economic diversification sectors and encouraging the establishment of projects that contribute to this diversification, and linking this approach to governorate development projects, financial allocations were provided. These allocations consisted of raising the capital of the Development Bank to RO 500 million, raising the maximum lending limit from RO 1 million to RO 5 million, and providing a room to exceed this limit for development projects that add value to the local economy in the governorates of the Sultanate of Oman, in addition to launching a specialised investment fund (Oman Future Fund) with a capital of RO 2 billion."

The minister affirmed that a programme called "Iskan" or "Housing" will be launched with a total value of up to RO 1.9 billion, with the prime aim of accelerating the pace of granting loans

through Oman Housing Bank.

Abdullah bin Salim al Harthy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Finance, gave a visual presentation highlighting prominent global financial, economic and monetary indicators. He shed light on the decline in global economic growth to reach 2.9 per cent in 2024 and a decline in global inflation rates to 5.8 per cent.

He added that the average global oil prices, according to the expectations of international agencies during 2024, are expected to reach about \$81 per barrel.

The under-secretary expected that the GDP at constant prices will grow by 2.3 per cent in 2023 and by 2.4 per cent in 2024. He touched on the preliminary results of the financial performance for the year 2023, which indicate achieving a financial surplus of about RO 931 million, against an estimated deficit in the state's general budget of about RO 1.3 billion.

He said that the state's public revenues during 2023 rose to RO 12.213 billion, constituting an increase of about RO 2.163

STATE BUDGET 2024

Total public spending RO 11.650 billion, increase of 2.6% compared to 2023.

Total public expenditure RO 1.050 billion

Total financing needs for the fiscal year 2024: RO 2.2 billion

Ratio of public debt to the GDP: 35%, lower by 50% by the end of 2023

Projects of the 10th Five-Year Plan, whose commitments increased from (RO 5 billion) as it was at the beginning to more than (RO 8 billion) by the end of 2023.

Education, health and social housing projects: RO 4.635 billion, representing 40% of the total spending.

The total amounts paid for debt service from 2020 until the end of 2023 stood at RO 4.062 billion

Iskan or Housing programme: RO 1.9 billion

GDP at constant prices will grow by 2.3% in 2023 and by 2.4% in 2024.

billion compared to what was approved in the budget for the same year. Public spending recorded RO 11.282 billion.

He added that net oil revenues in 2023 grew by 29 per cent to record about RO 6.883 billion, while net gas revenues increased by 43 per cent to reach about RO 2 billion.

Al Harthy stressed that the preliminary results of the financial performance for 2023 indicate that the government managed to reduce the public debt from RO 17.6 billion to RO 15.2 billion by paying about RO 2.4 billion, which led to saving RO 140 million from the debt servicing cost.

He explained that the net oil revenues in the 2024 budget are estimated at approximately RO 5.915 billion. The collection of net gas revenues is estimated at about RO 1.575 billion, and the collection of non-oil revenues estimated at approximately RO 3.520 billion.

The under-secretary at the Ministry of Finance pointed out that the 2024 budget allocated about RO 1.140 billion to the development budget and projects with a developmental impact. He added that the current expenditures in the 2024 budget are estimated at about RO 8.573 billion, constituting a percentage of 73 per cent of total public spending.

Meanwhile, the Minister of Finance affirmed that the government will continue to subsidise fuel prices. He added that RO 60 million have been allocated for the promotion of employees of the years (2013 and 2014), whose number reaches more than 52,000 employees. Starting from tomorrow, employees (seniority of 2013) will be promoted, while employees (seniority of 2014) will be promoted starting from July 2024.

The minister concluded, "It is expected that during 2024, about RO 1.6 billion will be paid from the public debt of the Sultanate of Oman. Employment in the government is based on the natural growth of projects and replacement, and that RO 36 million have been allocated in the 2024 budget for training programmes coupled with employment". — ONA



In brief

■ SHANGHAI



MADE-IN-CHINA CRUISE SHIP BEGINS VOYAGE FROM SHANGHAI

China's first domestically built cruise ship set sail on its maiden voyage from Shanghai on Monday, a sign of the nation's growing prowess in sophisticated construction as it seeks self-sufficiency in key technologies. The Adora Magic City left port on its first commercial cruise late afternoon, en route to South Korea and Japan. Equipped with a mahjong lounge and hotpot restaurant, the luxury vessel is aimed squarely at China's expanding middle class and their appetite for travel. State media have hailed the 16-deck behemoth.

■ RIYADH



SAUDI ARABIA'S REGIONAL HQ NORM GOES INTO EFFECT

Saudi Arabia's deadline for foreign firms to establish their regional headquarters in the kingdom or lose out on hundreds of billions of dollars in government contracts went into effect on Monday as did several exceptions to the rule. The exceptions include contracts below 1 million riyals (\$266,681), contracts executed outside of the kingdom, deals with companies that are the sole providers of their service or commodity, and emergencies that can only be addressed by a foreign company without regional headquarters.

■ N'DJAMENA



CHAD PRESIDENT APPOINTS OPPONENT AS PRIME MINISTER

Chad's transitional president General Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno on Monday appointed one of his leading opponents, who recently returned from exile, as prime minister. Succes Masra (pictured), president of The Transformers party, was a virulent opponent of the regime, which came to power in 2021 after the death of Idriss Deby Itno who led the country with an iron fist for 30 years. Masra returned to Chad in November after reaching an agreement with the military leaders.

Migrant Channel crossings decline

LONDON: The number of migrants crossing the Channel has fallen year-on-year for the first time since current records began, with the total arrivals in 2023 down more than a third in 2022, government figures show.

The last crossings of the year took place on December 16, when 55 people made the journey from France in one boat.

The Home Office recorded no further crossings for the remaining 15 days of 2023 amid bad weather conditions. That is the longest consecutive period of the year without any arrivals.

For the first time in five years, since current records began in 2018, no Channel crossings took place on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day or Boxing Day.

The provisional annual total for the year, 29,437, is 36 per cent lower than the record 45,774 crossings for the whole of 2022. But it is higher than the total figure for 2021 (28,526).

Last month, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said there was no "firm date" for meeting his pledge to "stop the boats" when facing questions from members of parliament (MPs).

The promise was one of the five priorities the Sunak set out at the start of 2023 when he said he would pass new laws to make sure people deemed to be arriving in the country illegally would be "detained and swiftly removed" as political pressure to grip the migrant crisis intensified.

The government's sweeping asylum reforms under the Illegal Migration Act became law in July but it is unclear when the rules will come into force.

Meanwhile, the Home Office is yet to confirm whether it has met Sunak's target of clearing the backlog of so-called "legacy" asylum applications by the end of 2023.



Migrants are seen on the UK Border Force rubber dinghy, after they were picked up at sea while attempting to cross the English Channel and brought to the Marina in Dover. — AFP file photo

Sacked home secretary Suella Braverman never got to see her "dream" of sending migrants to Rwanda succeed as the policy stalled amid legal action and was then ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court.

January will see fresh legislation back before parliament in a bid to get flights off the ground after Home Secretary James Cleverly signed a treaty with the east African nation in a bid to firm up the agreement and satisfy concerns raised by the court.

The number of migrants who have arrived in the UK after crossing the Channel since the Rwanda deal was signed in April 2022 by then home secretary Priti Patel is approaching 70,000.

Almost 40,000 people have made the journey since Sunak became prime minister six months

later.

He vowed to bring forward legislation in 2023 to make it "unambiguously clear that if you enter the UK illegally, you should not be able to remain here".

The Illegal Migration Bill became an Act of Parliament after being given royal assent almost six months ago. At the time, officials were still working on when the Act would come into force and it was anticipated elements of the new laws would be implemented in stages over the coming months.

Among the series of measures announced last year to curb Channel crossings and tackle the backlog of asylum claims, Sunak vowed to stop housing asylum seekers in hotels, with the government instead hunting for accommodation in empty holiday parks, former student halls and

surplus military sites.

Meanwhile, the use of giant barge the Bibby Stockholm to house migrants off the coast of Portland in Dorset has been beset by problems, delays and disputes, with an inquest ongoing into the death of one asylum seeker thought to have taken his own life while living on board.

The number of migrants crossing the Channel has steadily increased since 299 people were detected in 2018. There were 1,843 crossings recorded in 2019 and 8,466 in 2020, according to the Home Office.

August 2022 was the highest month on record for crossings when 8,574 people arrived in the UK after making the journey. August 22 that year also saw a record 1,295 migrants crossing in a single day on 27 boats. — dpa

Nobel winner Yunus convicted in labour law case

DHAKA: Nobel peace laureate Muhammad Yunus was convicted on Monday of violating Bangladesh's labour laws in a case decried by his supporters as politically motivated.

Yunus, 83, is credited with lifting millions out of poverty with his pioneering microfinance bank but has earned the enmity of longtime Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has accused him of "sucking blood" from the poor.

Hasina has made several scathing verbal attacks against



Muhammad Yunus steps out of a court in Dhaka on Monday. — AFP

the internationally respected 2006 Nobel Peace Prize winner, who was once seen as a political rival.

Yunus and three colleagues from Grameen Telecom, one of the firms he founded, were accused of violating labour laws when they failed to create a workers' welfare fund in the company.

A labour court in the capital Dhaka convicted and sentenced them to "six months' simple imprisonment", lead prosecutor Khurshid Alam Khan said, adding that all four were immediately granted bail pending appeals. All four deny the charges.

"This verdict is unprecedented,"

Abdullah Al Mamun, a lawyer for Yunus, said. "We did not get justice." Yunus is facing more than 100 other charges over labour law violations and alleged graft.

He told reporters after one of the hearings last month that he had not profited from any of the more than 50 social business firms he had set up in Bangladesh.

"They were not for my personal benefit," Yunus said. Another of his lawyers, Khaja Tanvir, said that the case was "meritless, false and ill-motivated." — AFP

UK govt bans expat students from bringing dependents

LONDON: British Home Secretary James Cleverly has said the "unreasonable practice" of overseas students bringing their family to the UK will end as restrictions on visa routes come into force on Monday.

He said the ban, which affects all but those enrolling on postgraduate research courses and ones with Government-funded scholarships, will cut migration by tens of thousands.

The measures were announced in May by his ousted predecessor Suella Braverman shortly before official figures showed net migration running at 672,000.

The move could hit universities which rely on foreign student fees and could also harm the UK's reputation as an international destination, experts have warned.

It means that as of Monday, international students starting courses in Britain are no longer allowed to obtain visas for their dependants, unless they are on a postgraduate research programme or a Government-sponsored course. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak tweeted: "From today, the majority of foreign university students cannot bring family members to the UK."

Cleverly said: "This Government is delivering on its commitment to the British public to cut migration. We have set out a tough plan to rapidly bring numbers down, control our borders and prevent people from manipulating our immigration system, which will come into force throughout this year."

"Today, a major part of that plan comes into effect, ending the unreasonable practice of overseas students bringing their family members to the UK. This will see migration falling rapidly by the tens of thousands and contribute to our overall strategy to prevent 300,000 people from coming to the UK." — dpa

Danes stunned by queen's surprise abdication

COPENHAGEN: Danes were on Monday slowly coming to terms with Queen Margrethe's surprise announcement that she will abdicate on January 14 in favour of her son after 52 years on the throne.

"Goosebumps, to say the least. It was quite a shock," 30-year-old Stefan Teichert said, adding that he, like many other Danes, had followed the 83-year-old queen's annual New Year's Eve speech live on television.

The hugely popular, chain-smoking monarch had insisted over the years that she would never step down, repeatedly saying she would "stay on the throne until I drop".

"We were all shocked. We were



Queen Margrethe II of Denmark announces her abdication on Sunday. — AFP

just like: 'What? Cancel New Year's Eve!'" said Maria Jepsen, 39.

"It was like somebody in the family died or something." Twenty-one year-old Rasmus Eliassen agreed, and chose to see the positive side of the announcement.

"It's nice it's not because of death that she's leaving," he said, adding that Denmark was "in good hands" with the future king, Crown Prince Frederik.

Margrethe II has been instrumental in making the Danish monarchy one of the most

popular in the world, enjoying the support of more than 80 per cent of Danes, according to a recent poll.

A widow since 2018, she underwent extensive back surgery in February. She said the operation "gave cause to thoughts about the future — whether now would be an appropriate time to pass on the responsibility to the next generation".

Aged 55, Crown Prince Frederik will take over the throne as King Frederik X.

There will be no formal coronation.

Instead, he will be pronounced king during an extraordinary cabinet meeting after his mother formally abdicates, after which

Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen will present the new monarch from a balcony.

"Her son is ready now," said Jesper Volpius, 55, adding that the queen was "a strong woman" to make the decision to step down.

In December, a poll published by Danish television TV2 indicated the queen was Denmark's most popular royal, followed by Crown Prince Frederik.

Prime Minister Frederiksen on Sunday called Margrethe "the epitome of Denmark".

"Many of us have never known another regent," she said.

