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RUBLEV,
ZVEREV BATTLE
THROUGH IN
MONTE CARLO

P15

YOUTH CENTRE
RECEIVES 50,000
VISITORS SINCE
LAUNCH

P20

DIVERSE CUISINE
REFLECTS OMAN'S
RICH HISTORY AND
HERITAGE

AL DUQM

PANEL TO OVERSEE
AL DHAHIRAH PROJECTS

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) has issued a decision to form an executive committee to oversee the development project of the Integrated Economic Zone in Al Dhahirah Governorate. The executive committee is chaired by Eng Ahmed bin Hassan al Deeb, OPAZ Deputy Chairman. It includes a number of officials from OPAZ and from the Saudi side members from the Ministry of Investment, the Economic Cities and Special Economic Zones Authority and the Saudi Fund for Development. **DETAILS ON P13**

CRUDE PRICE AT
\$84.54 A BARREL

Oman oil price for June delivery on Tuesday reached \$84.54, comprising a drop by 17 cents from the price of Monday, which was \$84.71. The average price of Oman oil for April delivery has stabilised at \$82.23 per barrel, thus \$1.31 per barrel higher than March delivery. World oil prices gave up early gains with Brent crude futures last down 0.17 per cent at \$84.02 a barrel. US WTI futures dipped 0.1 per cent to \$79.63.

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WHAT HAS BECOME OF
GERMANY'S 'ZEITENWENDE'?

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RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE AND GEOMETRY...



A unique collection of photos titled 'Religious Architecture, Geometry and the Spiritual Meaning' clicked by Mohammed al Zubair was unveiled under the auspices of Dr Mohammed bin Said bin Khalfan al Ma'amari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, in the presence of Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, and a number of officials as well as delegates from private entities, artists and art lovers on Monday at Bait Al Zubair Museum. **DETAILS ON P2**

When the rose industry meets
tourism in Jabal Al Akhdhar

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

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Walk through the lanes of the villages of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar and the air is filled with fragrance of fresh roses and rose water being distilled with a tinge of smoke from the traditional factories.

The farmers and workers start very early in the morning to pick the flowers just as the sun rises and wrap up by 9 am and then again around 4.30 pm till 6 pm.

"This is when the roses are fresh and cold," explains Salim

bin Saif al Tobi, who is now managing the family farm and a rosewater factory in Saiq village.

"I used to come to the farm with my grandfather," he added. Laith al Tobi is his nephew and comes to the farm to pick roses, which he has been doing for 15 years.

"I used to accompany my father everyday and now it is a habit," Laith explained.

How many kilos of roses are collected each day?

Salim said that it is not just one farm, "We collect from all small and large farms. So maybe

around five kilos. And then they are taken immediately to the factory."

The rose water is in big demand, and according to Salim they deal directly with shops and companies.

But this is not all, the rose water industry is taking a new direction, and that is the youth is connecting the rose water industry with tourism.

Qais al Amri also works at his family farm in Al Ayn village. Qais is also a photographer, and on his Instagram account the dominant subject is rose.

TURN TO P3



PHOTO BY SHAMSA AL HARTHIYA

HM ISSUES 3 ROYAL DECREES

Public utility
status for dam
projects

MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik on Tuesday issued three Royal Decrees.

Royal Decree No 20/2023 ascribes the public utility status to the project of constructing dams for protection against flood water (ANS02 & ANS03) in Wadi Al Ansab in the Wilayat of Bausher, Governorate of Muscat.

Article (1) states that the project of constructing dams of protection against floods (ANS02 & ANS03) in Wadi Al Ansab in the Wilayat of Bausher, Governorate of Muscat, as defined in the memo and diagram attached to this decree, is henceforth deemed a public utility project.

Article (2) stipulates that authorities concerned may expropriate, through direct implementation, the properties and lands necessary for the project aforementioned in Article (1), along with all the installations therein in accordance with the Public Utility Expropriation Law promulgated by Royal Decree No 64/78.

Article (3) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue.

Royal Decree No 22/2023 ascribes the public utility status to the project of constructing a dam for protection against flood water (Z4C) in Wadi Al Zuhaimi in the Wilayat of Liwa, Governorate of North Al Batinah.

Article (1) states that the project of constructing a dam of protection against floods (Z4C) in Wadi Al Zuhaimi in the Wilayat of Liwa, Governorate of North Al Batinah, as defined in the memo and diagram attached to this Decree, is henceforth deemed a public utility project.

Article (2) stipulates that authorities concerned may expropriate, through direct implementation, the properties and lands necessary for the project aforementioned in Article (1), along with all the installations therein in accordance with the Public Utility Expropriation Law promulgated by Royal Decree No 64/78.

Article (3) says that this Decree shall be published in the Official Gazette and enforced from its date of issue. — ONA

FITCH AFFIRMS OMAN'S RATING

MUSCAT: Fitch Ratings has revised Oman's outlook to positive from stable and affirmed the rating at 'BB', in a report issued on Tuesday.

According to Fitch, the positive outlook reflects a significant reduction in Oman's debt to GDP as a result of fiscal consolidation measures, high oil prices and the associated reduction of external liquidity risks.

The agency said that the measures taken by the government helped to contain public debt, stating that the debt to GDP fell from 61 per cent at the end of 2021 to 40 per cent at the end of 2022.

Fitch now expects the public debt to decline to 37 per cent at the end of 2024, compared to 48

per cent previously projected by the agency in its report issued in August 2022. Fitch forecasts a budget surplus of 2.3 per cent of GDP and 0.1 per cent in 2023 and 2024, respectively.

Fitch also projects Oman's fiscal break-even oil price to decline from \$77 per barrel in 2022 to \$67 per barrel in 2025, in light of ongoing fiscal measures and the implementation of the Medium Term Fiscal Plan (MTFP).

The agency expects non-oil sector growth of 2.3 per cent in 2023, pointing out to the recovery of the construction sector after being affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The agency also projects non-oil revenue to rise from 5.2 per cent of non-oil GDP in 2022 to 5.6 per cent in 2024. **DETAILS ON P13**



Illegal transporters under fire as crackdown intensifies

VINOD NAIR
@vinot_nair

The issues related to illegal transportation activities in the capital came to the fore again with the authorities intensifying campaigns to regulate this very important sector.

On Tuesday, the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and Information Technology (MoTCIT) reported more than 1,440 violations of illegal transportation by expatriate workers.

It also claimed that 546 violations of the Land Transport Law of 2016 related to transporting and delivering goods by expatriate workers operating without a license.

But the Observer's social media platform has been flooded with comments by people who have been fined for ferrying even family members or close relatives while dropping them to the airport or

for other purposes.

One person commented that his friend was fined for dropping his mother who was on a visa from a different sponsor, while another post was from a person who was fined multiple times while driving with a close friend for shopping.

While Observer cannot verify the authenticity of these claims, the fact however is that the MoTCIT has been taking strong measures to regulate the land transport sector in the Sultanate of Oman.

A fine of RO200 is imposed on the drivers by the ministry officials if caught and booked for illegal transportation.

The Ministry called on companies and individuals in the Sultanate of Oman to adhere to the Land Transport Law as it will continue to implement its inspection and control campaigns.

Under the Land Transport Law issued in 2016, practising any type



of land transportation activities (including those managed by expatriates) is prohibited.

Authorities have been cracking down on unauthorised taxis as part of the plans to regulate the public transport system in the capital.

"Illegal transportation is eating

into our business all the time and at the same time we are facing stiff competition from legal and licensed taxi operators," said Bashir, a taxi operator associated with one of the companies.

As a public service, it is essential to regulate any kind of transportation activity, especially

those connected to ferrying school children and tourists to and from the airport, according to authorities concerned with the implementation of the Land Transport Law.

"We are concerned with school transportation due to safety concerns though most of the

school bus operators are licensed. We are not against anyone dropping a friend or a relative or their children. It is easy to find out whether someone is doing it for business or not," sources in the MoTCIT said.

The Land Transport Law promulgated by a Royal Decree was expected to regulate one of the highly unorganised sectors by organising the contracts and documents for land transport to ensure the safety of passengers and goods and the compensation in the case of loss or damage to the cargo registered in the transport document.

The law states that the ministry should oversee land transport activities.

The ministry's Naql online platform offers the one-stop place for licensing, permits, and vehicle registration for individuals, companies, and institutions, including school buses, taxis, and trucks.

Municipality launches campaign to monitor beauty parlours

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

Muscat Municipality has launched a campaign to inspect beauty parlours in the Wilayat of Bausher during the month of Ramadhan.

In a statement, Muscat Municipality said, 'Female inspection team has been following up with the parlours in the Wilayat of Bausher to ensure that the they are ready to receive a wave of customers just before Eid Al Fitr.'

The campaign is intended to educate owners of hairdressing and beauty parlours on the sanitary conditions when offering services

"The campaign also aims to ensure



the application of necessary health requirements,' it stated.

Appeal for 'O' negative blood group

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

An urgent appeal has been made for the donation of 'O' negative blood due to high demand of this group for saving the lives of patients.

In a statement, the department of blood bank services said, "The demand for 'O' negative blood group is increasing dramatically. We are urging people of this group to donate as soon as possible at the Central Blood Bank Bausher."

'O' Negative blood is in high demand due to its universal ability to save lives. "This blood can be given to any patient, regardless of blood type, which



is why they are so important. Every day, trauma patients, cancer patients, and premature babies require 'O' negative blood," the statement said.

Blood donation hours during Ramadan at Central

Blood Bank Bausher: Evening (Daily) from 7.30 pm to 11.30 pm Morning (Sunday to Thursday) from 8.00 AM to 12.30 PM. The timing for platelets donations is 10.30 pm.

Unique photo exhibition of religious architecture opens

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

A unique collection of photos titled 'Religious Architecture, Geometry and the Spiritual Meaning' clicked by Mohammed al Zubair was unveiled under the auspices of Mohammed bin Said bin Khalfan al Ma'amari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs at the Bait Al Zubair Museum on Monday evening.

Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Dr Abdulmunim bin Mansoor al Hasani, Malik bin Sulaiman al Ma'amari, artists and art lovers from the country and beyond were present.

Religious Architecture, also known as sacred architecture or sacral architecture, implies to the practice of recreating religious architectural concerned with the design and construction of places of worship or sacred or intentional space, such as mosques, churches, temples, stupas and synagogues.

Mohammed al Zubair's religious architectural photos are the characteristics of grandiosity, spatial hierarchy, design intricacy, iconography, and natural building elements which remain common to all religious buildings.

A vibrant play of light and shadows is a significant element that enhances the spirituality



factor of design in almost all the photos that were clicked over many decades of his love with photography.

In his address, Mohammed al Zubair said, "In his diligent search for truth in the unseen and beyond, human kind

expressed his love for his creator in inscriptions, he raised his aspiration for the sky on the pillars of temples and sounds of minarets, and illuminated the path to tranquillity with lights sticking to the walls in various places of mosques and temples."

The collection of photos is an attempt to replicate the religious architecture which incorporates various design elements and sacred symbols. The world over, some features are incorporated to address the requirements of religious ceremonies, while other

elements are used to enhance the religious experience of worshippers.

The forms of architectural spiritual expression have varied and multiplied with the diversity of the laws, methods, approaches and paths taken by humanity.

'Observer Round Table' third edition today

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The third edition of the 'Observer Round Table' that aims at shedding light on contemporary topics will be held at the Ministry of Information premises at 11am today.

A panel of experts will be sharing their knowhow and expertise on the topic 'Ramadhan in the eyes of Science, where an attempt to delve into the scientific benefits of Ramadhan fasting will be made.

The panel will shed light on how fasting and hunger help in abstaining from evils, deriving the benefits of fasting, how 'revenge' eating is dangerous and what needs to be done through the rest of the year.

The key speakers of today's debate are Dr Khalid Shaikh, Senior Diabetologist and Specialist Medicine, Royal Oman Police Hospital, Engineer Abdulwahab al Busaidi, PDO Amateur Astronomer and Coach Joe Spraggan, a new Muslim who runs Elevate personal training.

Abdullah Salem al Shueili, Editor-in-Chief, Oman Daily Observer, will be the chief guest at the event that will be moderated by Shaddad al Musalmy, Senior Editor, Oman Daily Observer.



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■ RAFO CONDUCTS MEDICAL EVACUATION IN KHASAB



A Royal Air Force of Oman helicopter carried out a medical evacuation operation where a critically-ill Omani woman was transferred from Khasab Hospital in Musandam Governorate to Suhar Hospital in North Al Batinah Governorate to receive medical care, on Tuesday. The operation is part of the humanitarian efforts and services provided by the Sultan's Armed Forces and the other departments of the Ministry of Defence to the citizens and residents.

Expats held for illegally preparing food in Al Dakhiliyah



STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

The joint inspection team at the Directorate-General of Labour in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, in cooperation with the Al Dakhiliyah Municipality, arrested expatriates for illegally preparing meat for cooking in a house amid unhealthy conditions.

Legal procedures against them are underway.

Al Dakhiliyah Municipality continues its intensified

monitoring and inspection efforts on bakeries and cafés that are authorised to operate during Ramadhan to ensure their abidance by the health standards.

As a result, 7 health violations were issued in the Wilayat of Nizwa where health officers ordered the destruction of food deemed unfit for human consumption.

Health officers in the Wilayat of Samayil issued 2 violations, 3 notices given and 11 kg of rotten food materials destroyed.

Plans to attract more cruise ships, private yachts

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) is conducting a study with an international company on the readiness of the ports of the Sultanate of Oman to receive more cruise ships and private yachts.

Cruise tourism has the potential to generate millions of rials annually besides providing jobs to the citizens over the next ten years.

Haitham bin Mohammed al Ghassani, Director-General of Tourism Promotion at MoHT (pictured), said in an exclusive interview with Oman, the sister publication of the Observer, that the ministry is



working to make the Sultanate of Oman one of the most important destinations in the world to attract cruise ships by investing in the coastal areas of the country, spread over 3,165 square kilometres.