"Throughout the years (she) has put words and feelings into what we are as a people and as a nation." — AFP



Intense strikes in Gaza as Israel plans longer war

GAZA: Israel pulled tanks out of some Gaza City districts on Monday, residents said, as it announced plans to shift tactics and cut back on troop numbers, but fighting raged elsewhere in the Palestinian enclave along with intense bombardment.

Israel says the war in Gaza, which has reduced much of the territory to rubble, killing thousands and plunging its 2.3 million people into a humanitarian disaster, has many months to go.

But Israel has signalled a coming news phase in its offensive, with an official saying on Monday that the military would draw down forces inside Gaza this month and shift to a months-long phase of more localised “mopping up” operations.

Palestinian health authorities in Gaza say Israel’s offensive there has killed more than 21,978 people.

The scale of suffering in Gaza, where the bombardment has driven almost all inhabitants from their homes, has led Israel’s Western allies, including the US, to urge it to scale down its offensive.

“My wish for 2024 is not to die... Our childhood is gone. There is no bathroom, no food and no water. Only tents. There is nowhere safe,” 11-year-old Layan



This picture shows smoke billowing over Gaza City following Israeli strikes. – AFP

Harara said in Gaza’s Rafah.

Residents of Sheikh Radwan district in Gaza City, in the northern part of the enclave that Israel’s offensive focused on first, said tanks had withdrawn after what they described as the most intense 10 days of warfare since the conflict began.

Tanks remained in other parts of northern Gaza and health officials said some people trying to return to their homes in a southern district of Gaza City had been killed by Israeli fire on Sunday.

Fighting in central parts of the

enclave continued unabated on Monday, residents there said, with tanks pushing into al-Bureij and air strikes targeting al-Nusseirat,

Palestinian health authorities in Gaza say Israel’s offensive there has killed more than 21,978 people

al-Maghazi and the southern city of Khan Younis. Strikes on al-Maghazi killed at least 10 people on Monday morning.

Israel’s move to a new stage in the conflict comes after its initial bombardment and a ground invasion that began on October 27. Air and artillery strikes have continued to pound the entire enclave during that time, leaving much of it in ruins.

Washington said Israel should allow a Palestinian government to control Gaza when the conflict is over. Even in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, 2023 was the deadliest year on record for Palestinians with 307 killed since the war in Gaza began on October 7, the UN said. — Reuters

Kim meets military commanders, stressing armed conflict

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un told the country’s military commanders the most powerful means must be mobilised to fight back the United States and South Korea if they choose military confrontation, state media reported on Monday.

Kim said the danger of an armed confrontation on the Korean peninsula is fast becoming a reality because of hostile maneuvers by the enemies including the United States, requiring the country to “sharpen the treasured sword” to protect itself.

“If the enemy opt for military confrontation ... our army should deal a deadly blow to thoroughly annihilate them by mobilising all the toughest means and potentialities without moment’s hesitation,” KCNA news agency quoted Kim as saying.

Kim made the comments as he hosted senior military leaders at the ruling Workers’ Party (WPK)

headquarters to congratulate them on the accomplishments made in 2023, the state news agency said.

North Korea in 2023 tested its largest ballistic missiles and launched its first military reconnaissance satellite, which Kim has called major advances in modernising the country’s military.

The call to upgrade the country’s military readiness follows the pledge made at the conclusion of a five-day WPK meeting that ended on Saturday to boost its nuclear arsenal, build military drones and launch three new spy satellites in 2024. The escalation of rhetoric from Kim comes as the United States increased drills with South Korea in the past year, deploying more strategic military assets, including a nuclear missile submarine, aircraft carriers and large bombers. — Reuters



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un meets with commanders of the Korean People’s Army, at the headquarters of the Central Committee of the Party, in Pyongyang, North Korea. – Reuters

Massive earthquake slams Japan, residents flee coastal areas

TOKYO: A powerful earthquake struck central Japan on Monday, triggering warnings for residents to evacuate some areas on its west coast, destroying buildings, knocking out power to thousands of homes and disrupting travel to the region.

The quake with a preliminary magnitude of 7.6 triggered waves of around 1 metre along parts of the Sea of Japan coast, with authorities saying larger waves could follow.

The Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA) issued tsunami warnings for the coastal prefectures of Ishikawa, Niigata and Toyama. A major tsunami warning - the first since the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami that struck northeastern Japan — was initially issued for Ishikawa but later downgraded.

Several houses have been destroyed and army units have been dispatched to help with

Residents need to stay on alert for further possible quakes and I urge people in areas where tsunamis are expected to evacuate as soon as possible

FUMIO KISHIDA
Japanese Prime Minister

rescue operations, top government spokesperson Yoshimasa Hayashi told reporters, adding that authorities were still assessing the extent of the damage.

More strong quakes in the area, where seismic activity has been simmering for more than three years, could occur over coming days, JMA official Toshihiro



People stand next to large cracks in the pavement after evacuating into a street in the city of Wajima, Ishikawa prefecture. – AFP

Shimoyama said.

In comments to the press shortly after the quake struck,

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida also warned residents to prepare for more disasters.

“Residents need to stay on alert for further possible quakes and I urge people in areas where

tsunamis are expected to evacuate as soon as possible,” Kishida said.

“Run!” a bright yellow warning flashed across television screens advising residents in specific areas of the coast to immediately evacuate their homes.

Images carried by local media showed a building collapsing in a plume of dust in the coastal city of Suzu and a huge crack in a road in Wajima where panicked-looking parents clutched their children. There have been reports of at least 30 collapsed buildings in Wajima, NHK reported, citing the city’s fire department.

The quake also jolted buildings in the capital Tokyo, some 500 km from Wajima on the opposite coast.

More than 36,000 households had lost power in Ishikawa and Toyama prefectures, utilities provider Hokuriku Electric Power said. — Reuters

NAIROBI

Police arrest two suspects in athlete murder

Kenyan police said on Monday they had arrested two people in connection with the weekend stabbing to death of Ugandan athlete Benjamin Kiplagat.

The two men were arrested on the outskirts of the Rift Valley town of Eldoret, local police commander Stephen Okal said.

“The two suspects are known criminals who have been terrorising the members of public,” Okal said.

“We are in the advanced stage of the investigations and we will



possibly be sending them to court tomorrow.” While the motive of the killing was still unknown, police said investigations had shown that Kiplagat had been “waylaid” by the two men. — AFP

CONAKRY

Junta unveils constitutional referendum for 2024

The head of Guinea’s ruling junta says a constitutional referendum will be held in 2024, a key step towards the return of civilian rule after seizing power in a coup.

Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, who has ruled since overthrowing the country’s first democratically elected president in 2021, announced the vote during an end-of-year speech late on Sunday.

He gave no date for the referendum.



“In the new year, a new constitution which resembles us and brings us together will be submitted to a referendum,” Doumbouya said. — AFP

JUBA

6 killed in disputed Sudan border region

Six people including a senior local administrator were killed in an ambush by armed men in the Abyei region claimed by both Sudan and South Sudan, local officials said.

The region experiences frequent bouts of violence, where rival factions of the Dinka ethnic group — Twic Dinka from South Sudan’s neighbouring Warrap State, and Ngok Dinka from Abyei — are locked in a dispute over the location of an administrative boundary.



Abyei Deputy Chief Administrator Noon Deng and his team came under attack along the road from Abyei to Aneet town when they were returning from a visit to Rummamer. — Reuters



omanobserver.com/podcast

In brief

■ AMSTERDAM



POLICE ARREST MORE THAN 200 IN NEW YEAR RIOTS

Dutch police on Monday said more than 200 people had been arrested on New Year's Eve during riots throughout the country, in which dozens of police officers were injured.

Police in several cities were attacked with fireworks and stones, in what a spokesman told broadcaster NOS was a night of serious incidents and "unacceptable" violence.

Police in Rotterdam said more than 100 cars and other vehicles had been set on fire there, while in Amsterdam, The Hague and other cities riot squads were needed to disperse violent crowds.

— Reuters

■ SYDNEY



HEAVY RAINS LASH IN AUSTRALIA, TRIGGERING FLOODS

Heavy rains lashed parts of Australia's east on Monday, triggering flash flooding, inundating roads and bringing more pain for some residents reeling after the intense thunderstorms that hit the region over the Christmas holidays.

The northeastern New South Wales and southeastern Queensland regions were pounded by a wild weather system overnight, with several towns taking roughly a month's rainfall over 24 hours to Monday morning.

"This situation continues to be dangerous and dynamic," Miriam Bradbury, a forecaster at the Bureau of Meteorology, said in a video message on social media platform X.

— Reuters

■ VATICAN CITY



POPE DENOUNCES VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Pope Francis on Monday denounced violence against women, speaking as Italy is in the midst of national soul-searching over murder.

Francis has made numerous appeals for an end to violence against women in the past. But his words on Monday were the first in a speech since Italy was angered by the brutal killing of 22-year-old university student Giulia Cecchettin in November.

"Every society needs to accept the gift that is woman, every woman: to respect, defend and esteem women, in the knowledge that whosoever harms a single woman profanes God, who was born of a woman," he said.

— Reuters

Putin says Russia will 'intensify' attacks on Ukraine

MOSCOW: President Vladimir Putin said on Monday that Moscow will intensify strikes on military targets in Ukraine after an unprecedented attack over the weekend on the Russian city of Belgorod.

The attack killed 24 people and left over 100 wounded in Belgorod on Saturday. It came after Moscow launched a large-scale attack on Ukrainian cities.

"We're going to intensify the strikes, no crime against civilians will rest unpunished, that's for certain," Putin said on Monday during a visit to a military hospital.

He said Russia will press on with hitting what he called "military installations."

"We are doing that today, and tomorrow we will continue doing it," Putin said, almost two years into Moscow's offensive.

He spoke as Ukraine said Russia had hit it with a "record" number of drones on New Year's Day.

Putin accused Ukrainian forces of targeting "right in the city centre, where people were walking, before New Year's Eve."

He repeated a claim that Ukraine is being used by the West to "settle its problems" with Russia.

The Russian leader said he believed the "strategic initiative" in the dragging conflict was on



Russia's President Vladimir Putin meets with servicemen wounded in Ukraine while visiting the Central Vishnevsky Military Clinic in Moscow. — AFP

the Russian side.

"In any case that is how I am being briefed and I always insist: any offensive operations should be done after a defeat of the enemy," he said, according to the Interfax news agency.

Meanwhile, Ukraine said on Monday it had foiled a "record" number of Russian drones on the night of New Year's Eve after a week of escalation in the nearly two-year conflict.

Kyiv also said Russian shelling killed one person on New Year's

We're going to intensify the strikes, no crime against civilians will rest unpunished, that's for certain

VLADIMIR PUTIN

Russian President

German liberals vote to stay in Scholz's fractious coalition



Germany's Free Democratic Party (FDP) leader Christian Lindner attends an extraordinary party convention to vote on the coalition agreement, in Berlin, Germany. — Reuters file photo

BERLIN: A slim majority of the members of Germany's Free Democrats have voted in a non-binding membership poll to stay in Chancellor Olaf Scholz's fractious three-way governing coalition, party sources said on Monday.

The low-tax pro-business party's membership has increasingly chafed at governing with Scholz's socially minded Social Democrats and the Greens, leading to speculation that the coalition might not last the just under two years that remain of its term.

Wolfgang Kubicki, a close ally of party leader Christian Lindner, hailed the result as clear evidence that voices in the party calling loudly for an exit were in the minority.

"This result strengthens us in the coalition," he told Funke newspapers. "The silent majority clearly does not want to quit the government."

The poll was launched after the party was ejected from regional parliaments in Bavaria and Hessen after falling below the 5% vote share threshold in elections.

With the war in Ukraine, the loss of Russian gas and the need for an accelerated energy transition imposing unprecedented costs on Europe's industrial powerhouse at a time of low or negative growth, the FDP is finding its fiscally orthodox recipes a hard sell.

The bleak economic backdrop is hurting all three parties in the polls, with the opposition conservatives on around 30%, around twice the level of the SPD and the Greens. The FDP are hovering around the 5% mark nationally.

In his New Year's address on December 31, Scholz acknowledged times were tough, but promised that Germany had the strength to get through a

rough patch.

"Many are dissatisfied, and I take that seriously. But at the same time: we in Germany will get through this," he said. "Inflation is down, wages are rising, and winter gas stores are full to the brim. We do well even in headwinds."

Meanwhile, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said he is optimistic that Germany can navigate the sea of geopolitical and economic challenges it will face down in 2024 as he urged the country to embrace change.

"We can cope with headwinds," the Social Democrat said in his annual New Year's speech to the nation. "That doesn't make the challenges of our time any smaller."

Scholz made reference to Germans' worries: "As soon as Covid was halfway over, Russia started a relentless war in the middle of Europe," he said.

— Agencies

US Supreme Court urges 'caution' as AI reshapes legal field

WASHINGTON: Artificial intelligence represents a mixed blessing for the legal field, US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts said in a year-end report, urging "caution and humility" as the evolving technology transforms how judges and lawyers go about their work.

Roberts struck an ambivalent tone in his 13-page report. He said AI had potential to increase access to justice for indigent litigants, revolutionise legal research and assist courts in resolving cases more quickly and cheaply while also pointing to privacy concerns and the current technology's inability to replicate human discretion.

"I predict that human judges will be around for a while," Roberts wrote. "But with equal confidence I predict that judicial work - particularly at the trial level - will be significantly affected by AI."

The chief justice's commentary is his most significant discussion to date of the influence of AI on the law, and coincides with a number of lower courts contending with how best to adapt to a new technology capable of passing the bar



Chief Justice of the United States John Roberts arrives to address to a joint session of Congress at the Capitol, in Washington. — Reuters file photo

exam but also prone to generating fictitious content, known as "hallucinations."

Roberts emphasised that "any use of AI requires caution and humility." He mentioned an instance where AI hallucinations had led lawyers to cite non-existent cases in court papers, which the chief justice said is "always a bad idea." Roberts did not elaborate beyond saying the phenomenon "made headlines this year."

Last week, for instance, Michael Cohen, Donald Trump's former fixer and lawyer, said in court papers unsealed last week that he mistakenly gave his attorney fake case citations generated by an AI program that made their way into an official court filing.

— Reuters

Breathe-in experience, breathe-out poetry



Rasha al Raisi
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The writer is a certified skills trainer and author of *The World According to Bahja*

After months of house renovations, I was given the task of helping Mom to unpack and arrange books from Dad’s infamous library. Three words to describe that room: a disaster zone. Dad is an avid reader and a man who likes collecting any sort of reading material including newspapers, magazines, and supplements. Not to mention books that his nephews keep dumping on him from time to time, which fills him with pride. I decided to divide the books genre-wise and get rid of all unreadable materials, discovering in the process many interesting books that came as supplements with Arabic cultural magazines. After days of hard work, the place finally looked like a proper library. Now it was time for me to pick an Arabic book to read for change, and I chose one of translated poetry; something I rarely read as I’m a big sceptic of translated work. The book was called The Voice of Conscience: Fifty Global Poems, translated by Ta’lat El Shayeb and published by Al Doha Magazine in August 2013. In his introduction, El Shayeb shares his views regarding the difficulties of translating from other languages without destroying the essence and meaning of a poem such as Fitzgerald’s translation of Omar Al-Khayyam’s poetry, which helped in

developing English literature. Proceeding through the book was a great pleasure as it introduced me to many new international poets from diverse eras and backgrounds. There were different types of poems in the book but their main theme was that of oppression; whether it’s caused by dictatorship or imprisonment. It included Paul Éluard’s (France) famous poem “Freedom,” which was published and dropped by British parachutes on Paris during Nazi occupation in 1945 with Its famous opening stanza: “On my notebooks, On my desk and the trees, On the sand on the snow, I write your name.” Another memorable poem was that of Vasko Popa (Serbia), which talks about an inmate who smuggles a handful of cherries to his detention camp and divides them into three parts before swallowing them fast — with the pits — where it grows into a tree that sprouts from his stomach and makes his mates laugh. Reza Baraheni (Iran) and César Vallejo (Peru) poems reflect the weight of being an intellect in a world full of poverty-stricken and exploited humans. Some poems share beautifully imagined scenes, despite their depressing nature such as Forugh Farrokhzad (Iran) asking visitors of her house to carry with them a lamp and a small window so that

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PROPER LIBRARY

she could see the happy bustling of streets, while Ko Un (Korea) describes the fleeting happiness felt when a ray of sunlight visits his prison cell at sunset. As I reach the end of the book that includes the poets’ biographies, I’m struck by the common factor that unifies most of them: either being political prisoners for decades or their heart-breaking endings that don’t match their sensitive nature which sets them apart from others. Ernesto Díaz Rodriguez (Cuba) was imprisoned for 22 years during Castro’s regime, while Nazim Hikmet (Turkey) was sentenced for 35 years but served 15 after a hunger strike. Tragic deaths include Paul Celan (Romania) who drowned himself in the river Seine and Attila József (Hungary) who threw himself under a train. As for female poets, Alaide Foppa (Guatemala) disappeared in 1980 aged 66 and Forugh Farrokhzad (Iran) died in a much-debated car accident aged 32. Others who perished in prison include Miguel Hernández (Spain), Paul Celan (Romania) and Robert Desnos (France). Nevertheless, the best quote to sum-up this short yet rewarding poetic journey is by American poet Muriel Rukeyser: “Breathe-in experience, breathe-out poetry.”

Fire-gutted parliament a reminder of South Africa’s woes

JULIE BOURDIN

Charred beams and broken tiles still poke out from the gutted roof of South Africa’s parliament in Cape Town two years after it was engulfed by a devastating fire. For many, the arson attack and the scars, partially hidden behind the monumental white and red facade, symbolise the country’s ills as it goes into an election year. Reconstruction has been slow and the 400 National Assembly lawmakers have been forced into a smaller hall in the city that can only handle 170 of them. A probe into the arson by a man who has been declared unfit to stand trial, found guards sleeping on the job amongst a litany of security lapses. The fire and its aftermath highlight a “failing state” that cannot maintain basic services, ignores safety standards and where planning is “in tatters”, said political analyst Sandile Swana. “This all creates an atmosphere of precarity and general unsafeness,” he said. The main reconstruction at the iconic site will begin in January and take two years to complete — in line with “the timeframes that were announced”, according to parliament spokesman Moloto Mothapo. It has taken two years to secure funding and permits, remove rubble and artefacts in the gutted building and lay the groundwork, he added. With 2024 marking three decades since the advent of democracy, the starting date is itself steeped in symbolism. Mothapo said this would help ensure that parliament “is restored and made even better. “The institution is not just bricks and mortar. It carries the hopes and aspirations, and the future of the great majority of South Africans.” The delay angers some however. “We can all agree this has been a frustratingly long process,” Siviwe Gwarube, chief whip for the main opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) told a parliamentary committee this year. It took firefighters more than 48 hours to control the flames when the building was set ablaze on January 2, 2022. Though no one was killed, the fire caused \$120 million of damage and wrecked a chamber that was the scene of historic moments, including President FW de Klerk announcing the release of Nelson Mandela after 27 years in prison in 1990. — AFP

Does social media perpetuate inequality?

PAMELA PAUL

For some people, social media is inconsequential — a cat photo here, a banana slip TikTok there. For others, it’s all-consuming — a helpless catapult into a slurry of anxiety, self-harm and depression. To each his own Internet. Still, we can make some generalisations about the impact. We know social media use can harm mental health. We know that this disproportionately affects young people. Both the surgeon general and the American Psychological Association put out related health advisories this year. And we know that girls, who use social media more than boys, are disproportionately affected. But social media use also differs by race and ethnicity — and there’s far less discussion of that. According to a new study by Pew, Black and Hispanic teenagers ages 13 to 17 spend far more time on most social media apps than their white peers. One-third of Hispanic teenagers, for example, say they are “almost constantly” on TikTok, compared with one-fifth of Black teenagers and one-tenth of white teenagers. Higher percentages of Hispanic (27 per cent) and Black teenagers (23 per cent) are almost constantly on YouTube compared with white teenagers (9 per cent); the same trend is true for Instagram. Not surprisingly, disparities in social media usage reflect inequalities in the real-world. Largely because of lower income levels, Black and Hispanic teenagers are less likely to have broadband access or computers at home. This makes them disproportionately use their smartphones, where social media apps ping, whiz and notify. Lucia Magis-Weinberg, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Washington who studies teenagers and tech, compares Internet use of the phone to snorkelling, whereas computers allow more of a scuba dive. The phones, at least, are always there. “We know broadly that youth of minoritised communities have longer commutes, fewer opportunities to do after-school activities, fewer resources,” Magis-Weinberg told me. They may



What we do not need is another “sudden” yet regrettably delayed realisation that something has gone very, very wrong with America’s kids, but we were too busy looking the other way.

not have spaces to hang out safely with friends nearby; social media is a more accessible option. “But we have to ask,” Magis-Weinberg added, “what is social media use displacing?” The answer, according to experts, includes sports participation, in-person socialising, after-school clubs and activities, exploring the outdoors, reading and more. Let’s consider just reading, which also happens to be correlated with both mental well-being and school achievement. According to Scholastic’s most recent Kids and Family Reading Report, the percentage of kids ages 6 to 17 who read frequently for pleasure dropped to 28 per cent in 2022 from 37 per cent in 2010. Those numbers fall precipitously as kids get older; 46 per cent of 6- to 8-year-olds read frequently in 2022 compared with only 18 per cent of 12- to 17-year-olds. And these declines are tied to Internet use. All this raises the possibility that disparities in Internet use could in turn intensify overall declines and existing differences in reading across racial groups among adults. The average daily time spent reading per capita by ethnicity in 2022 was 0.29 hours for white adults, 0.12 for Black adults and 0.10 for Hispanics. In other words, one danger is that social media not only reflects real-world disparities — it could also exacerbate them. Greater use of social media by

Black and Hispanic young people “can help perpetuate inequality in society because higher levels of social media use among kids have been demonstrably linked to adverse effects such as depression and anxiety, inadequate sleep, eating disorders, poor self-esteem and greater exposure to online harassment,” Jim Steyer, the founder of Common Sense Media, told me. As is so often the case, the kids most affected are likely to be the ones least equipped to handle the consequences. Akeem Marsh, medical director of the Home of Integrated Behavioural Health at The New York Foundling, a social services agency, said that among the hundreds of largely Black and Hispanic kids he sees from communities with fewer resources, social media use is often a primary concern or it comes up in treatment. Kids who use it frequently often respond with traumatised feelings and repeated anxiety. “The way social media use presents itself is as something that is actively harmful,” Marsh told me. Already kids from these communities have few advantages, he explained. They may not have access to after school programmes. They’re often in single-parent households. They lack support systems. “I think in the long-term,” he said, “we’re going to see real differences in the impact.” — *The New York Times*

And the new year begins

The year 2024 has begun and we began by wishing the best to each other. On Monday, the first day of New Year, saw 7.6 magnitude earthquake in Japan bringing in a Tsunami alert.

As the life is unpredictable as much as in nature so in humans too. How a person responds to circumstances depends on an individual's capacity and state of mind during that particular moment. With nature of course an earthquake we might see today might have been going under pressure for a period of time. Just like a volcano that brews before the outburst. The change is not always announced. What we have to prepare for is to cope with the change.

Most of us would have gone through reflection of the year that has gone by and looked at the lessons learnt. If it was a difficult year, you might have been tired but you know you have become stronger because of the challenges.

And if we set our goals, how consistent are we going to be? It almost felt like going to a new class for the first time with new books and bags. If you think about it we never actually complete our studies. It is a life long lessons that we go through.

First the knowledge that is tested and evaluated in a formal manner, then tested and heard to be given qualifications and then the test to thrive or survive in life. Animals are lucky that way their examination is mostly on finding food and survival by not being a prey to some one else. Quite a challenge coming to think of it.

We know it is not enough just to survive so why don't we all thrive? Consistency could be the answer.

Many of us tend to give up quicker than the ones who thrive. The ones who continue actually practice patience, and it is not mere luck. As they say it is that moment when you want to give up that requires to be coped and managed. There will be mountains to climb and there will be hills to descend, and plains to walk and settle. We all know life is full of ups and downs and it is these experiences that make each of our lives different like our finger prints.

The struggle need not be on your own and we need not know all the answers. It is perfectly alright to



Lakshmi Kothaneth @lakshmioman

The writer is a senior journalist and a radio anchor

THE CHANGE IS NOT ALWAYS ANNOUNCED. WHAT WE HAVE TO PREPARE FOR IS TO COPE WITH THE CHANGE

seek help from the right people, in fact it is the most sensible thing to do. Sometimes we struggle because we do not have the know-how. It is important to seek help and learn. Sometimes the topic is boring so much that we wish that someone else would do it for us.

But remember the exams never end in life we just move from one subject to the other and from one exam to another.

So dear youngsters, what you are going through is just the beginning, the good thing is you have elders around you now and later in life you have to find your own mentors and often you are the ones who are going to be guiding others.

For now it is interesting to look at the news headlines of different countries. Not many situations have changed because it is the mindset that needs to be changed. And the desire has to come from within and not forced upon because only then one can feel the true joy in achieving the changes that are required for us to achieve in life.

We have to be realistic in understanding what is that we lack in skills in order to reach the next level. When we can brush aside ego and learn in earnest understanding the need that is when we grow. If we fall in the trap of thinking we know it all that is when we find there is no space for improvement. It cannot be so because the world, society and technology are evolving on daily basis.

Just as our status on WhatsApp and status on social media's timeline changes, the scenarios change in our lives too.

The only solution is to accept change, learn and adapt to new situations. Learning from others is not below the dignity. The person who learns from others become more agile.

Emotions are present in these situations and it is better we don't ignore them. It would be great to acknowledge them, at the same time not be stuck there. It all goes to prove how wonderfully blessed are the people who have family members who do not judge and friends whom they can trust so they can voice out their thoughts aloud so they don't have to internalise it all of the time and let it brew not knowing when it will turn to an outburst.