The Port Sultan Qaboos attracted 74 cruise ships and



149,000 passengers in 2022, contributing around RO 4 million. These ships also contributed to the recovery of the tourism sector in the various governorates of the Sultanate of Oman through various tour packages that were sold on ships.

Al Ghassani said, "A working group has been formed led by the under-secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism to discuss challenges and prepare programmes that will see cruise ships and yachts making more trips to the Sultanate of Oman."

Ramadhan charity reaches out to needy families

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

While community iftars have been trending, one charity drive has been reaching out ration to families.

One hundred low-income families were supported by a member of the Pakistani community in Oman.

One of the oldest expatriates in the Sultanate of Oman, Syedzada Sakhawat Ali Shah Bukhari was known for many community services. He passed away in January this year.

"He was a well-known figure among the nationals and especially the expatriate community who always looked up to him for valuable suggestions and support. He had started a food drive for the needy. The good work started by him continued even after his death with support to about 100 low-income families," said a resident.

Ateeq Ur Rehman, Community Welfare Attaché of the Pakistan Embassy, presided over the inaugural function of



the food drive and conveyed his best wishes for the success of this noble initiative.

Shaandar Bukhari, son of the late Sakhawat Bukhari, is a well-known name amongst the Pakistani diaspora in the Sultanate of Oman due to his social welfare work. He was also recently appointed the Honorary Secretary-General of the World Karate Confederation.

"I was out of the Sultanate of

families and make sure that the food bags are delivered to them discretely." "Ramadhan is a much revered and blessed month for Muslims all over the world, it is one of the five pillars of Islam which Muslims regard very highly may the Almighty bless us all in this holy month," he reflected.

He added, "For this year's initiative Hafiz Ibrahim Ahmed and Mohammed Ali Fazal supported the funding and Faize Hamidi, Atiq Sheikh, Tauseef Bukhari, Zeeshan Haider, Imran Malik and Zeeshan Janjua were leading the deliveries process. Also, our food bag was personalised. Like every year we did not buy readymade food boxes but bought loose items from the wholesale market and packed them.

Each bag weighing around 50 kg consisted of 17 items (flour, rice, turmeric powder bag, red chilli powder bag, coriander powder bag, oil, gram flour, sugar, salt, milk powder, vermicelli, rose flower essences juice, pulses of three types, packed milk for tea, and loose tea box).

When the rose industry meets tourism in Jabal Al Akhdhar

FROM PAGE 1

By 7 am the tourists who are keen photographers are on the location for pictures. Qais and Laith also collaborate when there is an overflow of visitors.

"At times our guests stay for eight days and other times they might stay even more than three weeks," noted Qais.

They have come up with activities for the visitors too.

"We take them on trekking through the farms, but they can also work in the farms by picking roses," said Laith.

"It is easy to pick them, all you have to do is place your index and middle finger on the middle of the rose and with your thumb lift it upward," Laith explains.

Can gloves be used?

Salim explained, "You will crush the rose and you might not get the whole flower."

For now the bushes are full of rose buds indicating the continuation of rose harvest season beyond April and maybe into early May. And so this could be the ideal experience for Eid holidays.

— Photos by Shamsa al Harthiya





TIME TO PRESERVE OMANI TRADITIONS

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
[@afrahalbalushia](#)

The Sultanate of Oman has many unique Ramadhan traditions that are part of its cultural heritage.

There are practices like ‘Tarawih’ prayers, Quran recitation, feeding the needy, helping the poor, and upholding ties of kinship and relatives. Preparations for guests and relatives and invitations for the occasion also have traditional touch.

During the holy month, ‘Dhikr’ sessions are held in mosques. Verses from the Holy Quran and prayers are repeatedly recited and chanted to praise Allah. Then there are night prayers.

The customs and traditions of the holy month in the Sultanate of Oman are followed in several ways. Some are related to the food that the Omani people prefer during the month.

Omanis exchange iftar dishes with their neighbours and relatives. This reflects values of tolerance, brotherhood and affection that the

members of the Omani society grew up on.

Then there are mass iftars in public places that host thousands and family iftars where family members break the fast together as this month is an opportunity for ties and rapprochement.

There are basic dishes that are prepared daily and eaten by family members before breaking the fast in Ramadhan, the most famous of which are dates, water and laban.

Oman is famous for its delicious dishes like biryani, kabsa, balaleet, harees, as well as Al Arsiya, thareed, madrooba, khabsa, salona meat and vegetables. They are among the most popular Ramadhan meals.

ALWAYS IN DEMAND

Coffee is a drink that is always in demand. Honey melons and sweet melons are on the top list of fruits in the month of Ramadhan, along with bananas. Watermelons and sweet melons are produced in the Najd region.

Dr Ahmed bin Suhail al Hadari, Chairman of the Omani Agricultural Society in Dhofar Governorate, said in an earlier statement,

“There is continuous communication and coordination between the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources and the Omani Agricultural Society in the governorate to make the season a success and facilitate procedures to ensure the transfer of products from farms to markets and follow-up on the import of melons.”

In addition, the National Centre for Statistics and Information stated that the prices of melons decreased in the first week of Ramadhan by about 11 per cent compared to the first week of Ramadhan last year.

One of the customs related to religious rites is holding big celebrations before the end of the holy month of Ramadhan for those children who have completed the recitation of the Holy Quran, and this distinguished celebration is called Tayminah.

During the celebration of Al Tayminah, children roam around the streets expressing their joy at the success in completing the study of the Holy Quran.



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■ RAMADHAN TRADITION IN SYRIA



A volunteer hands out Suhur meals from a horse-drawn cart in Syria's Idlib on Tuesday. — Reuters

Pope wants light shed on 40-year-old mystery of missing Vatican girl

VATICAN CITY: One of Italy's most enduring mysteries - the disappearance of a Vatican schoolgirl 40 years ago - entered a new chapter on Tuesday when her brother met with a Vatican investigator whom Pope Francis has given free rein to get to the bottom of the case wherever it may lead.

Over the past four decades tombs have been opened, bones have been exhumed from forgotten grave sites and conspiracy theories have abounded in attempts to

determine just what became of Emanuela Orlandi.

The daughter of a Vatican usher whose family lived in the Vatican, Orlandi, then 15, failed to return home on June 22, 1983 following a music lesson in Rome.

The case, which has been the subject of on-and-off investigations in Italy and the Vatican, has drawn fresh worldwide attention following the release late last year of the Netflix series "Vatican Girl".

In January, Vatican chief prosecutor Alessandro Diddi

reopened a previous inconclusive Vatican investigation after he inherited files from his retired predecessor.

Emanuela's older brother Pietro and the family lawyer, Laura Sgro, were meeting with Diddi in the Vatican on Tuesday afternoon.

In an interview in Corriere della Sera ahead of the meeting, Diddi said Pope Francis wants "the truth to emerge without any reservations". He said the pope had an "iron will" regarding the case. — Reuters

UN sounds alarm on Somalia's 'massive' need for international aid

MOGADISHU: Visiting UN chief Antonio Guterres appealed on Tuesday for significant international support for Somalia as it battles a desperate humanitarian crisis caused by "a perfect storm" of drought and protracted armed conflict.

Guterres said at a press conference with President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud in Mogadishu that he was on a "visit of solidarity" to the troubled Horn of Africa nation, where five million people are facing high levels of food insecurity.

Somalia's worst drought in decades has driven many to the brink of famine, while the government is also engaged in a major offensive to quell a bloody insurgency.

"This combination of terrorism and drought, largely caused by climate change, creates a perfect storm for the people of Somalia and requires massive support from the international community," Guterres said during a visit to a camp for internally displaced people.

"The people I met have lost their livestock, they have lost their property, they have lost everything," he told reporters in the drought-hit district of Baidoa.

The United Nations has launched a \$2.6-billion call for humanitarian assistance, but Guterres said the appeal was only 15 per cent funded.

"The international community has been absent-minded in relation to the drama of the



UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (L) and Somalia President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud shake hands at the Presidential Palace, in Mogadishu on Tuesday. — AFP

people of Somalia," Guterres said.

Mohamud said the UN chief's two-day visit, the first since March 2017, was also a gesture of solidarity "towards the government and the democratic process of Somalia".

"This visit ensures that the United Nations is fully committed to support our plans for state building and stabilising the country," his office said in a statement.

Five successive failed rainy seasons in parts of Somalia as well as Kenya and Ethiopia have led to the worst drought in four decades, wiping out livestock and crops and forcing at least 1.7 million people from their homes in search of food and water.

While famine thresholds have not been reached in Somalia, the UN says about half its population will need humanitarian assistance this year, with 8.3 million affected by the drought.

Adding to the woes, seasonal rains in March led to flooding that claimed the lives of 21 people and displaced more than 100,000, according to the UN, which warned that the rains were unlikely to be enough to improve the food security outlook for many.

"Although Somalis make virtually no contribution to climate change... the Somalis are among the greatest victims," Guterres said.

Somalia was hit by a famine in 2011 that killed 260,000 people, more than half of them children under six, partly because the international community failed to act fast enough, according to the UN. A report by the UN and the Somali government released in March said that drought might have led to 43,000 "excess deaths" last year, with children under the age of five accounting for half the victims. — AFP

Volcano erupts after earthquake in far east Russia

PETROPAVLOVSK-KAMCHATSKY: One of Russia's most active volcanoes erupted on Tuesday, shooting a vast cloud of ash far into the sky that smothered villages in drifts of grey volcanic dust and triggered an aviation warning.

The Shiveluch volcano erupted just after midnight and reached a crescendo about six hours later, spewing out an ash cloud over an area of 108,000 square kilometres (41,700 square miles), according to the Kamchatka Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences' Geophysical Survey.

Lava flows tumbled from the volcano, melting snow and prompting a warning of mud flows along a nearby highway while villages were carpeted in drifts of grey ash as deep as 8.5 centimetres (3.5 inches), the deepest in 60 years.

Pictures showed the cloud billowing over the forests and rivers of the far east and of villages covered in ash.

"The ash reached 20 kilometres high, the ash cloud moved westwards and there was a very strong fall of ash on nearby villages," said Danila Chebrov, director of the Kamchatka branch of the



A view shows cars covered in volcanic dust following the eruption of Shiveluch volcano on Tuesday. — Reuters

Geophysical Survey.

"The volcano was preparing for this for at least a year... and the process is continuing though it has calmed a little now," Chebrov said.

Around 24 hours after the volcano began erupting, a 5.8 magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Kamchatka, the geological survey said. Russian scientists said the quake was an aftershock from an April 3 earthquake.

About 300,000 people live on Russia's vast Kamchatka peninsula, which juts into the Pacific Ocean northeast of Japan.

The volcano, one of

Kamchatka's largest and most active, would probably calm now, Chebrov said, though he cautioned that further major ash clouds could not be excluded.

Chebrov said the lava flows should not reach local villages.

There were no immediate reports of casualties, though scientists said the volcano was still erupting 15 hours after the start of the eruption.

The Kamchatka Volcanic Eruption Response Team (KVERT) issued a red notice for aviation, saying "ongoing activity could affect international and low-flying aircraft".

— Reuters

SHORT TAKES

LONDON

First female cyber spy boss for UK

Britain named Anne Keast-Butler as the first female director of its intelligence communications agency GCHQ on Tuesday, tasked with protecting the country from terrorists, cyber-criminals and malign foreign powers.

She will take over the role in May, succeeding Jeremy Fleming who is stepping down after a six-year tenure.

Foreign Secretary James Cleverly, who made the appointment, said Keast-Butler



had an impressive track record at the heart of Britain's national security network. "Anne will use her vast experience to help keep the British public safe," he said.

ANKARA

Erdogan launches poll campaign

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan launched his re-election campaign on Tuesday with a party pledge to slash inflation to single digits and boost growth, as he seeks to extend his two decades in power in a May 14 vote.

Erdogan is facing the biggest political challenge since his AK Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, with polls showing support sagging in recent years after unorthodox economic policies hobbled the lira currency and sent inflation surging.



Even so, the president repeated his economic mantra that investment, production, exports and an eventual current account surplus would drive gross domestic product.

RIO DE JANEIRO

Brazil's Lula departs for official visit to China

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is on his way to China for a multi-day visit, Brazilian news site G1 reported on Tuesday.

Lula is scheduled to arrive in Shanghai on Wednesday and plans to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on Friday, according to media reports.

Both countries belong to the G20 group of leading economic powers. China is the most important trading partner for



Brazil, Latin America's largest country, and is also one of the most important sources of foreign investment.



Philippines, US kick off largest-ever joint drills

MANILA: The Philippines and the United States launched their largest-ever joint military exercises on Tuesday.

Nearly 18,000 troops are taking part in the annual exercises dubbed Balikatan, or “shoulder to shoulder” in Filipino, which for the first time will include a live-fire drill in the South China Sea.

Balikatan will include military helicopters landing on a Philippine island off the northern tip of the main island of Luzon and the retaking of another island by amphibious forces.

It will be the first time the exercises have been held under President Ferdinand Marcos, who has sought to strengthen ties with the United States after his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte trashed the alliance.

“In order for us to protect our sovereign territory, we really have to drill and exercise how we are going to retake an island that’s been taken away from us,” Philippine exercises spokesman Colonel Michael Logico told reporters after the opening ceremony at a military camp in Manila.

In recent months, Manila and Washington have agreed to restart joint maritime patrols in the South China Sea and struck a deal to expand the US forces’ footprint in the Philippines.

About 12,200 American, 5,400 Filipino and just over 100 Australian soldiers will participate in the two weeks of Balikatan exercises — about twice as many as last year.

As part of the exercises, troops will stage an amphibious landing on the western island of Palawan,

the closest Philippine landmass to the Spratly Islands.

The two armies originally planned to fire live rounds at sea off the northern province of Ilocos Norte, but later on had to move it further down the South China Sea, Philippine Army Major-General Marvin Licudine said.

The original site was “not sufficiently prepared” for unloading the needed equipment, he added.

The exercises will enhance “tactics, techniques and procedures across a wide range of military operations,” said Philippine military spokesman Colonel Medel Aguilar.

Soon after the opening ceremony in Manila, the Philippine defence and foreign ministers will jointly meet their US counterparts in Washington. — **Reuters**



General view during the opening ceremony of the annual Philippines-US joint military exercises in Quezon City. — Reuters

Sri Lanka again delays local polls, defying court order

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka again postponed local polls on Tuesday in defiance of a court order, delaying a de facto referendum on President Ranil Wickremesinghe’s efforts to restore the bankrupt island nation’s finances.

The elections were originally slated for last month but Wickremesinghe’s administration refused to finance them, saying the money was needed to pay for salaries and pensions.

His government was rebuked by the Supreme Court and ordered to release the funds for a rescheduled vote on April 25, but so far that has not happened.

The delayed polls are to pick local councillors but would be the first electoral test for Wickremesinghe since



President Ranil Wickremesinghe

he took office.

“A new date will be announced if a firm date is given by the government to release the necessary funds or there is another decision of the Supreme Court,” the election commission

said in a brief statement.

Sri Lanka suffered acute shortages of food, fuel and pharmaceuticals along with lengthy blackouts last year as a result of the worst economic crisis since independence from Britain in 1948.

Months of protests and political upheaval culminated last July in the ouster of Wickremesinghe’s predecessor Gotabaya Rajapaksa after an angry crowd stormed his compound.

The polls are widely seen as a referendum on unpopular austerity measures implemented to satisfy the terms of an International Monetary Fund bailout, including a doubling of income taxes and a sharp rise in energy tariffs. — **AFP**

North Korean leader calls for more ‘practical’ war deterrence

SEOUL: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un called for expanding the country’s war deterrence capabilities in a “more practical” way, state media said on Tuesday, to counter what it called “frantic” aggression by the United States and South Korea.

Pyongyang has opened the year with a flurry of weapons tests, including what state media has claimed are nuclear-capable underwater drones and the launch of two intercontinental ballistic missiles.

On Monday, Kim attended a meeting of the Central Military Commission to discuss ways to “cope with the escalating moves of the US and South Korea to unleash a war of aggression,”

Kim ordered that the country’s



Kim Jong Un

deterrence capabilities be strengthened with “increasing speed” and in a “more practical and offensive” manner.

North Korea last year declared itself an “irreversible” nuclear power, effectively ending the possibility of denuclearisation talks.

In response, Washington and

Seoul have intensified defence cooperation, staging joint military exercises with advanced stealth jets and high-profile US strategic assets.

North Korea views such exercises as rehearsals for invasion, and on Tuesday described them as “frantic” drills “simulating an all-out war against” Pyongyang.

South Korea on Tuesday also accused North Korea of being “irresponsible” after Pyongyang cut hotline contact with Seoul last week.

For five days, North Korea has not answered the twice-daily calls made through a military hotline and an inter-Korean liaison channel, South Korean Unification Minister Kwon Young-se told reporters. — **AFP**



Tender Announcement

The Internal Tender committee of **Ministry of Social Development** hereby announces the following tender :-

Tender No.	Tender Subject	Grade	Last date for obtainment of Tender Document	Last date for Tender Submission	Tender Document Price (non-retundable)
93/2023	The annual contract work for the maintenance of the air conditioning system and the building management system for the Ministry's General Office building	Companies specialized in the field of industrial workshop services and registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board with an excellent or first degree	Wednesday 26-4-2023 02:00 PM	Thursday 11-5-2023 10:00 AM	R.O. 25/=

❖ Specialized Companies, registered with the **Tender Board** may obtain the Tender documents at the Tender Board e-tendering digital portal link (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) On Wednesday 12/4/2023.

❖ Tender shall be submitted in compliance with the technical specifications and terms along with a local bank warranty at (1%) of the tender value, valid ninety (90) days from the date of e-submission.

❖ For Inquiry, please contact through the e-tendering website (reg@tenderboard.gov.om) tel. (24402200).

" The lowest or any other tender shall not be binding to the Ministry "

www.mosd.gov.om

All China-made new AI products require ‘security assessment’

BEIJING: New AI products developed in China will have to undergo a security assessment before being released and must reflect “core socialist values”, a sweeping new draft law by the country’s Internet regulator showed on Tuesday.

The fresh regulations come as a flurry of Chinese companies rush to develop artificial intelligence services that can mimic human speech since San Francisco-based OpenAI launched ChatGPT in November, sparking a gold rush in the market.

Rapid advancements in AI have stoked global alarm over the technology’s potential for disinformation and misuse, with deepfake images and people shown mouthing things they never said.

“Before providing services to the public that use generative AI products, a security assessment shall be applied for through national Internet regulatory departments,” the draft law, released by the Cyberspace Administration of China, reads.

The draft law — dubbed “Administrative Measures



A flurry of Chinese companies are rushing to develop AI services following the launch of US-based OpenAI’s ChatGPT. — **File Photo of AFP**

for Generative Artificial Intelligence Services” — aims to ensure “the healthy development and standardised application of generative AI technology”, it read.

AI-generated content, it continued, needs to “reflect core socialist values, and must not contain content on subversion of state power”.

It must also not contain, among other things, “terrorist or extremist propaganda”, “ethnic hatred” or “other content that may disrupt economic and social order.”

The Cyberspace Administration of China said it was seeking public input on the contents of the new regulations, which under Beijing’s highly centralised political system are almost certain to become law.

“The new CAC draft document is one of the strictest measures for generative AI so far,” Andy Chun, adjunct professor at City University of Hong Kong, said.

Companies submitting security assessments will need to “be very careful to ensure

each data source used for AI learning must be within guidelines, accurate, unbiased, and not infringe on IP rights of others,” he said.

“Ensuring accuracy is hard. No generative AI system to date can do that,” said Chun.

The regulatory crackdown comes as China’s tech giants ramp up their efforts in the closely-watched sector.

Alibaba’s cloud computing unit on Tuesday unveiled its own product called Tongyi Qianwen, which is expected to be rolled out across the tech giant’s office workplace communications software and household appliances.

CEO Daniel Zhang said in a statement that the software came in a “technological watershed moment driven by generative AI and cloud computing”. Beijing has announced ambitious plans to become a global leader in the field of AI by 2030, and consultancy group McKinsey estimates the sector could add about \$600 billion every year to China’s gross domestic product by then. — **AFP**



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In brief

■ LONDON



SUNAK CONDEMNS KILLING OF BRITISH-ISRAELI SISTERS, MOTHER

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has condemned the “abhorrent” attack which claimed the lives of three members of a British-Israeli family. Lucy Dee, 48, died on Monday from injuries suffered during the attack in the West Bank on Friday which killed her daughters Rina, 15, and Maia, 20. Rabbi Leo Dee said his daughters were killed by 20 bullets from a Kalashnikov rifle and his wife was shot twice in the suspected shooting. The Prime Minister said: “The killing of British-Israeli citizens, Maia, Rina and Lucy Dee is abhorrent. “The UK condemns this appalling attack on civilians and I send my deepest condolences to Rabbi Dee and his family.

■ BERLIN



GERMANY EXPELS CHAD'S AMBASSADOR

Berlin has ordered Chad's ambassador to Germany to leave the country within 48 hours in response to a similar move by the Central African country last week, the foreign ministry said. “In response to the unfounded expulsion of our Ambassador to Chad, we today summoned the Chadian Ambassador in Berlin, Mariam Ali Moussa, and called on her to leave Germany within 48 hours. We regret that it had to come to this,” the ministry said in a tweet. Germany's ambassador to Chad, Gordon Kricke, was expelled from the country last week. The Chadian Communications Ministry said that the decision was a result of “non-respect of diplomatic customs”. — AFP

■ AMSTERDAM



FRENCH PRESIDENT MACRON VISITS THE NETHERLANDS

French President Emmanuel Macron and his wife, Brigitte Macron, have arrived in the Netherlands for a two-day state visit that comes amid criticism of the French leader's comments on Europe's stand. The couple was greeted by the Dutch King Willem-Alexander and his wife Máxima in Amsterdam. It is the first state visit by a French president to the Netherlands in 23 years. Later, Macron is scheduled to give an eagerly-awaited speech on European sovereignty. In the Netherlands, the French president was greeted with a 42-gun salute by French naval vessels as well as the Dutch navy. — dpa

Yemen prisoner swap to start from April 13



People ride on a motorbike as delegations hold talks with Ansar Allah in Sanaa. — Reuters

DUBAI: A prisoner exchange involving hundreds of detainees from Yemen's civil war will start on April 13, Thursday, a Yemeni government official said, against a backdrop of rising hopes for peace. Nearly 900 prisoners, most of whom were fighting with Ansar Allah fighters, will be flown between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, which leads the military coalition fighting on behalf of the ousted government, the official said on Tuesday. Yemen has been at war since the intervention began in March 2015, months after Ansar Allah seized the capital Sanaa. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, through direct and indirect causes, and Yemen is suffering one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, according to the United Nations. The prisoner exchange, the biggest since October 2020, will last three days and involve multiple cities in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, said Majid Fadael, the official spokesman for the government delegation negotiating the exchange. The Ansar Allah will release 181 prisoners, including Saudis and Sudanese, in exchange for 706 detainees held by government forces, according to an agreement reached last month in Switzerland. “All arrangements have been completed... to implement the agreed-upon exchange process,” Fadael tweeted. “The first day of the exchange

process will be through reciprocal flights of the Red Cross between Aden-Sanaa and Sanaa-Aden,” he added. Yemen's six-month, UN-brokered truce that officially lapsed in October is still largely holding, providing respite for a population of 30 million that is mostly dependent on aid. This week, a Saudi delegation has held discussions with the

Ansar Allah leadership in Sanaa, hoping to “stabilise” the truce and seeking inter-Yemeni dialogue towards a “comprehensive political solution”, according to the Saudi ambassador. After Thursday's flights between Sanaa and Aden, on Friday and Saturday prisoners will be flown in and out of Riyadh and Abha in Saudi Arabia and Yemen's Sanaa, Mocha and Marib, Fadael said.

“This exchange process will be followed by other exchanges in the near future until all detainees and abductees are released on the basis of all for all, and all detention centres and prisons are cleared,” he tweeted. According to the Ansar Allah, 13 prisoners arrived at Sanaa international airport on Saturday, in exchange for a Saudi prisoner who was released earlier.

The exchange process will be followed by other exchanges in the near future until all detainees and abductees are released on the basis of all for all, and all detention centres and prisons are cleared

MAJID FADAEI
Official govt spokesman

“More than 1,050” prisoners were released in the last major exchange in October 2020, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross. Mohammed al Bukhaiti, a member of the Ansar Allah political council, said that the talks with the Saudi delegation “now revolve around lifting the (transport) blockade completely, withdrawing all foreign forces in Yemen, and releasing all prisoners”. “What we care about now is the issue of achieving comprehensive peace,” he said in an interview. But in a tweet, he also warned of “the return of war... in a more fierce manner” if negotiations fail. “Saudi aircraft will bomb Yemen again, and the Yemeni air and missile forces will resume bombing Saudi Arabia,” Bukhaiti tweeted. — AFP

Doctors in England start historic 4-day strike over pay

LONDON: Doctors working in England's public health service on Tuesday launched what has been billed as the most disruptive strike in its history, in a dispute over pay and working conditions. The four-day walkout, which began at 7 am, follows months of strikes by other public and private sector staff as inflation sparks the UK's worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation.

The action by so-called junior doctors — physicians who are not senior specialists but who may still years of experience — comes after a three-day stoppage last month and several strikes by nurses.

It threatens to be the most serious walkout yet and lead to the cancellation of hundreds of thousands of appointments.

They are demanding a pay rise of 35 per cent, which they say is needed to help make up for more than a decade of salary cuts in real terms.

They also argue pandemic backlogs coupled with staff shortages are massively increasing workloads, endangering patients.

“We have had a massive (pay) cut and we are filling more gaps because people are leaving,” said junior doctor Katrina Forsyth, who added she sometimes wept after shifts.

“It's becoming less safe for patients,” she said from a picket line after finishing a night shift at St Thomas' Hospital in London.

The government maintains the BMA's request is unaffordable, as ministers try to dampen wage demands across the public sector amid stagnant growth and high



Junior doctors during a strike amid a dispute with the government over pay in London. — Reuters

Doctors argue pandemic backlogs coupled with staff shortages are massively increasing workloads, endangering patients

inflation.

After slowing for three straight months, the Consumer Prices Index shot up to 10.4 per cent in February — close to 40-year highs and more than five times the target set by the Bank of England.

“I hoped to begin formal pay negotiations with the BMA last month but its demand for a 35 per cent pay rise is unreasonable,” said Health Secretary Steve Barclay.

“If the BMA is willing to move significantly from this position and cancel strikes we can resume confidential talks and find a way forward, as we have done with other unions.”

Barclay struck a deal last month with unions representing various health workers, including nurses, to increase pay by five per cent.

Union members are currently voting on whether to accept it.

However, the deal does not cover junior doctors, who comprise around half of all NHS doctors, according to official figures.

Their latest walkout will pile “immense pressures” on the service, NHS England medical director Stephen Powis warned.

“This is a significant set of industrial action that's going to cause major disruption,” he told BBC radio.

The strike affects the NHS in England but not in the UK's other regions.

Up to a quarter of a million appointments could be postponed, according to the NHS Confederation, which represents the system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. — AFP

Leaked US document casts doubt on Ukraine offensive

WASHINGTON: US intelligence has serious concerns over the viability of a coming Ukrainian counteroffensive against Russian forces due to issues with training and supplies, according to a leaked document reported by the Washington Post on Tuesday.

The document is part of a trove of highly sensitive material that has been posted online, sparking a US criminal investigation into a breach the Pentagon says poses a “very serious” risk to national security.

Ukraine is expected to launch an attack on invading Russian troops in the spring — its first major military push of the year.

But the top secret document says tough Russian defences and “enduring Ukrainian deficiencies in training and munitions supplies probably will strain progress and exacerbate casualties during the offensive,” the Post reported.