Let there be calmness and peace of mind while finding our path.

HELPING THE BROTHER!



A Palestinian man carries his brother, who sells sweets, on his shoulders as they walk past the rubble of a house destroyed by an Israeli strike amid the ongoing conflict, in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, on Monday. -- Reuters

The rule of law under fire



Ana Palacio

A former minister of foreign affairs of Spain and former senior vice president and general counsel of the World Bank Group,

THE POST-1945 INTERNATIONAL ORDER IS NOT PERFECT, NOT LEAST BECAUSE IT REMAINS DOMINATED BY ITS LEADERS AND ARCHITECTS: EUROPE AND, ESPECIALLY, THE UNITED STATES

It has been an eventful year, to put it mildly. In fact, the world has endured so much war, disruption, tension, and uncertainty that we are left to wonder whether the rules-based global order, which has guided international relations since World War II, will survive for much longer.

The post-war international order is not perfect, not least because it remains dominated by its leaders and architects: Europe and, especially, the United States. But one should not underestimate the value of a global system that both rests on and perpetuates liberal values, particularly the rule of law. And that system now appears to be in danger, as these values are attacked, undermined, and eroded.

According to the United Nations, the rule of law demands that every person, institution, and entity, "including the state itself," is accountable to laws that are "publicly promulgated, equally enforced," "independently adjudicated," and "consistent with international human-rights norms and standards." But three main forces are increasingly preventing this standard from being met.

The first is rising authoritarianism. According to Freedom House, 73 countries' Freedom in the World scores declined in 2020, while just 28 countries' scores improved. This is hardly an anomalous development: countries with declining scores have outnumbered those with rising scores every year since 2005. And the erosion is evident worldwide, from Africa to Latin America to Southeast Asia.

Even the European Union is not immune. Look no further than Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's regime. After taking power in 2010 (for the second time), Orbán proceeded to weaken the judiciary — including by narrowing the constitutional court's jurisdiction and politicising the selection of judges — and redrawing legislative districts to ensure the dominance of his Fidesz party.

Orbán made no secret of his intentions, proclaiming in 2014 that he was building an "illiberal state" in Europe. Four years later, in 2018, the

European Parliament triggered Article 7 proceedings against Hungary — which could lead to the suspension of some of a member state's rights — over the alleged risk of violations of the EU's founding values. While Hungary has since pursued corrective judicial reforms in order to unlock EU funds, it has a long way to go to reverse its descent into illiberalism.

But Orbán is not alone. After taking power in 2015, Poland's right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party similarly introduced sweeping reforms aimed at weakening the

judiciary, including by eroding the Constitutional Tribunal's independence. (That Tribunal subsequently ruled that Polish law took precedence over EU law.) This led the European Commission to initiate Article 7 proceedings against Poland in 2017, alleging that there is a "clear risk of a serious breach" of the rule of law.

The good news is that Polish voters recently voted PiS out of power. The bad news is that Orbán remains popular in Hungary.

Spain, too, is now flirting with "illiberalism." Last

month, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez reached an agreement with the Catalanian independence party (Junts) to extend amnesty to Catalan separatists — a move he had previously called unconstitutional — in exchange for political support to keep his socialists in power. As part of the deal, parliamentary inquiry commissions will be created to supervise judges' application of the amnesty law. Though this is supposedly intended to protect against so-called lawfare, it would be a clear breach of the separation of powers.

The second major force undermining the rule of law globally is theocracy. The independent adjudication of laws is inherently incompatible with a system in which there is no separation between the judiciary and political and religious authorities. And the view of religious law as divinely revealed means that it cannot be adapted to evolving standards regarding, say, human rights.

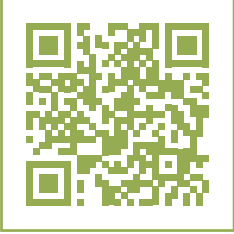
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The post-war international order is not perfect.

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Oman gear up for 2024 Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 1

After an absence of four months from last presence at the second CIS Games in Belarus in August, the Oman national beach soccer team players reported for training sessions on the first day of 2024 to commence their preparation for the Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup 2024 which is scheduled to take place in UAE from February 15 to 25.

The long-serving head coach of Oman beach soccer team, Talib bin Hilal, opted 16 players for the domestic preparatory camp which began on Monday and will run for 11 days until January 11 in Muscat. Majority of the players were selected from Al Amerat club who have been crowned as the champions for the second edition of the 2023-24 beach soccer league as they defeated rivals Al Shabab 10-6 in the concluding round of the league. The announced squad featured the probables:

Khalid al Oraiimi, Abdullah al Souti, Mashal al Oraiimi, Salim al Oraiimi, Younis al Owaisi, Nuh al Battashi, Said al Farsi, Abdul Rahman al Fazari, Moundher al Oraiimi, Nuh al Zadjali, Amjad al Hamdani, Al Yaqdhan al Hindasi, Sami al Balushi, Yahya al Murkhi and Musallam al Oraiimi.

Oman team will eye a different show in the next edition of the Beach Soccer World Cup in Dubai. Coach Talib Hilal affirmed in a previous statement to the Oman Daily Observer that they are looking to progress into knockout stages for the first time.

Oman will play in Group D against heavyweights Brazil (record five-time champions),

Portugal (champions of 2015 and 2019) and Mexico teams. Oman had played several times against Brazil and Portugal in the previous editions of the Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup. The coaching staff of the team are well aware of the team's requirements, who target an impressive show in the forthcoming major event. Hence, these will be addressed in the under way camp which is under supervision of the coach Talib who managed Oman team in the previous editions of the Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup.

The coaching staff were busy during the last couple days observing the clubs which took part in the 2023-24 beach soccer league. It was an opportunity for Talib Hilal and his assistant team to monitor the teams and progress of the national team players who are playing in different local clubs besides discovering some new faces. It is expected this camp will be based on the physical and fitness training sessions while the friendly games will be scheduled in the upcoming camps.

In the World Cup, Oman will commence their campaign with a tough encounter against the world champions Brazil on February 16. The match will start at 21:00 (Oman time). In the following match, Oman players will take on Mexico on February 16 at 15:30. In the concluding match of the group stage, Oman will face former champions Portugal on February 20 and the match will kick off at 17:00. The top two teams from each group will move to quarterfinals on February 22 while semifinals will take place on February 24. The third and fourth play-off and the final are scheduled for February 25.



Al Bashayer avenge first-round defeat against Seeb

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, JAN 1

In a thrilling matchup, the Al Bashayer club emerged victorious against Seeb, securing a 60-56 win in the second round of the Oman Basketball League for the 2023-2024 season. The triumph marked a successful comeback for Al Bashayer, avenging their earlier loss to Seeb in the first round.

With this result, both teams are tied at 23 points each, but Seeb lead with a basket difference, securing their places in the final round alongside Ahli Sidab.

At the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex, the game witnessed intense competition, with Al Bashayer dominating in the first quarter, solidifying their control over the game. The offence

contributed to scoring points and increasing the lead, while their defence thwarted most of Seeb attempts, thanks to the effective zone defence played by the Al Bashayer players. Despite Seeb's resurgence in the second, third and fourth quarters, Al Bashayer remained a strong contender and managed to secure the lead until the end of the game.

The match began with Al Bashayer taking the lead through a basket by Mahmoud al Souli. Their defence resisted consecutive attacks from Seeb, and Al Bashayer continued to intercept balls and pressurise Seeb's court. They added four points, through Nuh al Mahrooqi and professional player Damon James, both making successful shots from under the basket. Al Bashayer maintained



their gameplay advantage, adding 21 points, while Seeb scored 11 points, ending the first quarter with Al Bashayer leading 27-11.

In the second quarter, Seeb improved both defensively and offensively, with Abdulredha al Battashi scoring two points with a shot from under the basket. Al Bashayer responded with two points from Adel al Battashi. Al Bashayer's Cameron scored a three-pointer, widening the gap to 32-13. Both teams continued their offensive attempts, with Seeb managing to add 9 points. Al Bashayer added 7 points, and the first half ended with Al Bashayer leading 39-22.

In the third quarter, Seeb changed their offensive and defensive strategies, gaining control and increasing pressure on

Al Bashayer's court to narrow the gap. Seeb scored 19 points, while Al Bashayer only managed to score 10 points. Nevertheless, Al Bashayer maintained their lead, ending the third quarter with a score of 48-41 in their favour.

In the fourth quarter, Seeb continued to improve their performance, reducing the gap by scoring 15 points, while Al Bashayer added 12 points. The match concluded with Al Bashayer winning 60-56 over Seeb.

The match was officiated by international referees Ahmed al Balushi as the first referee, Essam al Siyabi as the second referee, and Mazen al Hilali as the third referee. Maryam al Zadjali, Mahmoud al Ajmi, and Fatima al Harthy were present at the table.

New Zealand win third T20 to square series



New Zealand's Mitchell Santner (L) celebrates with James Neesham (C) after taking the wicket of Bangladesh's Afif Hossain (R) during the third Twenty20 match at Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui. — AFP

MOUNT MAUNGANUI, New Zealand: New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner took four wickets as they beat Bangladesh by 17 runs in a rain-affected third and final Twenty20 international on Sunday to draw the series 1-1.

After dismissing the tourists for 110 in Mount Maunganui, New Zealand's top-order collapsed to 49-5 before Jimmy Neesham and Santner recovered to reach 95-5 off 14.4 overs.

When heavy rain halted play, the Black Caps were comfortably ahead of the Duckworth-Lewis-Stern target, thanks largely to an unbeaten 28 from all-rounder Neesham. The result denied Bangladesh a first series victory on New Zealand soil in any format, having lost the preceding ODI series 2-1. "Our bowlers did the job up front keeping them to 110 and it's good to get across the line in what's been a pretty tough-fought series," Santner said.

"It got quite tight in the end today. Credit to Bangladesh, their bowlers have bowled extremely well. They put us under some real pressure again."

After asking Bangladesh to bat first on a lively Bay Oval pitch, Santner claimed 4-16 off his four overs, stifling an innings that was already struggling at 41-3 when he was introduced.

Seamers Tim Southee, Adam Milne and Ben Sears all took two wickets.

Milne (2-23) removed Bangladesh captain and top-scorer Najmul Hossain Shanto for 17 when he skied a full-pitched delivery to point.

Shanto rued the fact that he and four other Bangladesh batsmen reached double figures, but all failed to convert into a substantial score.

"The bowlers did a great job but the batsmen didn't get runs today," he said.

"In T20s the top of the order is very important. Our batsmen got starts, like 15 or 17, but they're not taking the game deep."

Four of New Zealand's top order were dismissed for one run and when Finn Allen followed after scoring 38, Neesham held the innings together as the storm clouds gathered, with solid support from Santner who was unbeaten on 18. Seam bowler Shoriful Islam took 2-17 off 3.4 overs. — AFP

TECS beat Vanderlande; Jotun, Earn Trust and Renaissance post wins

MUSCAT: TECS beat Vanderlande in the A Division League 2023-24 powered by Khimji Ramdas LLC at the Oman Cricket Academy Turf 2 on Friday.

TECS posted 227 courtesy P Ravindu's salient 62 along with Jaleel K's aggressive 45 to post a above-par total. Aiyappan B picked 4 wickets for Vanderlande.

In reply, Vanderlande kept losing wickets as Abdul Malik and Devansh Loya picked 2 wickets each in the powerplay. Jaleel K's fifer sealed the deal for TECS as they registered the third win for the league.

In the D Division League 2023-24 powered by Credit Oman LLC, Winners Jotun beat Landmark Group at the Amerat Municipality Grounds on Friday.

Landmark Group posted 177 courtesy half centuries from Nithin Kumar and Kugan KR. Anoop V picked 2 wickets for Winners Jotun.

In reply, Vineesh Raj's magnificent century sealed the victory for Winners Jotun chasing with 8 balls and 4 wickets remaining. Vineeth Nair picked 4 wickets for Landmark Group. In another D Division League match, Earn Trust beat OCT Seeb on Friday.

Mustansar Hussain's 91 and Khurram Chaudhary's 64 piled a 152-run partnership that helped Earn Trust post a mammoth total of 206. Issa al Balushi picked 2 wickets for OCT Seeb.

In reply, OCT Seeb lost wickets at regular intervals as Zaheer Abbas picked 4 wickets and Maanas Kapoor scalped two. OCT Seeb



(L-R) Asif Khan, Sufyan Mehmood and Hammad Mirza of Renaissance



Jaleel K and P Ravindu of TECS

could only manage 114 courtesy of Ahmed al Balushi's 28.

MAJEES CC THUMP VLCC

In the Premier Division League 2023-24 powered by Muscat Pharmacy LLC, Majees CC thumped VLCC by 6 wickets at the Oman Cricket Academy Turf 1 on Friday.

VLCC posted a 206 courtesy of Sahil Dias' 90 while Sajjad Khan and Sultan Ahmed managed

to notch 44 and 41 respectively. Zeeshan Maqsood and Aamir Kaleem picked 2 wickets each.