But Washington has pushed back against that report. “We have no indication that any such plan has ever been executed,”

a senior administration official said.

“Egypt is a close partner and we are regularly engaged with its leadership on a host of regional and global issues,” the official said.

Dozens of photographs of documents have been found on Twitter, Telegram, Discord and other sites in recent days, though some may have circulated online for weeks, if not months, before they began to receive media attention.

In addition to information on Ukraine, the documents also include sensitive analyses of US allies, whom American officials are now seeking to reassure after the security breach.

Many of the documents are no longer available on the sites where they first appeared, and the United States is reportedly working to have them removed.

The fallout from the apparent leak could be significant — even deadly — potentially putting US intelligence sources at risk, while giving the country's foes valuable information. — AFP



Ukrainian servicemen ride on a YPR-765 armoured personnel carrier on a road near Bakhmut, Donetsk region amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. — AFP

A circular portrait of a man with a dark beard and mustache, wearing a light-colored turban with a gold pattern. He is wearing a white garment with a pink collar.

The writer is a banker
by day and a storyteller
by night

We have read the recent news of incidents involving school buses in Oman.

Then comes the return trip back home as many of the parents are still working when the children are heading back home. This was

The most recent accident happened in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate in the Wilayat of Dima W'attayeen, when a school bus

Some parents have found the solution to transport their children if it means being late to work or having to leave for work early.

Efforts should also come from the schools as well, conducting inspections on the condition of the buses or driver's feedback would help in greatly reducing the accidents and provide ease in the parent minds. Ensuring the safety of the children also safeguards our future generations.

The drones used by the Ukrainian army are often commercial models. Operators first have to hack the software to “make them invisible to Russian radio surveillance”, said Oleksandr. — **AFP**

The writer is a reporter
in the New Delhi
bureau of NYT

A photograph of two tigers in a natural, wooded environment. On the left, a tiger stands alert, facing right. On the right, another tiger lies on its back, appearing relaxed with its paws held up and its tail curled. The ground is covered with dry leaves and small rocks, and the background consists of dense trees and foliage.

Tigers at the Ranthambore National Park in Sawai Madhopur, India, in 2015.

A CONSERVATION
EFFORT HAS WORKED
WELL ENOUGH THAT
THERE IS NOW TALK
OF SENDING SOME
TIGERS TO CAMBODIA
TO HELP THAT NATION
REVIVE ITS OWN WILD
POPULATION

The rise in both populations puts pressure on managing human-tiger conflict. Such conflict has at times spread panic and fear, stopping villagers from even going out to their

fields.

In a related effort, India has received 20 cheetahs from African countries over the past year.

“Few days back in Kuno National Park, four beautiful cubs were born. After 75 years, cheetahs were born on Indian soil. That is a very auspicious start.” — **The New York Times**

To comment & email: opinion@omanobserver.om

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Human traits versus machines

So, what if a computer solves a problem that involves human traits like common sense? It may not be a surprise to see our individual qualities like empathy and humour, intuition and emotion, creativity and kindness are automated!

True, many problems that humans take days and months to figure out will be solved by computers in real time. However, despite their caliber, machines are not able to solve puzzling questions, especially those related to making instantaneous moral decisions.

It is because humans can make decisions based on their quick analysis of the surroundings and the situation. Computers can only provide decisions based on programmes they are fed with. They're not affected or influenced by emotions, feelings, wants, needs, and other factors.

Additionally, the human brain also has the ability to learn from experience, adapt to new situations, and make decisions based on context. This was the summary of a workshop on "Will the computers of tomorrow possess some of the traits that today are seen as uniquely human?"

"Humans learned and invented things during their different stages of transition. But artificial intelligence is different. Computers are fed with data instead of being taught. Therefore, there is no process as learning from experience," experts at the workshop opined.

Computers can take in and process certain kinds of information much faster than we can. They can swirl that data in their so-called "brains," and perform calculations to conjure multiple scenarios at superhuman speeds.

Computers enjoy other advantages over people. They have better memories, so they can be fed a large amount of information, and can tap into all of it almost instantaneously.



Samuel Kutty
@samkuttyvp

The writer is a senior journalist, author and columnist

TRUE, IT'S
PRETTY HARD
TO TALK ABOUT
TECHNOLOGY
TODAY
WITHOUT
ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCE.
IT IS
EVERYWHERE...
AND GROWING!

Artificial intelligence is omnipresent. From social media to public service, people are interacting with artificial intelligence or AI every single day. Whether you make a chat request on a website or trigger a quick voice search via voice assist, you will find that AI is working behind the scenes.

True, it's pretty hard to talk about technology today without artificial intelligence. It is everywhere... and growing! People are using it to operate their businesses more efficiently. The fact is that it's resulting in safer and more useful products.

Companies like Google, Facebook, IBM and Amazon are working with AI and creating amazing devices! Apple's Siri, Google Now, Amazon's Alexa, and Microsoft's Cortana are digital assistants that help users perform various tasks.

But the fact is that the technology behind artificial intelligence is much older than we would imagine. Even there are the myths of mechanical men in Ancient Greek and Egyptian Myths! Although the term artificial intelligence has been around since the mid-20th century, computers have been around the world for much longer. The first work which is now recognised as AI was done by Warren McCulloch and Walter Pits in 1943.

In the coming years, we are going to witness even more growth, along with plenty of new research and ideas. There will be monumental breakthroughs in AI development that will enhance productivity and help developers get to the production side and release their solutions more rapidly.

However, a warning was also sounded against the potential dangers of artificial intelligence. "We certainly need to keep our hands carefully on AI so that we control the machines rather than the other way around."

Computers can be programmed with vast libraries of information, but they can't experience life the way we do!

FEEDING A SQUIRREL!



A man feeds a squirrel with a dropper at his residence in Chennai, India, on Tuesday. – AFP

A year later, what has become of Germany's much-hyped 'Zeitenwende'?

MICHAEL FISCHER AND
CARSTEN HOFFMANN

Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock is the first member of the German government to find words for the inconceivable. "We have woken up in a different world," she tells journalists following the first crisis team meeting in her ministry.

A few hours earlier, the scenario that many fervently hoped would not happen had come to pass: Russian President Vladimir Putin had ordered his troops into Ukraine.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz is informed at around 5:00 am, when he is woken by the Situation Centre. "This is a terrible day for Ukraine and a dark day for Europe," he says later. The assumption in the German government on February 24 is that the war will last just a few days.

The expectation is that Ukraine will be overrun by Russian tanks. The answers in response to reporters' questions about the possible supply of arms to Ukraine suggest that before any weapons could be dispatched, the Russians would be in Kiev.

This assessment turns out to have a shelf-life of a few hours. It soon becomes clear that the Ukrainians are ready and in a position to defend themselves. On February 26, the government decides on a clear breach with the past: For the first time in modern German history, German

JUST DAYS AFTER
RUSSIAN TROOPS
CROSSED THE
BORDER INTO
UKRAINE, GERMAN
CHANCELLOR
OLAF SCHOLZ
PLEDGED WHAT
HE CALLED A
'ZEITENWENDE' —
A 'TURNING POINT'
— IN GERMAN
DEFENCE POLICY

weapons are sent into a war against a nuclear power.

A day later, Scholz addresses the Bundestag to announce an end to the principle of military restraint that had its roots in Germany's wartime past.

Apart from arms supplies, Scholz announces a German rearmament programme worth €106 billion and a U-turn in energy policy to end German dependence on Russian gas.

So what has the result been a year on? Has Scholz kept his pledge of solidarity to Ukraine? Is the German military better prepared to defend the country than it was a year ago?

At the beginning it was anti-tank weapons and Stinger missiles. Today it is infantry fighting vehicles and battle tanks. German arms supplies to Ukraine have been expanded step by step over the past 12 months.

Scholz has set three guidelines here: strong support for Ukraine, all German decisions coordinated with allies, and no direct Nato involvement in the war.

From a Ukrainian perspective, Berlin is still showing a lack of decisiveness and determination. As evidence: the debate on battle tanks began in the spring of 2022, but the decision was taken in January.

In terms of numbers, Germany

is among the largest suppliers of military equipment after the United States, Britain and Poland, according to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy. For heavy weapons, Germany is in second place. But based on economic output, a string of Eastern European countries have provided more military assistance than Germany with supplies of almost 2.6 billion.

Almost a third of the special fund set up for the Bundeswehr has now been allocated, according to the Defence Ministry — equivalent to some €30 billion. This includes equipping troops with clothing, arming drones and purchasing US F-35 stealth jets.



German arms supplies to Ukraine have been expanded step by step over the past 12 months.

The purchases are going too slowly for many, and a strenuous debate is under way on whether and to what extent the defence budget should be increased. New Defence Minister Boris Pistorius sees an increase as essential, but others in the ruling coalition take a different view.

Whether Scholz will keep the key pledge to Germany's partners in Nato depends on this rearmament. "We will from now on — year after year — invest more than 2 per cent of gross domestic product in our defence," he said in his Zeitenwende speech a year ago.

In 2022, the figure came in at 1.44 per cent, according to official

Nato statistics. The German government says 1.6 per cent is the expected figure for this year. The defence budget will have to rise by €15 billion to reach the 2 per cent.

Scholz has moderated his promise to some extent. At the Munich Security Conference last weekend, he referred to a permanent rises to 2 per cent and no longer the "more than 2 per cent" of a year ago.

While the debate turns around this figure in Germany, other Nato countries are further down the line. "Some allies are determined to make the current target of 2 per cent a minimum," Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said in an interview a few weeks ago. In the US, the figure is almost 3.5 per cent.

While the implementation of the Zeitenwende is mixed, the choice of word has certainly been a success. Zeitenwende has not only been selected as word of the year in Germany in 2022, but has also become a term in international security policy.

It is certain to be heard again when German leaders mark the start of the war in Berlin's Schloss Bellevue, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier's official residence, on Friday. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is to join by video link. — dpa

sport

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Oman to take part in Arab beach soccer in Saudi

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

The Oman beach soccer team will take part in the fifth edition of the Arab beach soccer championship 2023 which will be hosted by Saudi Arabia in Jeddah city during May 1 to 20.

The Arab beach soccer event is back to action after an absence of seven years from the last tournament in Sharm El Sheikh in Egypt in 2016. United Arab Emirates (UAE) are the last edition champions when they beat Morocco 3-2 in final. Oman finished fourth.

Hosts Egypt were the champions in the third edition, also at Sharm El Sheikh in 2014,

defeating Lebanon 6-5 in the final.

This external participation will be a crucial step for Oman team's preparation for the Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup UAE 2023 which will be hosted by Dubai during November 16 to 26. Oman are ranked 14th internationally in the latest Fifa world ranking and will be looking to claim maximum technical output from this significant event.

Oman team recently concluded their participation in the AFC Beach Soccer Asian Cup in Bali city, Indonesia, in the third place. The team, coached by the long-serving national coach Talib Hilal, will play in the Arab event alongside with Egypt, Morocco, UAE, Kuwait, Lebanon,



Palestine, Mauritania, Sudan, Libya, Comoro Islands and the hosts Saudi Arabia. The draw of the championship will take place after Eid break and it is scheduled on April 16 in Jeddah city. The 12 teams will be distributed into three groups.

The first edition of the Arab beach soccer championship was

in Egypt's Marsa Alam in 2008. Libya beat UAE 5-3 to emerge champions. In 2010, it was in Damam, Saudi Arabia and the hosts beat UAE 6-3 after extra-time to win the title.

It is expected that Oman team will return back to the action after Eid break with series of internal and external camps. The preparatory program will be released soon with the list of friendly games ahead of the forthcoming assignments including the top participation at the Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup UAE 2023 and the Arabian beach soccer Championship.

Oman's next attendance in the Fifa Beach Soccer World Cup will be the fifth attendance as the first

presence was in Ravenna city in Italy in 2011 and then in Portugal in 2015. The third participation of the team was at the Beach Soccer World Cup in Paraguay in December 2019 while the fourth attendance was in August 2021 in Russia. During all the previous editions, the team was under supervision of the long-serving national coach, Talib Hilal.

Oman Squad: Khaid al Araiimi, Mashal al Araiimi, Younis al Owaisi, Abdullah al Souti Amjad al Hamadani, Sami al Balushi, Munthir al Araiimi, Shareef al Balushi, Sami al Balushi, Ahmed al Owaisi, Hamed al Araiimi, Yahya al Muraikhi, Salim al Araiimi, Abdulrahman al Fazari and al Yaqdhan al Hindasi.

Al Harthy aims to convert performance into podium

PORTIMAO, Portugal: Oman Racing's Ahmad Al Harthy makes a welcome return to race action in Europe later this week as the FIA World Endurance Championship arrives in Portugal, for the hotly anticipated second round of the 2023 season – the 6 Hours of Portimao.

Aston Martin Vantage racer Al Harthy, along with teammates Michael Dinan and Charlie Eastwood, heads to the Algarve region in justifiably optimistic mood after a very competitive showing during the championship curtain-raiser in Sebring, USA, last month.

Marking the Omani's maiden outing in FIA WEC, and his first ever visit to the very unique Florida track, Al Harthy starred and delivered from the outset in the GTE Am class – first producing an excellent top three showing in qualifying, before racing impressively during the eight-hour contest.

Ninth place at the finish though wasn't remotely indicative of the

pace and performance shown by the Oman Racing with TF Sport trio, as the squad had to battle back from a costly puncture early in hour two – while Dinan was running in the podium battle. Losing a huge amount of time, the points for ninth position were the best which could be achieved.

All things being equal at the weekend, Al Harthy is aiming for a big haul of points with the focus on mounting a challenge for a maiden FIA WEC podium finish in only his second weekend in the globe's biggest endurance racing championship.

It's worth remembering too, Portimao's Autodrome Internacional do Algarve provided one of last year's true highlights for the Omani with a fantastic second place finish in the LMGTE class during the final race of the 2022 European Le Mans Series. Notably, it was Al Harthy's debut at the track.

As always, the Aston Martin brand ambassador will go into the Portuguese round with key

Omani racer Ahmad Al Harthy carrying confidence into Rd2 of WEC

Al Harthy, Dinan, Eastwood targeting GTE Am trophies in Portimao

Impressive fightback on WEC debut in USA brings rightful optimism



backing and support from the Oman Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, OQ, Omantel and MHD-ITICS.

AHMAD AL HARTHY:

"Portimao obviously holds very happy memories for me from last season in the ELMS, and it would be fantastic to be challenging for the podium this weekend in only Oman Racing's second race in the FIA World Endurance Championship. The level is so incredibly high in WEC, but we competed well in America during the first race and there were so many positives to bring away from there.

"Qualifying will be important, as always, and I was very happy with my performance there in round one. The whole team learnt a huge amount from the Sebring race and we're all determined to build on that and have the strongest weekend we can. Portimao is a completely different challenge to Sebring, but it's a track we went very well at last year

2023 FIA World Endurance Championship GTE Am Driver Standings:
9th Ahmad Al Harthy / Michael Dinan / Charlie Eastwood, 3pts
2023 FIA World Endurance Championship GTE Am Team Standings:
9th Oman Racing with TF Sport, 3pts

in ELMS so confidence is high."

Opening free practice for the second event of the FIA World Endurance Championship season will take place at 11.00 (local time) on Friday, 14th April, with session two following at 16.00.

On Saturday, 15th April, third free practice starts at 11.00 with qualifying then beginning at 19.00. Race two of the season, the 6 Hours of Portimao, will get underway at 12.00 on Sunday, 16th April.

Live timing and coverage is available through the FIA WEC App and at www.fiawec.com



Stokes wants fast pitches for Ashes showdown

LONDON: England captain Ben Stokes has warned Australia that he has asked for “fast, flat wickets” to take the attack to the Ashes holders later this year. Stokes is hoping to lead England to their first Test series victory over Australia since 2015 and he believes pitch conditions will be crucial. The all-rounder wants groundsmen at Edgbaston, Lord’s, Old Trafford, Headingley and The Oval — the five venues staging Ashes Tests — to produce the kind of quick pitches that will allow England to use the aggressive game-plan he has deployed with great success since taking over as captain. “We’ve been very clear with the ground-staff around England about what type of wickets we want and they’ve been very responsive to us, which is good,” Stokes said on Tuesday. “We

want fast, flat wickets. We want to go out there and score quickly. I’m smiling because I’m looking forward to it. There’s no point changing just because we’re coming into an Ashes series. Every player knows the Ashes is where everything ramps up a bit — pressure, exposure, all kinds of stuff — but we’ll just keep sticking to what we do.” Stokes has spoken frequently of his willingness to lose in pursuit of victory. He pushed that philosophy to the brink against New Zealand in February when England lost the series decider in Wellington by one run having declared their first innings and enforced the follow-on. A draw would have settled the series in England’s favour but Stokes said he would not settle for stalemate, even with the Ashes on the line. — AFP

Lucknow win last-ball thriller against RCB after Pooran blitz

BENGALURU, India: Nicholas Pooran smashed the fastest fifty of the IPL season in 15 balls as Lucknow Super Giants pulled off a stunning chase of 213 to edge out Royal Challengers Bangalore in a last-ball thriller on Monday. West Indies’ Pooran smashed 62 off 19 balls before he departed but Lucknow crept over the line to win by one wicket in a dramatic final over in Bengaluru. Lucknow needed five off the last six balls after Ayush Badoni was out hit-wicket for 30 in the penultimate over, hitting his stumps while hammering what would have been a six. Mark Wood and Jaydev Unadkat were dismissed in the final over and Ravi Bishnoi was nearly ‘mankaded’ from the last ball. With the scores level and a super over beckoning, number 11 Avesh Khan scampered a bye and threw his helmet in celebration. Australia’s Marcus Stoinis had earlier clobbered a 30-ball 65, but it was Pooran’s blitz including seven sixes that blew away RCB. Virat Kohli, Faf du Plessis



and Glenn Maxwell notched up 15 sixes between them in Bangalore’s 212-2, with 27 hit in the match in total. Bangalore struck with three early wickets before Stoinis dominated a fourth-wicket stand of 76 with skipper KL Rahul.

Impact player Karn Sharma broke the partnership as he sent back Stoinis but Bangalore had a new nemesis in Pooran. The efforts of Pooran and Stoinis eclipsed the power-hitting from Kohli (61), Du Plessis (79 not out) and Maxwell (59) after

Bangalore were put in to bat first. Kohli set the tone for Bangalore’s big total with his second fifty of the season in a 96-run opening stand with Du Plessis. Maxwell kept up the charge later and Du Plessis hit his second fifty. — AFP

HCC claim Danube Ramadhan Premier League title

MUSCAT: HCC defeated Ayan Muscat by 5 wickets to claim the Danube Group Ramadhan Premier League cricket tournament organised by Al Hail Cricket Team. The final was held on April 6 where Sheik Irfan from Danube Group presided as the chief guest and Doshambe al Balushi, Waleed, captain of OCT Al Hail CT, were also present for the award ceremony. In the final, the HCC captain won the toss and elected to field



first. Ayan Muscat went on to score 84 runs in the stipulated 10 overs for 8 wickets. Ishtiaq Hussain top-scored with 22 runs and other useful contributions came from Ayaz with 14 runs and

Shafeeq with 10 runs. For HCC, Gireesh took two wickets giving away 10 runs. In reply, HCC reached the target of 85 at the end of 10 overs losing 5 wickets. Gireesh was the

top-scorer with 23 runs, played a captain’s innings to helped his team to win the game in the last ball. Gireesh was declared man of the match in the final, man of the series for his all-rounder performance and he was adjudged as best bowler of the tournament as well. Shafeeq of Ayan Muscat was declared best batsman of the tournament. Danube Group were the main sponsors, supported by Oman Oasis Company and Baab Al Hail Trading.

Chennai take on spirited Rajasthan at home



This year’s IPL has already offered everything and its still just in its second week. From Rinku Singh’s Swashbuckling innings to get KKR a win from the mouth of defeat, to Rashid Khan’s hat-trick, to Shikhar Dhawan’s one-man show 99, to Mark Wood’s life-threatening spell, to Shardul Thakur’s counter-attacking 68 (29 balls), to vintage Virat Kohli’s 82 not out and the list just goes on. Although one thing that has hampered this year’s IPL is the injuries. Most teams are trying to still understand the best use of the Impact player. But all said and done, one is thing is clear that, this year’s IPL will have a very important role for strategies and game planning in it.

CHENNAI SUPER KINGS (CSK) VS RAJASTHAN ROYALS AT CHENNAI
• **TEAM INFO:** It’s a match-up between the ex-keeper for the Indian team and a prospect, who

has been trying to fill those shoes for the past few years, but has lacked sufficient opportunities. Chennai are slowly settling in and are looking like a very good team this year, and with Chennai being their fortress, its going to be one task ahead for Rajasthan. On the other hand, Rajasthan have the best spin attack and a slow wicket could cost Chennai a big way and they might have to move out of their comfort zone and pick a batting-friendly wicket, just like they did against Lucknow. So all-in-all, its going to be a complicated situation for the Chennai curator and management.
• **Head-to-Head** - Played - 27; Won by CSK - 15; Won by RR – 12
• **DC possible XI** – RD Gaikwad, Devon Conway, Ajinkya Rahane, MM Ali, RA Jadeja, S Dubey, Mitchell Santner, SSB Magala, MS Dhoni(C), RS Hangargekar, TU Deshpande
• **MI possible XI** – Yashasvi Jaiswal, R Parag, Shimron Hetmyer, Ravichandran Ashwin, Jason Holder, Jos Buttler, SV Samson(C), DC Jurel, Trent Boult, Yuzvendra Chahal, Sandeep Sharma
• **Pitch & Weather Report** – The surface at MA Chidambaram



Stadium is believed to remain slow and sluggish. But this was proved wrong in the first game here between CSK and LSG, as a total of 422 runs were scored in total. The pitch will remain balanced throughout the game,

with the average first innings score in the last five games here being 158 runs. Scattered clouds with temperature between 26 to 35 degrees Celsius and no chance of rain.
• **Match Prediction** – Even

though Rajasthan are a balanced and a strong team, but yet, it has to be Chennai that will start as favourites on home turf. Even though, the entire India this season is like a home, but when it’s in Chennai, it’s a little extra special. The home fans are extremely passionate and when 50,000 fans cheer together, the opponent team is likely to feel very lonely in the middle. Chennai also have a very impressive record at home and that will also work in its favour. So, it’s going to be Mahendra Singh Dhoni’s - Chennai Super Kings for this one.
FAN COMMENTS
“Being a Rajasthani, I have always backed the Royals and specially their strategy of backing and developing young talents right from the first season. It all started with the late legendary spinner Shane Warne, may his soul rest in peace. Halla Bol!!” — Imran Behlim, 35, Businessman, Indian.
“MSD has been an inspiration to many upcoming talents like us. His presence of mind, while being calm in a tensed situation is absolutely commendable. CSK is a very balanced side and is going to go all the way this season. Let’s Whistle together!” — Hemakesh and Hemanath Balasubramanian

(twins), 17, Students, Indian.
“IPL has been a learning lesson for so many other countries on how to best develop the local infrastructure and its talent. Miss the presence of Pakistani players in IPL, but I am sure that soon that will also happen with the educated newer generations taking over the politics in both the countries.” — Faizan Khan, 25, Professional Cricketer, Pakistani.
“Cricket is a sport that unites people and teaches the importance of team work. I have seen a few locals playing this game and I hope that a lot more local kids take interest and play this game. Looking for more local names representing Oman at the national level in future.” — Amjad Balach al Balushi, 41, Businessman, Omani.
“Mahendra Singh Dhoni is not just a name, but an emotion. He is celebrated by every cricketer, irrespective of his background. One thing I respect him the most for is that, he walked away at the right time for International cricket, something that’s missing with most senior players these days. Although, its an absolute pleasure to see him as fit as ever in this year’s IPL. Chennai will lift the trophy this year!” — Adnan Ahmad Klair, 42, Businessman, Pakistani.



I hope to play with Messi next season at Barca: Lewandowski

BARCELONA: Barcelona striker Robert Lewandowski said he would love Lionel Messi to return to the Catalan club from Paris Saint-Germain this summer, speaking at a charity event on Tuesday.

The 35-year-old Argentine World Cup winner left Barca in 2021 when the club could not afford to renew his contract and his PSG deal expires in June.

Amid whistles from PSG supporters who see Messi as a symbol of the club's mistakes in chasing star signings instead of building a competitive team, Barcelona are openly courting the forward.

"Messi belongs to Barca and if he returns it would be something incredible," said Lewandowski.

"We know that his place is here, in Barcelona. I don't know what will happen, but I hope that next season we can play together."

Messi is the club's all-time top goalscorer and many consider him the best player in the history of football.

Barcelona fans have chanted Messi's name in the 10th minute — representing his former Barca shirt number — in their last two matches, including a 0-0 draw against Girona on Monday in La Liga.

Lewandowski, top scorer in La Liga, could not find the net for the league leaders and said he had been carrying an injury.

"I took a blow from (Real Madrid defender Eder) Militao in the game against Madrid and I could not walk," said Lewandowski, referring to Barcelona's 4-0 thrashing by Los Blancos in the Copa del Rey last week.

"On the pitch I have to play better but that knock from Militao left my body in a bad way." — AFP

RUBLEV, ZVEREV BATTLE THROUGH IN MONTE CARLO

MONTE CARLO, Principality of Monaco: Andrey Rublev and Alexander Zverev both survived dropping a set to advance in the Monte Carlo Masters on Tuesday as last year's runner-up Alejandro Davidovich Fokina fell at the first hurdle.

Fifth-seeded Rublev, recipient of a first-round bye, rallied from a set down to defeat Spaniard Jaume Munar 4-6, 6-2, 6-2 in their second-round tie.

Germany's Alexander Zverev made a hesitant start to his clay-court season before seeing off Kazakh Alexander Bublik 3-6, 6-2, 6-4 in the first round.

But Spaniard Davidovich Fokina fell 6-2, 6-2 to ninth seed Karen Khachanov.

Rublev, a losing finalist in 2021, broke Munar's serve six times and hit 36 winners to win in two hours and 12 minutes.

"The feeling was, 'No way, I might be out in the first round of Monaco,'" said Rublev, 25, who will next face fellow Russian Khachanov, Dan Evans or qualifier Ilya Ivashka in the third round.

Khachanov took 75 minutes to brush past Davidovich Fokina, who lost the final in the Principality last year to Stefanos Tsitsipas.

Zverev was finding his feet back on clay for the first time since he retired in the French Open semi-finals last year against Rafael Nadal with a nasty right ankle injury.

The 13th-seeded German took just under two hours to move past Bublik with 21 winners to nine unforced errors.

"It felt awful at times to be honest," Zverev said.

"It usually takes me five or 10 minutes to get used to a clay

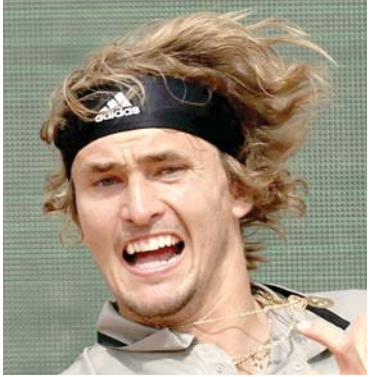
ATP MONTE CARLO MASTERS RESULTS

First round

Luca Nardi (ITA) bt Valentin Vacherot (MON) 7-5, 7-5; Lorenzo Musetti (ITA x16) bt Miomir Kecmanovic (SRB) 7-6 (7/1), 6-0; Lorenzo Sonego (ITA) bt Ugo Humbert (FRA) 3-6, 7-5, 7-5; Alexander Zverev (GER x13) bt Alexander Bublik (KAZ) 3-6, 6-2, 6-4; Karen Khachanov (x9) bt Alejandro Davidovich Fokina (ESP) 6-2, 6-2; Grigor Dimitrov (BUL) bt Ben Shelton (USA) 6-1, 3-6, 6-3; Jiri Lehecka (CZE) bt Emil Ruusuvuori (FIN) 6-1, 7-5

Second round

Andrey Rublev (x5) bt Jaume Munar (ESP) 4-6, 6-2, 6-2



Alexander Zverev

court, but this year was a bit different. I needed to get the injury out of my head. I needed to get used to sliding again.