In reply, the left-handed batting pair of Zeeshan Maqsood and Aamir Kaleem stitched a 191-run partnership to whistle through the target set by VLCC.

Zeeshan scored a magnificent century ably supported by skipper Kaleem scoring 63. Sohail Ahmed picked 2 wickets for VLCC.

In another Premier Division

match on Saturday, Renaissance beat Zawawi Powertech at the Oman Cricket Academy Turf 1.

Renaissance posted a par-total of 208 courtesy Hammad Mirza's 40 along with Asif Khan scoring 39 and Mohd Adeeb scoring a quick 33. Saishiv Narayan picked 4 wickets while Sivaraj Dheenadhayalu picked 3 wickets to bundle Renaissance.

In reply, Kalaiaarasan Natarajan held the Powertech chase scoring 51 along with Prabhakaran Kannan scoring 35 but could not take them through the line. Skipper Sufyan Mehmood picked 3 scalps while Asif Khan and Syed Muzamil picked 2 wickets to seal the victory for Renaissance.

BRIEF SCORES

TECS 227-6 in 50 overs (P Ravindu 62 (77b); Aiyappan B 4-20) beat Vanderlande 84 all out in 21.1 overs (Abhishek Madan 20 (25b); Jaleel K 5-14) by 143 runs. Landmark Group 177-5 in 20 overs (Kugan KR 56 (33b); Anoop V 2-16) lost to Winners Jotun 178-6 in 18.4 overs (Vineesh Raj 110 (62b); Vineeth Nair 4-38) by 4 wickets. Earn Trust CT 206-6 in 20 overs (Mustansar Hussain 91 (52b); Issa al Balushi 2-19) beat OCT Seeb 114-8 in 20 overs (Ahmed al Balushi 28 (20b); Zaheer Abbas 4-18) by 92 runs. VLCC 206-7 in 50 overs (Sahil Dias 90* (120b); Zeeshan Maqsood 2-33) lost to Majees 210-4 in 40.4 overs (Zeeshan Maqsood 112 (124b), Aamir Kaleem 63 (106b); Sohail Ahmed 2-23) by 6 wickets. Renaissance 208 all out in 49.5 overs (Hammad Mirza 40 (67b); Saishiv Narayan 4-25) beat Zawawi Powertech 195 all out in 49.1 overs (Kalaiaarasan Natarajan 51 (63b); Sufyan Mehmood 3-37) by 13 runs.

Warner retires from one-day cricket ahead of Test farewell

SYDNEY: Dynamic Australian opener David Warner called time on Monday on one-day international cricket ahead of his farewell Test against Pakistan this week, but kept the door open to play the 2025 Champions Trophy if needed.

The 37-year-old will pad up in his 112th and final Test in his home city Sydney on Wednesday, having plundered 8,695 runs at an average of 44.58, with 26 centuries and 36 half-centuries.

At a press conference at the Sydney Cricket Ground, he also announced his retirement from ODIs, where he has been a fixture since his debut in 2009, helping the team win the World Cup in 2015 and 2023.

"I've got to give back to the family and also on the back of that I'm definitely retiring from one-day cricket as well," he said.

"That was something that I had said through the (2023) World Cup, get through that, and winning it in India, I think that's a massive achievement.

"So I'll make that decision today, to retire from those forms, which does allow me to go and play some other (Twenty20) leagues around the world and sort of get the one-day team moving forward a little bit.

"I know there's a Champions Trophy coming up," he added. "If I'm playing decent cricket in two years' time and I'm around and they need someone, I'm going to be available."

The Champions Trophy has not been played since 2017, but is set to be resurrected in 2025 in Pakistan. Traditionally 50-over cricket, reports have said there is a push underway to make it T20.

Warner leaves ODIs after 161 matches, smashing 6,932 runs at an average of 45.30, with 22 centuries. Among Australians, only Ricky Ponting with 30 has scored more one-day tons.

He will continue to be available in the T20 format, with the 2024 World Cup in the



Australia's David Warner celebrates after winning the 2023 ICC Cricket World Cup in November. — Reuters

Caribbean and United States a target. Warner's decision to depart one-dayers means Australia will need a new opener for their three-match series against the West Indies in February, which follows a two-Test series in Adelaide and Brisbane.

VITAL ROLE

Ahead of his ODI announcement, Cricket Australia chief Nick Hockley paid tribute to Warner's "amazing Test career".

"We are all extremely grateful for his immense contribution to this form of the game," he said in a statement. "David's wonderful attacking style not only played a vital role in many Australian victories, it also enthralled and entertained fans across the world and drew many to Test cricket."

A longer-than-life character, Warner was described by Australia coach Andrew McDonald over the weekend as "probably our greatest ever three-format player".

Reflecting on his Test career, Warner said it was a "fairytale ending" to hang up his gloves in Sydney. "I would have never imagined opening the batting for New South Wales or anyone to be honest when I first started but to be here, 112 Tests I think, I still pinch myself," he said. — AFP



Camels compete during a race from the previous season.

General camel races to begin in Barka today

WALEED AL JAHWARI
MUSCAT, JAN 1

The general camel race competitions will begin at Al Fulaij Race field in Barka on Tuesday and will continue for three days. The event is supported by the Royal Court Affairs represented by Royal Camel Corps (RCC) and organised by Oman Camel Racing Federation (OCRF). As many as 75 races will be held over three days and a number of camels will

qualify to the final race (HM cups), which will held in March to conclude camel racing season 2023-24. The winning camels will qualify to the HM Cup Festival, also Royal Camel Corps will buy some of wining camels with best records. The first day will witness 25 races dedicated to 'Hagayeg' category, two years old over a distance of 4 km, the top two winners will qualify to HM Cup Festival from the first 11 races. The RCC will

purchase a camel with the best record in the category. On the second day of competition, 16 races will be held for the 'Laqaya' category, three years old over a distance of 5 km, the top two winners will qualify to HM Cup Festival from the first 7 races. Also, RCC will purchase a camel with the best record from this category. In the afternoon, there will be two races with human riders for 2 km. The top 10 from both races will qualify for the

HM Cup Festival. The third day will witness 7 rounds for 'Al Ythaa' category, four years old for 6 km. The top two winners will qualify to HM Cup Festival from the first 4 races. The RCC will purchase a camel with the best record from this category. The competition will continue with three races for 'Al Thanaya' category, five years old over a distance of 8 km, the best 13 camels from top two races will qualify for HM Cup race.

The race will conclude with 'Al Hawl' category, above six years for 8 km. The best 21 camels from top three races will qualify for HM Cups race. The Royal Camel Corps announced some participating conditions, which is limited to purebred camels owned by Omani only and strictly prohibited to stimulate with blood or use stimulating substances and electric shocks. In all rounds, top ten winners will receive cash awards.

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Budget earmarks RO 11.65 billion towards expenditure; 25% for social protection

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, JAN 1

The Ministry of Finance unveiled the State Budget for 2024 at its headquarters on Monday. Based on an oil price of \$60 per barrel and a production rate of 1.031 million barrels per day, the public expenditure for fiscal 2024 is projected at RO 11.650 billion, while the total revenue is estimated to amount to RO 11.010 billion, with a total deficit of 640 million.

Public spending is expected to increase by 2.6 per cent in comparison to the previous year. Of the total expenditure, RO 8.573 billion (73 per cent) will be allocated towards current expenses. Fifty-two per cent of this figure has been allocated towards ministries and Government Units (totalling RO 4.453 billion), 36 per cent allocated towards Defence and Security (RO 3.070 billion) and 12 per cent towards servicing the public debt (RO 1.05 billion).



Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, addressing media on the State Budget

Furthermore, 19 per cent of the public expenditure (RO 2.177 billion) is earmarked towards Contributions and Other Expenses. Significantly, approximately 25 per cent will be allocated to the newly established Social Protection Programme with a budget of RO 560 million. A further 21% will go towards supporting the power sector (RO 460 million), 18% for debt repayment (RO 400 million), 11% for developmental projects



(RO 240 million), and 8% to support the water and wastewater services sector (RO 184 million). The balance amount will be allocated towards supporting and subsidising other sectors of the economy. The remaining 8 per cent of public expenditure (RO 900) will be allocated towards developmental expenses. These funds will be allocated

towards seven main sectors including education, health, youth and sports, housing and urban development, transport, agriculture, fisheries and water resources. The ministry estimates total revenue to increase by 9.5 per cent this year to RO 11.010 billion. The oil and natural gas industries are expected to contribute to 68 per cent of revenues this year.

The oil industry is expected to contribute to around 54 per cent of this figure (RO 5.914 billion), while the natural gas industry is estimated to contribute by 14 per cent (RO 1.575 billion) in 2024. On the other hand, non-hydrocarbon industries will contribute around 32 per cent of revenue (RO 3.520). The ministry report stated that the RO 640 million deficit will be

financed through domestic and external borrowings of RO 240 million, as well as withdrawals from reserves (RO 400 million). However, if the general state revenue exceeds approved expenditures, the State will not resort to additional borrowing or withdrawals from reserves to pay the expected deficit in the 2024 budget, the ministry added.

Three major funding initiatives to drive economic diversification

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, JAN 1

The 2024 State Budget introduces three major initiatives to support economic diversification in the Sultanate of Oman, Sultan bin Salim al Habsi, Minister of Finance, announced here on Monday, January 1, 2023. Listing the three initiatives, Al Habsi said the first relates to the establishment of a specialised investment fund with a capital of RO 2 billion as a collaborative arrangement between the ministry and Oman Investment Authority (OIA). “The launch of a specialised investment fund, the Oman Future Fund, with a capital of two billion Omani Rials, aims to finance or enter into partnerships with the private sector and investors

in viable investment projects in Oman’s development sectors,” shared the minister. “This is done by distributing the funding across these sectors and not focusing on a specific sector. Additionally, 10 per cent of the fund’s capital is allocated for bold investments and projects of small and medium-sized enterprises.” The second initiative centres on the establishment of a housing loan programme with a total value of RO 1.9 billion in collaboration with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, and Oman Housing Bank. The programme will aim to expedite the disbursement of subsidised housing loans for citizens on the waiting lists of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning and Oman Housing Bank — an initiative expected to

provide over 60,000 loans. Significantly, the programme will result in an increase in real estate activity, enhance the flow of cash into the national economy, and support the development of local industries. The third initiative involves increasing the capital of the Development Bank (previously known as the Oman Development Bank) to RO 500 million. “The capital of the Development Bank has been raised to five hundred million Omani Rials, and the maximum lending limit at the Development Bank has been increased from one million to five million Omani Rials. The scope has been extended beyond this limit for development projects with added value to the local economy in Oman’s governorates,” Al Habsi added.



Finance Ministry officials presenting the 2024 State Budget to local media on Monday

Private investment sought for 500 acres of agricultural land in Al Amerat

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, JAN 1

The National Employment Programme (Tashgheel), in cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning, is offering around 500 acres of government-owned agricultural land for private sector investment at Al Nahda in the Wilayat of Al Amerat in Muscat Governorate. Also supporting the initiative are the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR), Nama Water Services and the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority. It envisions the use of treated water and modern agricultural practices in unlocking opportunities for agricultural investment in line with the vision of the Tashgheel programme. Through collaboration with the private sector, Tashgheel seeks to secure investment in projects that will boost the production of basic commodities suitable for cultivation in Oman. This initiative will not only enhance agricultural self-sufficiency,



but also strengthen food security in line with Oman’s Vision 2040 goals. Crucially, the initiative will open the way to the large-scale utilisation of triple-treated effluent water from Al Amerat STP for crop cultivation, thereby supplanting imports and boosting self-sufficiency. Investors are encouraged to use innovative cultivation methods to grow crops and farm produce, and create entrepreneurial and job opportunities in the process. Importantly, the project will create a new agro zone in Al Amerat with the potential to attract investments in spinoff activities, including agri-tourism. In the initial phase of its development, interested private sector players will be provided with an overview

of Tashgheel’s vision for the optimal development of the land, its design and management, the potential for its marketing and operation, and the use of treated effluent. In designing its development, investors will also be encouraged to take into account is agricultural and agri-tourism potential. Investors will also be entitled to a set of incentives, including power and water supply up to the boundaries of the land, exemption from usufruct fees for up to 5 years (with a further extension of the usufruct period depending on type of targeted crops), free treated water for up to 5 years, funding support from the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority, and also training support.



Pledges comprehensive infrastructure upgrades in the Wilayat of Muttrah

KR Eshraqa foundation signs MoU with MoE and MoH

MUSCAT: In a significant step towards bolstering its commitment to community development, the Khimji Ramdas (KR) Eshraqa Foundation officially signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Health (MoH).

The ceremony, held under the auspices of Al Munther bin Ahmed al Marhoon, the Wali of Muttrah, marked a milestone in the KR Eshraqa Foundation's ongoing efforts to enhance education and healthcare infrastructure in the Sultanate of Oman.