"I have had two weeks of practice now. It is the most natural surface for me."

Zverev, a two-time Monte Carlo semi-finalist, will next play Spaniard Roberto Bautista Agut for a place in the third round.

Italy's Lorenzo Sonego saved four match points to beat French qualifier Ugo Humbert 3-6, 7-5, 7-5 and next plays third seed Daniil Medvedev in the second round. — AFP



Russia's Andrey Rublev celebrates after winning his Monte-Carlo ATP Masters Series tournament match against Spain's Jaume Munar in Monaco. — AFP

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Bank Dhofar explores merger with Ahli Bank



QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

Bank Dhofar, the second biggest lender in the Sultanate of Oman, has proposed a non-binding merger with Ahli Bank in a deal that if and when approved could create a powerful new financial player in the country.

The proposal follows a decision to this effect by Bank Dhofar's Board of Directors during its meeting on April 10, 2023.

However, the proposed merger still requires approvals from the relevant regulatory bodies, as well as the respective boards of directors and shareholders of both banks. Should the transaction proceed, further updates will be provided at the appropriate time, Bank Dhofar said in a regulatory filing on Monday.

A non-binding merger proposal is a preliminary offer that does not create a legally binding agreement between the two companies. Instead, it allows them to discuss the potential benefits and drawbacks of a merger without committing to it. This approach provides the parties with flexibility, as they can walk away from the negotiation process if it does not seem to be in their best interests.

Moreover, a non-binding merger proposal can provide an opportunity for both companies to assess the potential benefits and risks of a merger, including financial, operational, and cultural considerations. It can help them make informed decisions about whether to proceed with the merger.

In addition, it can provide a chance to gauge market reactions to a potential merger and assess its potential impact on stakeholders, such as customers, employees, and shareholders.

Overall, a non-binding merger proposal can be a useful tool for exploring the potential benefits of a merger while minimising the risks associated with a legally binding commitment.

Panel set up to develop new Integrated Economic Zone in Al Dhahirah

NEW HUB: Phase 1 of 388 sq km
economic zone to attract investors
from Oman, Saudi and wider
region

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

The Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) has issued a decision to form an executive committee to oversee the development project of the Integrated Economic Zone in Al-Dhahirah Governorate. Chaired by Eng Ahmed bin Hassan al Dheeb, OPAZ Deputy Chairman, the committee includes a number of officials from OPAZ and from the Saudi side members from the Ministry of Investment, Economic Cities and Special Economic Zones Authority and the Saudi Development Fund.

The committee is responsible for several tasks, most notably supervising the implementation of the memorandum of understanding signed between OPAZ and the Saudi Economic Cities and Special Economic Zones Authority, in the field of economic development for special economic zones and free zones.

The committee will also develop a plan for the development, execution and management of the Integrated Economic Zone project in Al Dhahirah Governorate, including all programmes and initiatives, and monitoring their implementation.

Additionally, the committee will oversee the establishment of the Omani-Saudi Company that will manage and operate the Integrated



Economic Zone in Al Dhahirah Governorate.

The committee will work towards exchanging successful experiences and practices in the management and operation of economic zones between the two countries.

It will also coordinate to hold informative workshops for traders and investors about the Zone in both countries.

Mahmoud bin Hamoud al Rawahi, General Manager of OPAZ Planning and IT Sector, and a member of the committee, said: "OPAZ has completed the consultancy studies related to the Integrated Economic Zone project in Al Dhahirah Governorate, which has been allocated 388 sq km of investment land.

OPAZ has also provided the relevant documents, which support providing the funding required for developing the project's first phase, covering an area of 20 sq km. This phase includes

the establishment of infrastructure, roads, electrical installations, water and sewage networks, industrial waste treatment, and necessary facilities for the zone, in addition to providing engineering consultancy services for the project (design and supervision).

The remaining part of the zone will be developed as future expansions to meet the land requirements for all economic sectors in Al Dhahirah Governorate."

Al Rawahi confirmed that establishing the land port marks one of the priorities in implementing the infrastructure facilities of the Integrated Economic Zone project in Al Dhahirah Governorate. The Zone was established to maximise the benefits of its strategic location on the borders with Saudi Arabia.

It is located about 20 kilometres from the border crossing of the Empty Quarter with Saudi Arabia and about 100 kilometres from Ibri Industrial

City project.

OPAZ aims to contribute to stimulating bilateral trade between Oman and Saudi Arabia, as well as enhancing efforts for economic development and diversification, opening new opportunities for the Omani and Gulf economies, and drawing on the competitive advantages and attractiveness of the location.

The Integrated Economic Zone in Al Dhahirah will have a leading role in maximising the benefits of its location, as well as playing a significant role in the development of Al Dhahirah Governorate and enhancing bilateral trade between the two countries.

It is expected that the zone will also have an important role in creating job opportunities for Omanis, in line with the objectives of Oman Vision 2040, and attracting Saudi companies to establish their projects in Oman and form economic partnerships in various economic activities.

Fitch revises outlook on Oman to positive; affirms at 'BB'

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, FEB 11

International ratings agency, Fitch, has revised the outlook on Oman's long-term foreign-currency Issuer Default Rating (IDR) from stable to positive and has affirmed the rating at 'BB'.

The positive outlook reflects Oman's lower government debt/GDP, with high oil prices and spending restraint reducing external liquidity risk. The outlook also incorporated Fitch expectation that the government remains committed to fiscal consolidation.

"Fiscal reform should be sufficient to limit a deterioration of Oman's budget, debt/GDP ratio and external position under our assumption of lower oil prices this year and next. Government debt/GDP fell to 40% in 2022, from 61% at end-2021, and we expect it to reach 37% by end-2024, from 48% at our last review in August 2022," Fitch said.

In its report, Fitch projects a government budget surplus of 2.3%



of GDP in 2023, against 4.9% in 2022, Oman's first surplus since 2013. "We assume the average Brent oil price will fall to \$85 a barrel in 2023, while production will be limited by Opec+ production caps agreed in April 2023, leading to a 9% drop in total revenue. This is despite higher tax revenue on stronger tax enforcement

and economic activity. Our fiscal balance metric differs from the government, as we exclude some dividends, liquidity and debt management items from revenue and spending."

"We forecast a budget surplus of 0.1% of GDP in 2024, as a small rise in oil production is likely to be insufficient to

counter the effect of lower oil prices of \$75/barrel Brent on budget revenue. Non-oil tax revenue should rise to 5.6% of non-oil GDP, from 5.2% in 2022; a modest increase as we do not factor in a mooted value added tax (VAT) hike at this stage," the agency added.

It also noted that high oil prices and global inflationary pressures have led the government to pause some measures included in its medium-term fiscal plan, including a rise in the VAT rate and the introduction of personal income tax.

On the spending side, the timeframe for the elimination of the electricity subsidy, accounting for 1.2% of GDP in 2022, has been extended to 10 years, from five.

The government also put in place a fuel-price cap in 2022 that is to remain until at least end-2023 at a cost of about 1.1% of GDP during the year under our oil price assumption.

Fitch projected general government debt to fall to 37% of GDP in 2023 and be broadly stable in 2024, below the 'BB' peer median of 54%. Oman's domestic debt fell

by RO 0.9 billion in 2022 and external debt by RO 2.3 billion on strong hydrocarbon revenue.

The government repaid a maturing \$1.25 billion eurobond in January 2023 and prepaid \$1.5 billion of a \$4.0 billion facility in March. The Petroleum Reserve Fund was not used for those repayments and stood at over \$2.2 billion in March 2023.

Lower external debt has eased external liquidity risk, although debt repayments prevented accumulation of foreign assets.

"We project sovereign net foreign assets to return to a positive position in 2023, after falling to -9% of GDP in 2020, from 53% in 2014.

Foreign exchange reserves will rise only modestly in 2023 as debt repayments continue, to cover 3.3 months of current account payments, below the 'BB' median of 4.2 months. Oman Investment Authority's (OIA) foreign assets are stable, at close to \$17 billion. Total net external debt, at 34% of GDP, is double the 'BB' median," the ratings agency noted.

Souq Al Wathbah witnesses excellent participation from SMEs and visitors

MUSCAT: The annual Ramadan Souq Al Wathbah, organised by the SMEs Development Authority and Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in the Sultanate of Oman, witnessed an exceptional participation from entrepreneurs, small enterprises owners as well as visitors.

The Souq, which was held from April 6 to 8, 2023, at Bank Muscat Head Office, Airport Heights, comes as part of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of Bank Muscat with participation of more than 160 entrepreneurs and SMEs.

Over a period of three days, the Souq saw a great turnout from visitors who toured the different pavilions for shopping and purchasing the Omani products encompassing fashion, beauty, health and food as well as services at competitive prices.

Speaking on the occasion, Ibrahim Khamis Salim al Bulushi, Senior Assistant General Manager – SME, at Bank Muscat, expressed his pleasure with the success of Souq Al Wathbah which reflects the bank's strategy to contribute to the development of the business's sector in the Sultanate of Oman as one of the vital sectors.

He stressed on the importance of enhancing partnership between the public and the private sectors to support MSMEs through various programmes and initiatives.

Ibrahim al Balushi said "Souq Al Wathbah constitutes a great importance as it creates an avenue to successfully market these small business' products and is



an opportunity to network with successful entrepreneurs and exchange experiences. The bank will continue to provide the best banking services and facilities to meet customers' and these institutions' expectations".

From his side, Khalfan bin Said al Khatri, Assistant Director of the Marketing and Events, SMEs Development Authority, extended his appreciation for the successful annual organisation of Souq Al Wathbah which is a great opportunity for SMEs and startups to showcase their products and services.

He said, "A variety of goods and commodities with competitive prices are displayed every year amid

wide participation of visitors.

Having the event held at Bank Muscat Head Office is a perfect choice as the building is well-equipped with service and facilities. Thanks to Bank Muscat for its pioneer role in promoting business's owners throughout its various initiatives".

Khalfan al Khatri also noted that the role played by MSMEs is of a great significance to foster economic stability through supporting youth who are an integral part of Oman Vision 2040.

A number of entrepreneurs expressed their happiness to participate in this year's edition of Souq Al Wathbah. Ahmed bin Khalid al Malki, business owner of

Basmat Ragul, said: "I am pleased to participate in Souq Al Wathbah which witnesses excellent participation from the first day. Such initiatives are really important as they provide support to SMEs. We hope this important initiative will continue to provide support to entrepreneurs."

Dina Issa al Zain, business owner of Tekkeya, said: "Souq Al Wathbah is a very important souq and it witnesses wide participation each year. It provides an opportunity to introduce different home-based projects and showcase their different products to visitors. I strongly encourage such initiatives because they serve a lot of people and bring together different businesses and projects under one roof."

Abraj first in Oman to receive API Q2 2nd edition certification for integrated fracturing services

MUSCAT: Abraj Energy Services, a leading provider of oil and gas services, is proud to announce that it has become the first company in the Sultanate of Oman to receive the API Q2 2nd Edition Certification for Integrated Fracturing Services from the American Petroleum Institute (API).

This milestone marks Abraj's commitment to providing high-quality services that adhere to global industry standards and its dedication to serving as a market leader within the oil and gas service industry.

The API Q2 2nd Edition Certification covers all of Abraj's services and validates the company's ability to consistently meet customer needs, industry standards, and regulatory requirements. This certification is a testament to Abraj's robust quality management system, which focuses on competency, service design, contingency planning, supply chain controls, preventive maintenance, inspection, service quality plans, and change management.

"We are thrilled to have achieved this significant milestone, and we are proud to be the first company in Oman to receive this certification," said Eng Saif al Hamhami, Abraj CEO. "This recognition is a testament to our team's hard work and dedication to providing high-quality services that meet and exceed our customers' expectations."

Abraj Energy Services is committed to delivering reliable, cost-effective, and sustainable solutions to its customers while maintaining the highest levels of safety, quality, and environmental stewardship. With this certification, Abraj Energy Services demonstrates its continued commitment to achieving excellence in all aspects of its operations.



Hyundai offers special deals for Ramadhan



MUSCAT: This Ramadhan, special deals on Hyundai's sedan and SUV range are making ownership of these globally popular vehicles a breeze for enthusiasts of this South Korean auto brand here in Oman.

Prices across the diverse and impressive line-up now come bundled with the following exciting benefits included: VAT, insurance and registration for the first year, and three years of unlimited mileage lube service.

At the same time, EMIs have been reined in to bring some of Hyundai's highly coveted machines within easy reach of customers in Oman.

EMIs start as low as RO 98 for the Elantra, RO 104 for Venue, RO 105 for Creta, RO 120 for Kona, RO 150 for the Tucson, and RO 173 for the SantaFe – tariffs that are budget-friendly and cost-competitive.

Choose from Hyundai's spectacular world of sedans – a byword for power, versatility and endless options. The line-up includes the 2023 Hyundai Elantra in two engine choices 1.6L & 2.0L, a sedan optimised

for performance, efficiency and comfort.

Then there is the Accent, a compact family car with the look and feel of a full-size sedan. Sonata, the feature laden large size sedan, has evolved over the decades to rank among the most loved of Hyundai's offerings.

For those with a penchant for family adventures both on and off-road, Hyundai comes with an equally unmatched choice of SUVs each with their distinctive styling, superior performance features, and uncompromising safety.

In the subcompact 5-seater SUV category is the powerful and fuel-efficient Venue, perhaps the smallest of Hyundai's SUVs but outstanding in its value proposition.

The Hyundai range is exclusively marketed in Oman by OTE Group, a leading distributor of reputable international automotive brands. Visit Hyundai showrooms located in major cities across the country for a first-hand look and feel of the complete line-up of Hyundai sedans and SUVs.