Under the MoU inked with Dr Ali bin Humaid al Jahwari, the Directorate-General of Education, Muscat Governorate, the KR Eshraqa Foundation is set to fortify the infrastructure of three schools: Al Walja School for Basic Education, Darsait School for Basic Education, and Al Amaal School for Basic Education.

The Foundation's support will encompass the installation of CCTVs, provision of sunshades, and the implementation of a state-of-the-art Public Address system, aimed at creating safer and more conducive learning environments for students.

Simultaneously, through a separate MoU signed with Dr Thamra bint Said al Ghafriyah, Director-General of Health Services of Muscat Governorate, the KR Eshraqa Foundation is poised to elevate the quality of medical services at Hai Al Mina Health Centre in the Wilayat of Muttrah.

The Foundation's contribution will include the donation of advanced dental medical equipment such as a Dental microscope, Obturation System, Broken

Instrument Removal Kit, ProUltra Piezo Ultrasonic, Endo Motor, and Minis Apex Root locator, ensuring enhanced healthcare facilities for the local community.

Speaking on the sidelines of the signing ceremony, Nailesh Khimji, Director, Khimji Ramdas stated: "Through our partnerships with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health, the KR Eshraqa Foundation continues its mission to be a catalyst for positive change in communities.

We believe that investing in education and healthcare infrastructure is fundamental to the long-term well-being and prosperity of society. These initiatives align with our goal of creating sustainable impact, and nurturing a better future for Oman, under Oman Vision 2040."

Dr Ali bin Humaid al Jahwari, Directorate-General of Education, Muscat Governorate mentioned: "Our collaboration with the KR Eshraqa Foundation marks a significant leap forward in our efforts to enhance educational facilities.

The Foundation's commitment to upgrading the infrastructure of three schools reflects a shared vision of creating a conducive learning environment for students. We look forward to a fruitful partnership that will positively impact the Sultanate of Oman's educational landscape."

Dr Thamra bint Said al Ghafriyah, Director-General of Health Services of Muscat Governorate averred: "The KR Eshraqa Foundation's support to improve the healthcare services at Hai Al Mina Health Centre is commendable.

All-new Suzuki Jimny 5-door: A landmark in off-road adventure

MUSCAT: Moosa Abdul Rahman Hassan & Company (MARHCO), the exclusive distributor of Suzuki vehicles in Oman, introduced the much-anticipated Suzuki Jimny 5-door.

The grand unveiling witnessed the gathering of Jimny enthusiasts, media representatives, and the esteemed management of Moosa Abdul Rahman, marking a new era in off-road adventure.

INNOVATING OFF-ROAD EXCELLENCE:

Celebrating over 50 years of innovation, Suzuki has consistently pushed the boundaries in the automotive industry.

The introduction of the Suzuki Jimny 5-door marks a significant milestone, elevating the Jimny's legacy and offering unparalleled versatility to off-road enthusiasts.

PRACTICAL AND FUNCTIONAL DESIGN:

The exterior inherits the practical and functional design elements of the Jimny, boasting a strong square body that signifies off-road prowess.

Notable features include upright A-pillars, a flat clamshell bonnet for enhanced visibility, and distinctive chrome accents on the front grille.

The 15-inch dark-metallic alloy wheels and signature round headlamps further emphasise its robust exterior styling.

INTERIOR SOPHISTICATION:

Inside, the Jimny 5-door strikes



The introduction of the Suzuki Jimny 5-door marks a significant milestone, elevating the Jimny's legacy and offering unparalleled versatility to off-road enthusiasts.

a balance between aesthetics and functionality with a handsome black interior. Horizontal lines on the instrument panel and vertical lines in the meter cluster and center console panels aid the driver in rough and mountainous terrain. The focus on minimal distraction allows the driver to concentrate on maneuvering the vehicle.

ENHANCED USABILITY:

Updates to the rear seat, including thicker cushions for improved seating posture, ensure comfort for two adults.

The extended wheelbase has created a more spacious luggage area, offering 211L of capacity.

Practical features such as a rear seat lamp and conveniently located power window switches

enhance usability.

SAFETY FEATURES:

Equipped with a rearview camera and rear parking sensors, the Jimny 5-door prioritises safety in its design.

OFF-ROAD PERFORMANCE:

Despite a 340 mm longer wheelbase than its 3-door counterpart, the Jimny 5-door maintains the essential elements for serious off-roading.

A sturdy ladder frame structure, exceptional approach, ramp breakover, and departure angles, rigid axle suspension, and a part-time 4WD system ensure superior performance on diverse terrains.

CEO'S PERSPECTIVE:

Mr. Said Darwish Al-Balushi, the CEO of Moosa Abdul Rahman Hassan & Company, remarked on the launch, "With the introduction of the Suzuki Jimny 5-door in Oman, we are not merely presenting a vehicle; we are unveiling a new chapter in off-road adventure.

The 5-door version takes the Jimny's legacy further, offering enhanced access and comfort without sacrificing its off-road prowess."The Suzuki Jimny 5-door is poised to redefine off-road versatility, combining over 50 years of innovation with practicality, safety, and rugged performance in a thrilling package.

As Oman welcomes this new addition to the Suzuki family, it marks a milestone in the country's automotive landscape.

Indian SUV sales soar, small car demand slips in Dec

BENGALURU: Sales of sports utility vehicles (SUVs) surged in December, while sales of smaller cars declined despite substantial discounts, according to data from Indian automakers released on Monday.

While entry-level vehicles continue to pose challenges for automobile makers, they have nonetheless experienced an upswing in sales of premium vehicles, catering to a more affluent demographic that remains largely unaffected by inflation.

Maruti Suzuki and Mahindra & Mahindra reported domestic SUV sales growth of 24% and



Cars are seen parked at Maruti Suzuki's plant at Manesar

39%, respectively.

The SUV segment for Indian carmakers has thrived due to strong demand throughout the past year. Mahindra, known for

SUV models such as the Thar, Scorpio, and XUV, achieved multiple months of record sales in this category in 2023, with monthly sales growth ranging

from 20% to 57% in the current fiscal year.

SUVs constituted 36% of Maruti's domestic passenger vehicle (PV) sales so far this fiscal year, compared to 22% in the previous fiscal year, while accounting for almost all of Mahindra's PV sales.

During the year-end period, when automakers typically offer larger discounts, Maruti increased discounts on its lower-priced models by 40% to 45%.

However, sales of its smaller cars like the Alto and Baleno saw a decline of 29%, partially attributed to Maruti's moderation of wholesales. — Reuters

Chery to invest 100+ billion Yuan over next five years

MUSCAT: In the current dynamic landscape of the automotive industry, characterised by both opportunities and challenges, Chery has navigated through 26 years, with "independent innovation" and "technological ascendancy" becoming the hallmarks of the company.

In the face of an increasingly competitive environment, Chery Group achieved remarkable results in November, with car sales reaching 212,076 units, representing a year-on-year growth of 111%.

This marks the second consecutive month of surpassing the 200,000 unit milestone and establishes a new historical high



Chery to invest 100+ billion Yuan over next five years

for monthly sales. Established in 1997, Chery has been a pioneer in exporting automobiles since 2001, making it one of China's earliest automotive enterprises to

enter the global market. Through incomplete statistics, Chery has, to date, established eight major R&D centres globally, including locations in Wuhu, Shanghai,

North America, South America, Europe, and Central Asia.

In China, Chery has set up 14 production bases in cities such as Wuhu, Dalian, and Hefei.

Additionally, the company has 16 production bases in overseas countries such as Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay, along with over 1,500 overseas dealers and service outlets.

Chery's products are distributed to over 80 countries and regions, with a global user base exceeding 12.7 million.

Over the years, Chery has built a formidable R&D team, attracting top talent from around the world.

The team consists of nearly 20,000 professional R&D

personnel, including a R&D team relating to powertrains of close to 3,000 individuals, featuring over 1,200 masters, doctors, and experts. Chery collaborates with more than 60 renowned domestic and international institutions.

As of now, Chery has accumulated over 26,000 patent applications, with over 8,000 patents related to powertrains.

Furthermore, Chery has established or is in the process of establishing over 140 technology labs and has planned over 160, forming a global R&D system that integrates "a strong brand, a large central platform, and refined backgrounds". Looking ahead, Chery aims to invest over

100 billion Yuan in R&D in the next five years, expanding its R&D personnel to over 25,000 individuals, with more than 50% talents in software development.

The company plans to have over 300 technology labs, aiming to achieve a world-leading technological framework.

Currently, Chery has achieved comprehensive advancements in five major technological areas, including platform architecture, chips, efficient PHEV engines, hydrogen energy, electric propulsion, batteries, intelligent interaction, autonomous driving, and smart cloud platforms, totalling 19 core technological upgrades.



In brief

■ LONDON



SAUDI SOVEREIGN WEALTH FUND SPLASHES CASH IN 2023

Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund accounted for about a quarter of the almost \$124 billion spent by sovereign wealth funds worldwide last year, a report published on Jan. 1 showed.

PIF's whopping \$31.5 billion spend in 2023 compared with \$123.8 billion for all sovereign wealth funds, based on a preliminary annual report from industry specialist Global SWF, which tracks the world's sovereign investment funds.

The strong rally last year in global stocks helped swell the assets managed by the sovereign wealth funds worldwide to a record \$11.2 trillion.

— Reuters

■ PARIS



HSBC FRANCE RETAIL BANK SOLD TO US FUND CERBERUS

After more than two years HSBC transferred on Monday for an undisclosed amount its retail banking network in France to My Money Group, controlled by US private equity fund Cerberus. The operation will see HSBC France's nearly 250 retail branches with their 800,000 clients and 3,500 staff become CCF, a brand that HSBC shelved when it began operations in France some two decades ago.

The move is part of London-headquartered HSBC's efforts to simplify and refocus operations on its major region of Asia.

HSBC said the transfer for a nominal one euro would see it incur a hefty charge. — AFP

■ BEIJING



CHINA'S DECEMBER FACTORY CONTRACTION DEEPENS

China's manufacturing activity contracted for the third consecutive month in December, showing a more significant decline than anticipated. This clouds the outlook for the country's economic recovery, prompting discussions about the need for additional stimulus measures in the new year.

China's central bank stated on Thursday that it would intensify policy adjustments to support the economy and promote a rebound in prices amid signs of rising deflationary pressures.

Earlier this month, leaders at a key meeting to chart the economic course for 2024 pledged to take more steps to support the recovery next year.

— Reuters

KEY ROLE FOR OMAN'S NON-BANKING FINANCIAL SECTOR IN GREEN FINANCE

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT, JAN 1

A national road-map for unlocking new sources of sustainable funding for the financing of green projects in the Sultanate of Oman envisions a key role for the non-banking financial sector, according to a top official of the Capital Market Authority (CMA).

Abdullah bin Salim al Salmi, Executive President, said CMA Board of Directors has approved a strategy that will see non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) gearing up to support the green finance requirements of the Omani economy.

Writing in 'Wealth', the newsletter of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals, Al Salmi said the road-map – planned for implementation in three phases – also envisages initiatives to strengthen regulatory frameworks around green finance, support capacity-building within the Authority, enhance disclosure guidelines, improve transparency, and champion a pivot to green and sustainable financial instruments.

Over the last decade and a half, global sustainable and green finance has grown exponentially, spurred by the growth of financial instruments, such as "green bonds, green loans, green investment funds, green insurance, and green Sukuk," said Al Salmi.

Complementing this portfolio are social bonds, sustainable Sukuk and other such instruments, he noted. Sustainable and green finance, he pointed out, helps achieve "economic development by eliminating pollution and emissions of greenhouse gases, decreasing waste to the minimum level, and improving the efficiency of using natural resources".

The national road-map is designed to spur the achievement of three key goals: Encourage NBFCs to roll out innovative financing products for green projects; Support the funding of projects that will contribute to Oman's Net-Zero targets; and Embed ESG principles in the implementation of green projects.

"All this entails the need for providing regulatory frameworks and an enabling environment to attract green and sustainable



Oman sees the non-banking financial sector playing an important role in meeting the country's sustainable and green finance requirements – Picture credit: Reuters

investment in the non-banking sector to guarantee that this type of fund is governed, managed, and improved in accordance with the best international practices," said Al Salmi.

To this end, the CMA is drafting a regulatory framework to support the issuance of green finance in the form of traditional or innovative bonds, as well as Sukuk.

The regulations will also come

with guidelines for ESG disclosure, registration of suitably qualified auditors, and other prerequisites necessary to align these laws with international benchmarks for green and sustainable finance, he added.

Global demand for Omani fish on the rise, export increased



The total value of fish resources by the end of November 2023 amounted to about RO 387m and 453,000 Omani riyals

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

Over 648.148 tons of fish were landed by artisanal fishing also known as traditional fishing technique by the end of November 2023, an increase from 591,421 tons by the end of November 2022, or 9.6 per cent, according to the statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

The total value of fish resources by the end of November 2023 amounted to about RO 387m and 453,000 Omani riyals, and the amount landed in commercial fishing by the same period amounted to 46,287 tons, while the amount landed in coastal fishing reached 5,063 tons, the report further suggested.

"Oman's fish and fish products are of great demand across the world and while the countries like Chile, Peru, Morocco and Mauritania reported a decline in the total catch, Oman sustained the catch and the value increased benefiting the revenue generated through the advantage," says

648,148 tons of fish caught in traditional fishing

Mohammed Ameen, Managing Director of Sea pride LLC, the leading Omani fish and fish products exporter to nearly 50 countries across the world.

"Similarly, the Omani fishmeal and fish oil occupy a very prominent role in the global fisheries market and there is a steady demand for the same which makes the export of these products a flourishing one," adds Mohammed

Oman origin fish products including fresh chilled fish, frozen fish, value added fish products, fish meal and fish oil are exported to 40 countries including Europe, US, and Far East, besides Middle East on a regular basis, and is a major contributor to Oman's national economy.

The report elaborates that Al Wusta Governorate, with a

total quantity of 249,666 tons topped the list of governorates with highest catch followed by Al Sharqiyah South Governorate with 197,926 tons, Dhofar with 70,364 tons, and Al Batinah North and Al Batinah South with 67,110 tons.

The amount of fish landed by artisanal fishing in Musandam Governorate reached 35,214 tons by the end of November 2023, and 27,869 tons in Muscat Governorate.

The small pelagic fish has been ranked the largest quantity of fish landed by artisanal fishing, as the quantity reached about 368,613 tons by the end of the same period while the large pelagic fish landed by artisanal fishing reached 151,42 tons, and the amount of demersal fish reached 103,000 tons, according to the report.

The total quantity of crustaceans landed by artisanal fishing amounted to 5,786 tons while crustaceans and mollusks landed by artisanal fishing stood at 15,607 tons were landed, and the quantity of other fish stood at 4,099 tons, the report suggested.

Italian firm to deploy new mining farm in Oman's Green Data City

MUSCAT: The Oman-based company Green Data City LLC and Italy's Alps Blockchain SpA, through its subsidiary Alps Middle East SPC, have entered into an agreement to develop a new blockchain data centre in the Sultanate of Oman.

The mining farm will be installed in the Green Data City's hub with a first phase of 6.5MW.

Alps Blockchain will start to deploy the containerised units in January 2024, and use the latest S21 machines released by Bitmain.

Alps Blockchain has long been in partnership with Bitmain, the largest manufacturer of mining equipment in the global market.

The new S21 mining ASIC reaches an efficiency rating of 16 to 17 joules per terahash (J/TH), an unprecedented performance in the market.

This performance reduces the energy needed to mine and to secure the bitcoin network.

The aspect of energy efficiency is particularly important for Green Data City, located in the South of Oman where the summer temperature stays below 29 degrees, naturally decreasing the cooling requirements compared to the rest of the region.

In addition, the presence of cold deep ocean water will bring natural cooling in the next phases of the development and further reduce the energy needed to operate the facility to a minimum.

In addition to the geographical advantages of the location, the partners have chosen Oman because of the long-term security provided by the Green Data City mining license, the stability of the Omani government's energy policies, and the large renewable energy development plans in the



(Left to Right): Francesco Buffa, CEO, Alps Blockchain; Francesca Failoni, CFO, Alps Blockchain; and Olivier Ohnheiser, CEO, Green Data City.

country.

Green Data City LLC operates the first license for sustainable crypto-mining in Oman since 2022. International mining companies can register and operate in Green Data City with long term agreements.

The first phase of development consists of 200MW of mining capacity, the second phase will reach 400MW hyperscale data centre capacity with natural cooling, renewable energies and downstream applications.

Real estate and hospitality investments will join the development of the new eco-system, and create the next generation data & blockchain eco-system in the region.

Alps Blockchain SPA is an European company specialised in the design and management of blockchain data centres.

With facilities located both in Italy and overseas, the company aims to build a bridge between the world of new technologies and the energy system, focusing on the development of sustainable mining solutions.

Founded in 2018, it has started to introduce an innovative business solution for the Italian hydroelectric energy sector, through the integration of mining farms within power plants.

Don't make 2024 just like any other year resolution

It's the 2nd of January 2024 - over 87 per cent of people I met over the years have made resolutions for desires, wishes, aims and changes for the better. Few achieved, yet many did not. This year too is no different, and the same can happen again in the next coming years.

My aim with this weekly column starting this week is to share insights and practical steps I followed through-out the 30+ years of experience building personal and professional wealth. But first, let me share a reality that many encounter as part of the New Year resolutions fiasco.

So as the clock struck midnight on 2024, you were filled with excitements, determination and energy about the New Year



TARIQ AL BARWANI

The author is an award-winning technology expert & renowned motivational speaker

THIS SIMPLE APPROACH THAT I HAVE FOLLOWED HAS HELPED ME ACHIEVE PROFOUND RESULTS THAT I LIVE AND CONTINUE TO UNDERTAKE TILL DATE

solutions that you have set for yourself. Going to gym and exercise regularly to stay fit, eating quality and avoiding fast food to be healthy, reading books periodically to personally and professionally develop yourself, get married and have family, buy a house, and yes the list goes on, from wishes and desires to achieve.

Items on your list may be long or some of them may even not apply to you, yet I am sure the idea is crystal clear – you have a lot of wishes that you aim to achieve, and the night of the New Year's Eve is just the perfect day to plan. Wrong? This is why many people do not achieve their goals, because dependence is on this specific evening. Let me elaborate how will the year will look like

to many wishers. In January is where motivation for achieving your wishes start. You sign up for an annual gym membership, you shop for healthy food, you buy books on personal and professional development, and you also try to action some of the long-list of wishes you have set for the year.

Reality sets in on February, or even on March for some, where weeks passes by to see you gradually miss gym sessions that you signed-up for, junk-food will find its way to your stomach, and the pile of books you bought will remain with unread chapters. Does this ring a bell to you?

Last year and the year before may not be any different to this and the next year. Trust me, I have been there and done that,

on a personal level, but luckily, not on a scale of missing a full year-on due to not depending on New Year's eve, yet on a regular personal and professional assessment I undertake every day, week or even every month, at worst case scenario.

This, of course, has helped me get back on track and achieve almost every goal I had planned on a personal and professional level over the years. That's simply because plans were not based on new-year's eve.

Resolutions for becoming better, achieving results or attaining desired wishes are not magical but rather an ongoing commitment that one needs to strictly abide into. Looking back, I can confidentially attest that failure wasn't in setting goals yet

was mostly on underestimating what it really takes to achieve them, starting from clearly having a realistic vision, followed by a concrete plan, put on a feasible time-line for action, along with constant follow-ups that are consistently celebrated when achieved successfully.

This simple approach that I have followed has help me achieve profound results that I live and continue to undertake till date.

How can one create a realistic yet practical vision is what I will share next week as part of my weekly insights on how to live successfully and build personal and professional wealth. Stay tuned to learn what it takes to achieve and transform yourself successfully in 2024.

The biggest threats to global economic stability

The International Economic Association (IEA) recently concluded its 20th World Congress in Medellín, Colombia. This triennial event brings together scholars from all over the world to share and discuss the latest developments in economic thinking. This year's edition underscored the urgency of re-evaluating some of the field's core assumptions. The rapidly escalating debt crisis in the Global South, while not a direct focus of the conference, cast a shadow over it.

The IEA was founded in 1950, with Joseph Schumpeter chosen to be its first president. Since then, the organisation has been led by some of the world's most renowned economists, including Paul Samuelson, János Kornai, Kenneth J. Arrow, Amartya Sen and Joseph E. Stiglitz. With the world economy increasingly strained by supply-chain disruptions related to the war in Ukraine, the lingering consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the cloud of uncertainty hanging over the fighting between Israel and Hamas, this year's Congress has thrown these daunting challenges into sharp relief.

As the global economy undergoes a fundamental transformation, some of the deeply held assumptions economists have relied on to model it must evolve, too. Unsurprisingly, many of the presentations during this year's Congress focused on the impact of digital technologies and social media on labour, wages and inequality. Others focused on the changing nature of globalisation, the shift from a unipolar to a multipolar economic order and the erosion of democratic institutions amid the rise of populist nationalism.

Danny Quah's lecture underscored the speed with which the global economy is changing. Building on earlier studies by Jean-Marie Grether and Nicole A. Mathys, as well as his own previous research, Quah illustrated the world economy's shifting centre of gravity, which he defines as the "average location of economic activity across geographies". In 1980, he showed, this centre was located in the middle of the Atlantic



KAUSHIK BASU

The author is a former chief economist of the World Bank and chief economic adviser to the Government of India, is Professor of Economics at Cornell University and a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution



Frozen planet Earth climate change concept

Ocean, reflecting the dominance of North America and Western Europe during this period.

As East Asian economies took off, the global centre of economic gravity began to shift eastward. Quah estimates that by 2008, it had moved close to Izmir, Turkey, and kept moving east, driven by the Indian and Chinese economies' rapid growth. He projects that by 2050, the world's economic centre will settle between India and China, unlocking opportunities but also stoking geopolitical tensions and giving rise to new threats.

Rising authoritarianism, in particular, remains a major driver of global economic uncertainty. The growing appeal of populist movements, Sergei Guriev argued (based on some of his earlier writings with Elias Papaioannou), could pose an "existential threat" to democratic governance, civil liberties and the liberal world order.

To be sure, the populist surge is partly an understandable response to rising within-country inequality and reduced social mobility, as Adam Szeidl pointed out in his Congress presentation.

Disillusioned Western voters' tendency to favour right-wing leaders is puzzling, however, given that these politicians' favoured policies will likely exacerbate the problems they purport to address.

A financial crisis could provide far-right authoritarians with the momentum they need to dominate Western politics.

Despite the grim predictions of a prolonged economic downturn, the global economy successfully dodged a recession in 2023, buoyed by unexpectedly robust GDP and job growth in the United States. While this has led some economists to adopt a cautiously optimistic outlook for 2024, I believe that such complacency is misguided.

The new optimism can be attributed to analysts' tendency to focus on rich countries when assessing the state of the global economy. A more granular analysis yields a bleaker picture of the world's economic landscape. Unlike the Great Recession of 2008-09, which was triggered by the collapse of the US housing market, the biggest threat to global economic

stability today comes from the developing world.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, virtually every country in the world was forced to increase public spending. But while developed and middle-income countries had the resources to purchase vaccines, drugs and equipment, low- and lower-middle-income economies borrowed massively to cope with the pandemic and subsequent food and energy crises. That left dozens of countries in debt distress or at high risk of it, underscoring the need to look specifically at the developing world.

According to the World Bank's latest International Debt Report, the world's poorest countries have been hardest hit by the sovereign-debt crisis. Their external debt service, which reached an all-time high of \$88.9 billion in 2022, is projected to surge by 40 per cent in 2023-24. Ghana and Zambia have already defaulted, Ethiopia will likely default by 2024, and domestic debt levels in countries like Argentina and Pakistan are alarmingly high. Not enough

is being written about this, but urgent international intervention is necessary to prevent the situation from escalating. While the current crisis may not have the immediate global impact of the 2008 collapse of the US subprime mortgage market, its potential long-term effects could be far-reaching. Notably, it could exacerbate the migration crisis, further fuelling the surge of right-wing populism across the developed world.

While the IEA's five-day Congress in Medellín felt like a breath of fresh air, tackling the developing world's debt crisis requires more than cutting-edge research. The international community, especially multilateral institutions like the World Bank, must act decisively before the situation spirals out of control.

Kaushik Basu, a former chief economist of the World Bank and chief economic adviser to the government of India, is professor of Economics at Cornell University and a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

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UAE and GCC experienced Indian graduate in sales and marketing division seeks suitable placement. Holding UAE driving licence knowledge in accounting. Worked with pharmaceutical, healthcare, food, cosmetics and equipment companies. Contact: 93865254.

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M.COM graduate with Oman driving licence, residing in Muscat with 1 year and 4 months work experience as Media Finance Executive in India, seeking for Accounts Assistant or other related eligible jobs. Contact: 71755901, E-mail: krishnanmahesh02@gmail.com

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NAME CHANGE

We, SHISHIR KUMAR SINGH (name of father as per the passport, holder of Indian Passport No. N8149552) and SHAILJA SINGH (name of mother as per the passport, holder of Indian Passport No. S0553835) having permanent address in Vill. Amgilia Post Sukhipur, Ahraula, Azamgarh, UP, India Presently residing at the following address Wadi Kabir, Muscat PO Box 54, PC 100 Sultanate of Oman, hereby solemnly affirm and declare to change the name of our Child/ Master **SHASHWAT** (name as per the passport) holder of Indian Passport No. T3959100 date of issue 06/05/2019 issued at Muscat. The name of our child will be henceforth known as **SHASHWAT SINGH** (new name) for all purposes.

Any objection towards the change of name of our minor child may please be communicated to Embassy of India, Muscat, Diplomatic Quarters, Al Khuwair, PO Box No. 1727, Postal Code 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman.