Chance to win gold this Ramadhan with Spar Oman

MUSCAT: In the spirit of the holy month, Spar Oman is giving customers the opportunity to win gold coins under its festive promotion that is being run across 25 outlets across Oman. To be eligible for the promotion which runs until the end of Ramadhan, customers have to purchase a minimum value of RO 5 at any Spar outlet.

Spar Oman has rewarded the first set of winners of the ongoing Ramadhan promotion, by presenting them with gold coins on a special event. The prize distribution ceremony was held at Spar's Madinat Al Sultan Qaboos (MQ) branch, where 13 lucky winners were presented with a gold coin each, by the supermarket chain's senior management members. The



ceremony was attended by shoppers, well-wishers, management and the staff of SPAR Oman.

Congratulating the winners and urging more customers to shop and get a chance to win, Moosapeta Sridhar, CEO of Consumer

Products Goods, KR Group mentioned: "Spar Oman constantly strives to enhance the customer experience by making the buying process rewarding in more than one respect. The response to this year's promotion is overwhelming, and we hope more customers shop and get a chance to win gold coins this Ramadhan."

He added: "Spar Oman comes up with meaningful deals and discounts to meet consumer needs for every season and occasion. Other promotions, deals, offers and discounts are also being offered alongside the 'Shop and Win a Gold Coin' promotion, to make shopping at Spar Oman an enjoyable and rewarding experience for our customers this Ramadhan."

JAC announces 'Season of Giving, Just got Better' campaign

MUSCAT: In celebration of this special time of year, JAC Motors Oman is thrilled to announce its latest campaign, 'Season of Giving, Just Got Better' with an exciting display of offers and benefits that you won't want to miss out on.

The campaign started on March 13, 2023 and will continue till July 12, 2023, JAC Motors Oman is offering amazing cash gifts on all JAC models, ranging from RO 1,400 to RO 2,500.

This means that you can now save more on your favourite JAC vehicles and get the best value for your money.

Whether you're looking for a compact SUV like the JAC S3, a



sporty and versatile SUV like the JAC JS4, a sleek and sophisticated

sedan like the JAC J7, or a tough and durable pickup truck like the

JAC T8, JAC Motors Oman has got you covered.

To make the most of this incredible opportunity, visit Towell Auto Centre today to take advantage of the 'Season of Giving, Just Got Better' campaign and start your journey with JAC Motors Oman.

Stay up-to-date on the latest news, events, and promotions by following JAC Motors Oman on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. With the wide range of JAC models, amazing cash gifts, and unbeatable service package offers, there's no better time to get behind the wheel of a brand new JAC vehicle during the holy month of Ramadhan.



Economy not on the mend yet as recession fears persist



ANDY JALIL
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The writer is our foreign correspondent based in the UK.

A recession is still on the cards in the UK despite the economy performing better than the experts were warning just a few months ago, according to new forecasts.

Higher interest rates and households responding to the cost of living crunch gripping their finances by trimming spending is tipped to push GDP 0.3 per cent lower this year, according to consultancy KPMG.

Families are being hit by the worst inflation surge in forty years and by the Bank of England (BoE) increasing borrowing costs to tame it.

Bank governor Andrew Bailey and his team of economists increased rates for the eleventh time in a row at the end of March to 4.25 per cent a post-financial crisis high, as he stepped up the central bank's fight against inflation.

KPMG reckons the BoE will keep rates at that level for the whole of this year, weighing on household and business spending. As a result, "although the likelihood of a UK recession has fallen it has not dissipated entirely" the firm said in its latest set of UK and global economic forecasts.

The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), Britain's official forecaster, at chancellor Jeremy Hunt's first budget in March raised its GDP forecasts for this year on the basis that households will raid their savings to maintain spending.

Back in November, BoE projected the UK was on course for the longest recession in a century. But now, despite the slightly better outlook, OBR chief Richard Hughes warned at the end of March in a TV interview that families in the UK are grappling with the biggest hit

to their living standards since records began.

KPMG experts also said a slowdown in the housing market caused by higher mortgage rates freezing potential buyers out of a home purchase and weaker business investment will clamp down on economic growth.

The UK is tipped to be the only G7 country to undergo an economic contraction this year. Growth is also poised to flatline in 2024, with GDP only bumping 0.6 per cent higher.

Separate numbers at the end of last month from consultancy PwC reveal UK household debt has topped £2 trillion for the first time on record, with risky borrowing up just over 7 per cent over the last year, showing families are turning to borrowing to fund spending amid the cost of living crisis.

The global economy is also not out of the woods as yet as it faces its darkest outlook for more than 30 years as geopolitical tensions and sky-high inflation take their toll, according to the head of the International Monetary Fund.

In a speech ahead of the fund's spring meeting earlier this month, Kristalina Georgieva said output around the world would rise by an average of just 3 per cent a year for the next five years – the weakest projection since 1990 and well below the average annual growth of 3.8 per cent over the past two decades.

"With rising geopolitical tensions and still-high inflation, a robust recovery remains elusive," said Georgieva. "This harms the prospects of everyone, especially for the most vulnerable people and vulnerable countries." She said over the past three years the global economy has been "climbing one great hill after another only to discover there are many more to come."

"First was Covid, then Russia's invasion of Ukraine, inflation and a cost of living crisis that hit everyone," she added. "But the path ahead, and especially the path back to robust growth, is rough and foggy, and the ropes that hold us together may be weaker now than they were."

Bank failures in Switzerland and the US exposed frailties that raised the downside risks for the global economy, she said. The fund predicts 90 per cent of advanced economies will see growth slow this year.

Oman weighs Concentrated Solar Power project at Duqm

Renewables portfolio: Thermal storage to be included in project scope

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

A first-of-its-kind Concentrated Solar Power (CSP) project is envisioned for development near Duqm in Al Wusta Governorate as part of Oman's pivot away from gas-powered electricity generation to renewables-based sources.

The initiative, subject to the findings of a feasibility study, will add to a mixed portfolio of renewable resources and technologies being explored by the Oman Power and Water Procurement Company (OPWP) – the sole national buyer of power and water output – to help achieve Oman's targets for the decarbonisation of the power generation sector.

Those targets prescribe a minimum 35 – 39 per cent share of national electricity supply coming from renewables by the year 2040. CSP technology complements solar photovoltaic (PV) technology of the kind that's in use at Oman's first large-scale grid-connected 500 MWp solar power plant in operation at Ibri in Al Dhahirah Governorate.



The one-million odd solar panels installed at site convert sunlight into electricity, which is then channelled into the national grid. In the case of CSP technology, however, mirrors arrayed in concentric circles reflect solar radiation on to a centrally located thermal receiver, with the heat captured and stored by a fluid to power a turbine to generate electricity.

As the liquid can absorb and store solar energy, this heat can also be used later to power a turbine during periods of low sunlight, and even at night. Significantly, OPWP's vision for a CSP project at Duqm also includes thermal storage within its scope

to ensure a degree of stabilised electricity supply from the plant.

A feasibility study into the project – originally envisaged with a capacity of around 600 MW, was earlier slated to be completed in 2022. Once deemed viable, OPWP plans to include the CSP project in its procurement strategy, it said.

That procurement strategy envisions the procurement of new solar and wind based Independent Power Projects on an annual basis over the next several years through 2028.

Slated for development over this period are three solar PV projects (including Manah I and Manah II Solar IPPs), five wind IPPs and one Waste-to-Energy project. Also

being prepped for implementation are a new solar IPP within the Main Interconnected System (MIS) for launch in 2027, Ras Madrasah Wind IPP (Al Wusta Governorate) also in 2027, and Sadah Wind IPP (Dhofar Governorate) in 2028.

Importantly, no new gas-based thermal capacity is in the cards for procurement during this period, with OPWP focused solely on renewable energy projects over this timeframe. However, any supply shortfalls will be met through short-term capacity pacts or energy imports via interconnections with neighbouring power systems, or other local operators with surplus capacity on their hands.

Cryptocurrency phishing grows by 40% in one year

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

International cybersecurity company Kaspersky says its anti-phishing systems have prevented 5 million cryptocurrency-related phishing attacks in 2022, increasing by 40 per cent compared to the previous year.

Conversely, there was a decrease in the detection of traditional financial threats, such as banking and mobile financial malware. These and other findings can be found in the company's latest report on financial threats.

According to a new report, the financial threat landscape has seen significant changes in 2022. While attacks using traditional financial threats such as banking PC and mobile malware have become less common, cybercriminals shifted their attention to new areas,



including the crypto industry.

In the last year, cryptocurrency phishing rose significantly and was included as a separate category, demonstrating 40 per cent year-on-year growth with 5,040,520 detections of crypto phishing in 2022 compared to 3,596,437 in 2021.

This increase in crypto phishing could be partially explained by the havoc that occurred on the crypto market last year. It is still unclear

if the trend will continue, this depends on the trust users place in cryptocurrency.

This data correlates with users' experiences with cryptocurrency threats explored by Kaspersky earlier this year – every seventh person surveyed was affected by cryptocurrency phishing.

Although most crypto scams feature traditional tricks such as giveaway scams or fake wallet phishing pages, a recent active fraudulent scheme shows scammers are constantly coming up with new techniques to ensure their success.

In this campaign, the user receives a PDF file in English by mail, stating that they allegedly registered on a cryptocurrency cloud mining platform a long time ago and need to urgently withdraw a lot of crypts since their account is inactive.

The file contains a link to a fake mining platform.

To withdraw the crypt, the user must fill out a form with personal information, including the card or account number, and pay a commission, in this case, through a crypto wallet or directly to the specified wallet address.

"Despite some problems that have occurred in the cryptocurrency market over the past six months, in the minds of many people, crypto still remains a symbol of getting rich quick with minimal effort.

Therefore, the flow of scammers parasitising in this field does not dry out. In order to lure victims into their networks, these scammers continue to come up with new and more interesting stories," commented Olga Svistunova, a security expert at Kaspersky.

Youth Centre receives 50,000 visitors since launch

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, APRIL 11

The Youth Centre has reported more than 50,000 beneficiaries of its spaces since its opening in October, according to data shared by Chief Executive Officer Zaid al Salmani. "The centre has an average of 400 visitors per day – even more; this an indicator of the importance of having a space dedicated to the youth," shared Al Salmani.

A first of its kind, the Youth Centre was launched in last October under the auspices of His Highness Sayyid Theyazin bin Haitham al Said, Minister

of Culture, Sports and Youth to support and hone the skills and talents of young people in line with Oman Vision 2040.

The Centre, located in Muscat Grand Mall, offers a variety of training programmes aimed at young people in Oman. According to Al Salmani, the Centre has concluded over 78 training programmes in various fields around the Sultanate of Oman, with over 20,000 beneficiaries as of March this year.

Additionally, the Centre in Muscat offers a space and various facilities for young people to use free of charge. This includes a



photography studio, an audio recording studio, an art space, a table tennis hall, a 3D printing lab, a drone lab, and a music hall with musical instruments. In addition to a reference library

with over 600 titles, including braille and audiobooks for the visually impaired.

According to Al Salmani, visitors can put in requests for titles not available in the

library. Additionally, the Centre provides laptops and tablets for users to check out. Visitors also have the option of renting out office spaces, and multimedia meeting rooms free of charge.

The Centre also serves as an incubator for local SMEs. "The Centre, in cooperation with the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority, serves as an incubator of twenty small and medium enterprises operating in the creative industry," shared Al Salmani, adding, "The creative industry is one of the industries that won't be replaced by

automation, due to its need for human creativity."

According to Al Salmani, each SME receives a specialised training and marketing plan, in addition to the chance of participating in local and global exhibitions.

The concept of the Centre was first introduced in October of 2021, under the directive of HH Sayyid Theyazin to serve as an "incubator for developing the capabilities of youth, discovering their talents and nurturing their creativity". According to Al Salmani, the Centre is expected to expand its branches to all governorates in the near future.

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ramadhan



Diverse cuisine reflects Oman's rich history and heritage

Food has always been a central theme of Ramadhan in Oman. Historically, the people of Oman broke their fast with simple meals of dates and water, followed by a larger meal later in the evening. Today, Omani favourite dishes mix well with Arabic, Indian and other dishes served not just in homes but also different business establishments.... **P20**



QUR'AN VERSE OF THE DAY

Say, O Muhammad, "Travel through the land and observe how He began creation. Then Allah will produce the final creation. Indeed Allah, over all things, is competent."

Surah Al-Ankaboot, 20

HADITH A GUIDE FOR THE FAITHFUL

Ibn 'Abbas reported that the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, "Do not dispute with your brother. Do not make fun of him. Do not make a promise to him and then break it."

Da'if (Al-Albani)

HEALTH TIPS

Having three meals is still important during this holy month: Iftar, a light evening snack, and Suhoor. This would help you avoid continuous snacking throughout the non-fasting hours.



STORIES FROM THE QURAN



The Story of the Owners of the Elephant

{ALLAH THE ALMIGHTY SAYS: {Have you not considered, O Muhammad, how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant? Did He not make their plan into misguidance? And He sent against them birds in flocks,

Striking them with stones of hard clay, And He made them like eaten straw.}

BEFORE PROPHET MUHAMMAD was born, the governor of Abyssinia, Abraha Al-Ashram, had built a

place of worship and asked all Arabs to worship there. But the Arabs refused to bow down. Their loyalty lay with the Ka'aba, built by Ibrahim. Abraha swore to destroy the Ka'aba.

The Abyssinians had tame elephants that they used in wars. Abraha gathered his army of men and elephants and marched toward Makkah. As he advanced towards the Ka'aba, he defeated the tribes, enslaving the people and seizing their property. Included in this were two hundred camels that belonged to 'Abdul Muttalib Ibn Hashim, the Prophet's grandfather, who was then, the leader of the Quraish.