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MEXICO
A woman holds a sparkler during the New Year 2024 celebration in Mexico City .— AFP



LONDON
Fireworks explode around the London Eye and The Elizabeth Tower, commonly known by the name of the clock's bell, "Big Ben", just after midnight on January 1, 2024. — AFP



BURJ AL ARAB
Fireworks light up the sky by the landmark Burj Al Arab luxury hotel tower in Dubai at midnight on new year's eve. — AFP

art & life

TUESDAY | JANUARY 2, 2024 | JUMADA AL THANIA 19, 1445 AH | OMAN OBSERVER | www.omanobserver.om | features@omanobserver.om

A thrilling 5-day expedition in Oman's untamed wilderness

We traversed a precarious trail, fashioned by our friends using tree branches and flat rocks along the cliff...P20



Thousands gather in Times Square for New Year ball drop

AFTER STANDING in New York City's Times Square for more than a dozen hours, thousands of revellers cheered in the New Year on Sunday night with the annual ceremony of a descending crystal-clad ball.

Many had arrived early in the morning for a spot in one of the barricaded pens set up by the New York Police Department, ahead of musical performances by Megan Thee Stallion and LL Cool J before the final countdown to midnight.

"This is my first time to cel-



ebtrate the New Year in Times Square," said Nadja Sjostrom, 44, who had travelled from Stockholm, Sweden, a few days earlier for the occasion and had been standing amid the giant illuminated billboards of Times Square since about 8 am.

It was a shorter commute for Markus Washington, a

49-year-old resident of Brooklyn, but also his first time at the Times Square celebration.

"It's a very good feeling," he said. "Awesome. Cold, but awesome."

Antonio Ruz, 51, had booked a flight from Granada, Spain, in order to make a lifelong dream come true, joining the

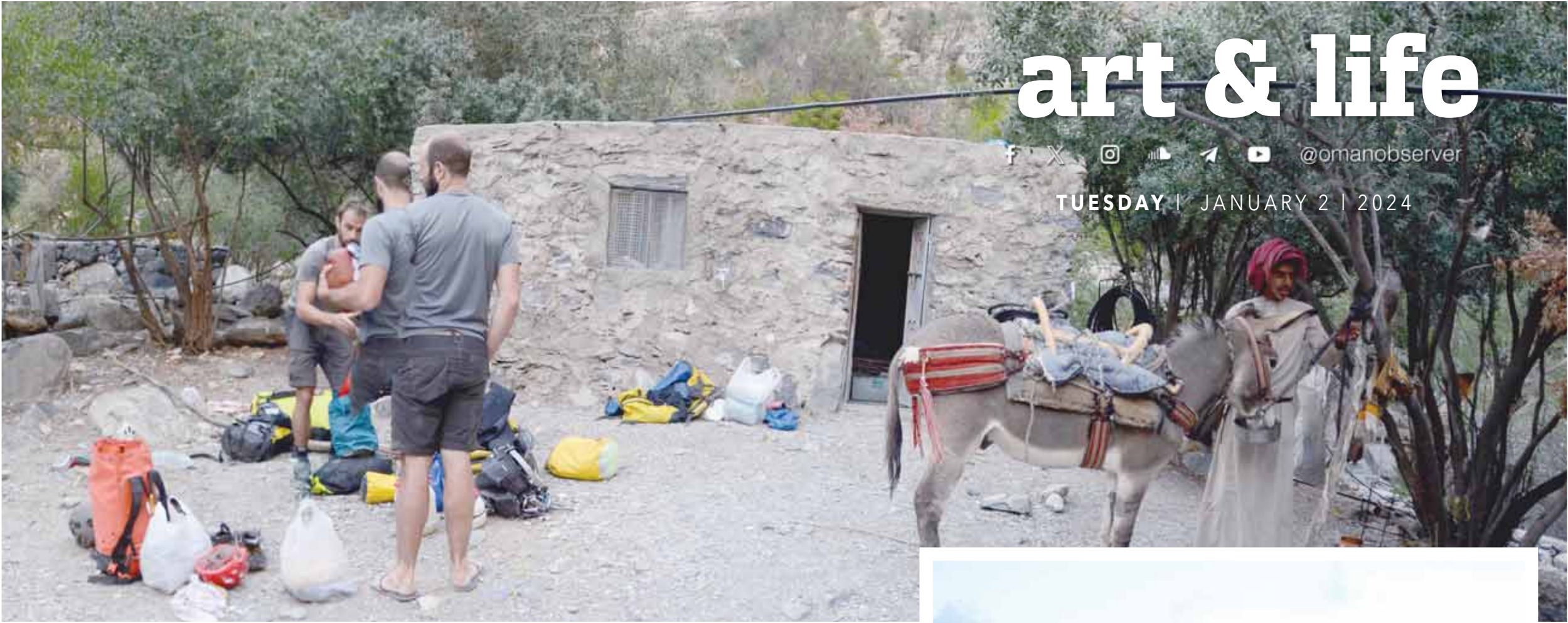


crowds to get into the barricaded area at about 8.15 am.

"Since I was a kid, I saw on TV this is spectacular show, so I had to live it," he said. He called it a "once in a lifetime" moment, emphasising that he did not plan to return. "I love New York, but 15 hours is too long to wait for a moment." —

REUTERS

And in fifth was Sony rom-com "Anyone But You," at \$9 million (\$11.5 million). Sydney Sweeney and Glen Powell star in the tale, oh-so-loosely based on Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing," that takes the two from instant connection to crossed signals to the scheming of friends to a lot of splashing in Sydney Harbour before ultimately ... but nay, the rest is silence. — **AFP**



A thrilling 5-day expedition in Oman's untamed wilderness

BY KHALED ABDUL MALAK

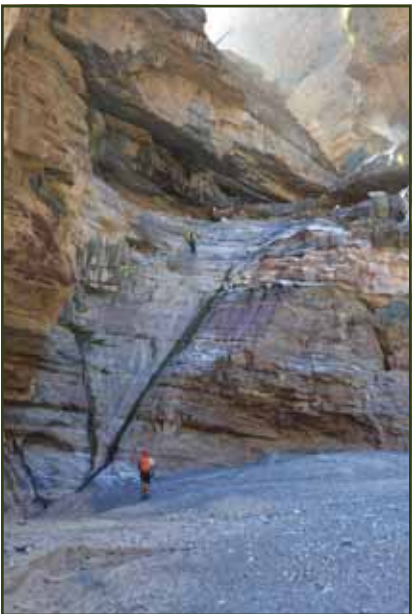
Having completed my solo exploration of both ends of Wadi Taysaa, the time had come to orchestrate a comprehensive crossing of the canyon. In February of 2023, my French companions, a group of seasoned canyons, travelled specifically for this ambitious project.

Prior to their arrival, I had enlisted the assistance of my friend Sultan from Jamma to help organise our expedition. The French team landed on the February 4 and headed directly from the airport to the campsite near Jamma. I joined them the next day, marking the commencement of our five-day exploration journey.

The primary objective was to traverse the entire basin of Wadi Taysaa. Arriving at the canyons' campsite at 7am, we packed up their tents and proceeded to Jamma, where Sultan awaited us with his younger brother and two donkeys.

Our team, numbering nine people, including Sultan and his brother, lugged approximately 250kg of equipment, encompassing personal gear, provisions, and climbing essentials such as ropes, drills, and anchors. Our plan was to pause at the halfway point leading to the "green spot," also known as Zhayrat, upstream at the canyon's terminus.

Embarking on our journey through the canyon bed, we ascended a steep donkey trail on the left bank after about 45 minutes, taking us several hundred meters above the canyon. The panorama from this vantage point was breathtaking, surrounded by massive mountains and deep canyons. We made good progress, reaching our

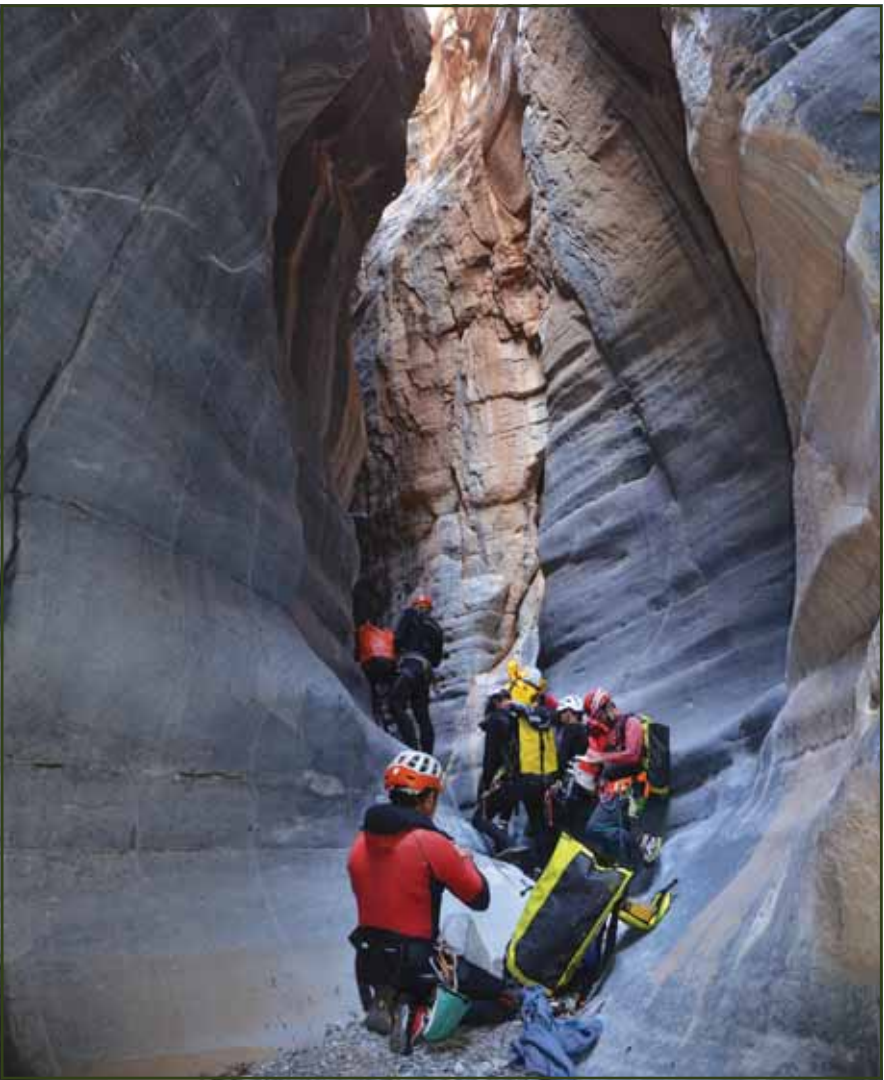


camping spot just before sunset after a seven-hour hike.

Sultan had constructed a room at this location, which he used during his goat-grazing expeditions in the mountains. After setting up our tents, we enjoyed dinner and retired early, anticipating the exploration of one of Wadi Taysaa's tributary canyons the following day.

Rising before sunrise, we packed our tents, had breakfast, and commenced our first day of exploration. By 12:30 pm, we reached the start of the tributary wadi, intending to cross it to reach Wadi Taysaa and proceed upstream to Zhayrat, where Sultan would meet us with our camping gear.

The crossing of the tributary canyon consumed four hours, involving the installation of numerous anchors to facilitate abseiling down several drops. We finally reached Sultan at "the green spot" around 6 pm, where he welcomed us with Qahwa, dates, and Omani bread cooked over a campfire. The evening chill prompted us to gather around the fire while relishing our dinner.



The subsequent day was dedicated to further upstream exploration, culminating in reaching the base of the colossal cliff near Aaqabat Al Mashbak. We traversed a precarious trail, fashioned by our friends using tree branches and flat rocks along the cliff. Returning to our camp in the afternoon, we prepared for the longest day ahead, planning to explore a second tribu-

tary and part of Wadi Taysaa before returning to our initial campsite.

An early start was imperative, and we estimated the entire day would be required to reach our destination. Sultan and his brother led the way with loaded donkeys, reaching the entrance of the second tributary in an hour. Equipped with canyoning gear, we bid farewell to Sultan,



who wished us luck on our venture into the unknown.

The new canyon proved to be narrow with numerous drops, some leading into freezing water, making the journey challenging even with our 3mm wetsuits. By 2 pm, we reached Wadi Taysaa, briefly pausing for a snack before progressing upstream.

Fortunately, our path didn't encounter any pools, and we rendezvoused with Sultan around 6:30 pm. Expressing concern for our tardiness, Sultan learned of the obstacles we faced, with numerous drops slowing our progression in the canyon.

At this juncture, I bid farewell to my friends and commenced the journey back to Jamma with Sultan. Ahmed remained with the French team and the donkeys, as they aimed to explore the final tributary of Wadi Taysa the next day.

By 10 pm, I reached my car in Jamma, expressing profound gratitude to Sultan for his invaluable assistance before embarking on the road back to Muscat. Nearly midnight upon reaching home, exhaustion was outweighed by the joy and satisfaction of a successful expedition.

The subsequent day saw my friends conquer the last tributary, and we reunited in Muscat for a memorable dinner before their departure.