The tribes of Quraish, Kinanah, and Hudhail decided to fight against

Abraha, but they realised that they could not afford such a war and gave up the plan. Abraha, meanwhile, sent a messenger to the Quraish, who were taking care of the Ka'aba. In his message, Abraha declared that he had come only to destroy the Sacred House and would not harm anyone unnecessarily. He said that if the people did not want to fight, their leader should come and meet Abraha.

Abdul Muttalib, after listening to the message, said: "By Allah! We do not intend to fight. Really, we cannot afford it. This is the Sacred House of Allah and His Khalil (friend) Ibrahim. He Alone can protect it if He wills to." Abraha, arrogantly claimed that no one could defend the Ka'aba from him. Abdul

Muttalib ordered Quraish to evacuate Mecca and move to the mountains. They invoked Allah to protect the Ka'aba. Abdul Muttalib set out with all the Quraish to the mountains seeking shelter and waiting to see what would happen next.

Allah the Almighty then sent birds from the seaside that resembled hawks. Each bird held three stones: one in its beak and one in each leg. The birds dropped these stones on the Abyssinians killing them. Some Abyssinians fled while death pursued them every way they went. They tried to go back the way. Allah the Almighty also sent a severe wind that added to the speed and strength of the stones and caused the majority of the army to perish.



An iftar with a social cause

By Kabeer Yousuf
@kabeeryousef

A typical gathering for iftar is over quite quickly once the fast is broken and the congregation has prayed together, listened to a speech by a senior member of the community, and shared the evening meal, known as the suhour. But the Dawoodi Bohra Muslim community breaks their fast after the sunset prayers with dates, water and tea. Later community members come together for an iftar dinner consisting of traditional Bohra delicacies.

Ramadhan preparations begin weeks in advance when volunteers are appointed to plan daily religious affairs, organise iftar meals to break the daily fast, and find ways to manage cleanliness and waste in and around the masjid. Usually, just as the Omanis do, preparations to welcome the holy month begin weeks beforehand with the cleaning of their houses and workplaces. This year, around 950 members of the Dawoodi Bohra community in Muscat took part in the cleaning campaign to prepare their place of worship for Ramadhan.

comprising volunteers in the food preservation sector, oversees the food consumption, ensuring that members receive nutritious meals, while ensuring that not even a single grain of food is wasted.

TYPICAL BOHRA FASTING
A typical fasting in the Bohra community begins with tahajjud, before the dawn, Dua and Tilawat. And after Sehri the members of the community pray Fajr. At midday, they offer Zohrana namaz. After every namaz, the Bohra members recite various duas, and after Magrib salah they break their fast

cuisines served in Bohra meals include biryani, kari-chawal, dal-chawal, dabba gosht, khichda, patveliya (made of arvi leaves) and smoked samosas.

LEARNING NEVER STOPS
The Dawoodi Bohra community places great importance on education, knowledge and acquiring spiritual wealth. Sultan al Bohra Syedna Mufaddal Saifuddin also makes constant efforts to spread the memorisation of the Holy Quran movement throughout the community. To that end, special Quran hifz classes for Ramadhan for all ages



Community centres also have a practice of preparing extra food to serve those who are less fortunate in the neighbourhood. Special iftar dinner programmes are also organised to host friends from local authorities and neighbours to share the traditional Bohra meal and converse in a spirit of unity and brotherhood. The 350 close-knit families form the Dawoodi Bohras of Muscat, which first settled here in the 1960s, hold iftar and suhour gatherings at Jamia Masjid. They stand out for their community spirit and consideration for those in wider society.

As part of their year-round, global Project Rise initiative, Dawoodi Bohras everywhere undertake activities to protect and enhance the local environment. Ramadhan is a time when such activities increase, as Bohras find ways to help those outside of their immediate community. This year, the Dawoodi Bohras of Muscat planted several saplings in and around their masjid in Darsait. The community has replaced single-used plastic bottles with reusable bottles - a decision that has prevented 1,000 plastic bottles a year going to landfill. The Dawoodi Bohra community kitchens team,

and then pray Isha before taking their meals. **MAJOR ITEMS FOR BOHRA IFTAR**
The Bohra community pays great attention to healthy eating and observes moderation in their meals. They never overeat as they are guided by the Prophet's principle: "Nothing is worse than a person who fills his stomach. It should be enough for the son of Adam to have a few bites to satisfy his hunger. If he wishes more, it should be: one-third for his food, one-third for his liquids, and one-third for his breath." Some of the traditional Bohra

are conducted during this month just like in other months. There are over 7,500 Bohra huffaz (those who have memorised the entire Quran) across the world. A 5 year-old girl from Houston, America, is the youngest hafiz of the Holy Quran in the community. Other social welfare activities that are part of the community's global philanthropic arm "Project Rise" include education and medical support for workers and widows, as well as extending support to various relief aids in Türkiye, Syria, and Pakistan and other countries wherever natural disasters have left thousands of people vulnerable and in need.

TRAVEL TALES

Booking the Paris Olympics for 2024? What You Need to Know.



ALL EYES WILL BE ON PARIS in 2024, when the French capital hosts the 33rd Summer Olympic Games. The global sporting event, which runs from July 26 to August 11, is expected to draw 10,500 Olympic athletes vying for some of the biggest accolades of their careers – and millions of spectators watching them do it.

The flow of sports fans into the city should create a very different spirit to the stripped-down experience of the last Summer Games, hosted by Tokyo in 2021, which was postponed a year because of the pandemic and saw athletes competing to almost empty stands because of Covid protocols.

In a further leap from Tokyo's deserted scenes, Paris 2024's opening ceremony will be the first in Olympic history to be held outside a stadium; the city instead is inviting the public to cheer on delegates on a flotilla of boats proceeding down a nearly 4-mile route on the River Seine. Tickets will be sold for seating on the lower banks and other areas, but the upper banks will be free for the public to watch from.

After the Olympic Games, the athletic competition continues in Paris with the Paralympic Games, which will take place from August 28 to Sept. 8.

Considering making the trip to the City of Lights? Here's what you need to know.

HOW DO I BUY TICKETS?

Ticket sales for the Paris Olympics' almost 10 million spectator spots have already begun, but it's not too late to snag some of your own.

Keep in mind that the Paris 2024 ticketing website is the only official platform for international spectators to purchase tickets, with prospective buyers warned that any other sites selling tickets are unauthorised and could be subject to cancellation.

The first phase of sales, in which some 3.25 million tickets were sold, ended in March.

If you missed that, don't worry: There's still time to enter the draw for the second phase of ticket sales, which closes April 20 at 6 pm Central European Time. Successful entrants will be notified by email after May 9 and will be given a 48-hour slot to buy tickets to individual sporting events, as well as for seats to the opening and closing ceremonies.

There are more than 750 events to choose from, so perusing the Paris 2024 calendar, seating plans and ticket prices ahead of booking is a good idea. Pricing will vary depending on the seating and event type (tickets for handball competitions, for example, range from 24 to 190 euros, or about \$26 to \$205; while tickets for track and field, which is listed as "athletics," range from 24 euros to 980 euros). It's possible that some of the most popular events will have sold out. Each registered account can buy a maximum of 30 tickets, with a maximum of six tickets per event, although some events will limit that number to four tickets.

Tickets to the Paralympic Games will go on sale on the Paris 2024 site this fall, with options including single tickets and day passes.

WHEN SHOULD I BOOK ACCOMMODATION IN PARIS?

While some Paris hotels are already taking bookings for summer 2024, many don't open their reservation calendars until about 400 days before the intended stay, or around July 2023.

That might be in part because they are still waiting to gauge commitments to the International Olympic Committee, its sponsors and other VIPs, said Henry Hartevelde, the founder of Atmosphere Research Group, a travel industry research company based in the United States.

Hartevelde also said to anticipate hotels and airlines raising prices around the time of the Games. "Be prepared for sticker shock," he added.

Short-term rental companies like Airbnb and VRBO are already opening bookings for next summer. (Airbnb is an official partner of the Games, a pairing that has stoked displeasure from hoteliers in France, who have campaigned for more regulation against the rental giant.)

The demand for housing will likely boom closer to the Games, as more of the total 10 million tickets are snapped up.

Rob Stern, an independent travel adviser based in North Carolina, expects that "there will be a big scramble" for accommodation as more people secure tickets and once flight bookings open. He added that people would be wise to book hotel dates as early as possible.

With 35 sporting venues spread across Paris, and a few events happening outside of the French capital, some attendees unbothered by a longer commute are opting to stay on the outskirts of the city to try to save on costs. (The official site offers a map of the venues and estimates the travel time between each.)

"I would have a look to see where there are any smaller towns to get to the venue rather than booking directly in Paris," said Val Stevens, 78, who will travel from West Yorkshire, England, to Paris next summer for her third Olympics. She is planning to stay with friends outside of the capital who live on a direct line into Paris.

WHEN SHOULD I BOOK MY FLIGHTS?

Airlines have not opened their flight schedules for summer 2024; some will begin offering them around 330 days before departure.

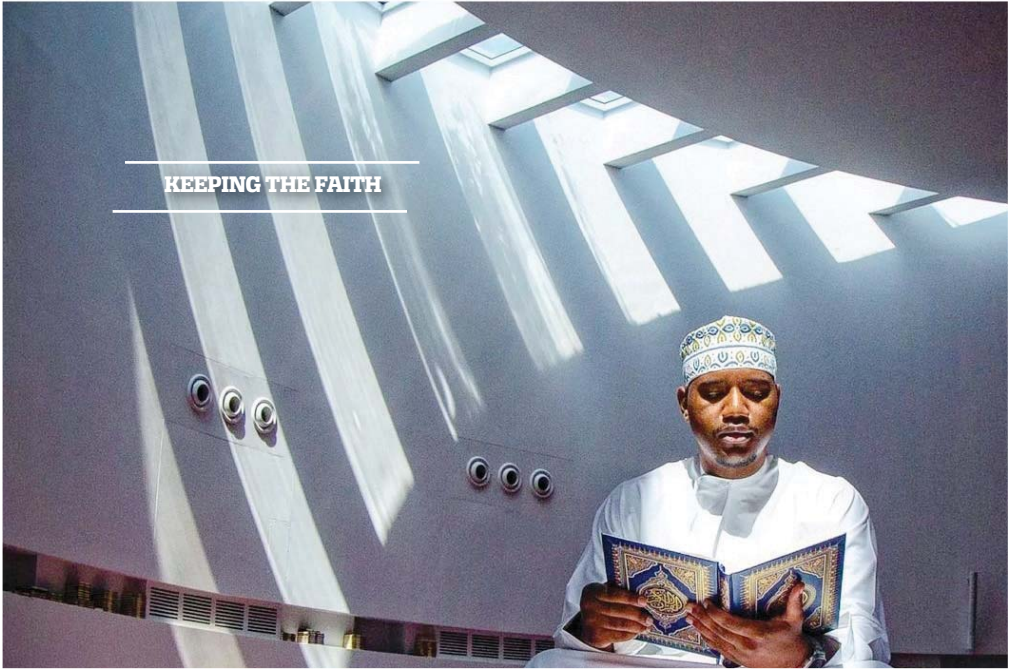
Travel experts warn that the cost of flights to Paris for summer 2024 could surge beyond flight prices to the French capital for this summer season, and to reserve as soon as possible.

"If you add the demand of the already popular summer destination that Paris is and you add an event to it – well, wow," said Stern, the travel adviser, who said he had booked one economy trip from Kansas City to Paris, and Rome to Kansas City, for nearly \$1,700. He said that travelers should consider being flexible with travel dates or consider low-cost carriers to try and save on costs.

He also suggested travelers consider flying into another European city before the Games, then travel to Paris from there. — **NYT**

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AROUND THE WORLD

ENTERTAINMENT

ROHM to close season with Mozart's Cosi Fan Tutte



THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE Muscat is delighted to present Mozart's stunning opera *Cosi Fan Tutte* as the final opera of the 2022/2023 Season at the opera house. Audiences are invited to celebrate opera with a production which promises to do justice to the work of arguably the best-loved composer of the opera genre.

Acclaimed young composer Leonardo Sini, a rising star in the world of music, will conduct the Luigi Cherubini Youth Orchestra in Ettore Scuola's direction of *Cosi Fan Tutte*. The 1685 Choir of the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory of Ravenna will perform alongside star soloists including Martina Russomanno, Serena Malfi, German Olvera, Alasdair Kent, Lavinia Bini and Ferruccio Furlanetto.

The plot takes place in the Bay of Naples in the 18th century. Deeply convinced of women's infidelity, the cynical Don Alfonso provokes his young friends Ferrando and Guglielmo by impugning the constancy of their fiancées, sisters Dorabella and Fiordiligi. To prove his assertion, Alfonso proposes the following plan to them: that they tell their fiancées they are leaving for war, and then return dressed as Albanian soldiers, ready to do anything to seduce the lonely fiancées. With their "real" lovers gone, Fiordiligi and Dorabella appear outraged when their servant



Despina (Don Alfonso's accomplice) introduces into their home the two Albanians, who quickly prove very enterprising. The two sisters at first reject them virtuously but soon allow themselves to be charmed by these new suitors who, under a false identity, gradually become disillusioned as they see their mistresses betraying them. "They all do that!" (*Cosi fan tutte*) Don Alfonso concludes, delighted to have proved his theory. When the deception is revealed, the two couples reunite despite it all, with no great illusion about their happiness.

The opera is rich with fabulous costumes and elegant staging, making it the perfect evening out and a feast for opera lovers and culture enthusiasts. Don't miss your chance to catch this wonderful performance in Muscat. *Cosi Fan Tutte* will take place over two nights on May 4 & 6, at 7.30 pm at the Royal Opera House Muscat.

For information or to purchase tickets, contact the box office, visit the website or the ROHM app.

LIFESTYLE

Food historian says pizza, carbonara are American not Italian foods



FOOD HISTORY professor Alberto Grandi made some polarising claims in a recent interview, saying many Italian dishes are actually more American in heritage.

Grandi, who teaches at the University of Parma in Italy, told the Financial Times that he had been questioning the authenticity of certain "Made in Italy" dishes for years, specifically naming pizza, carbonara and Parmesan cheese.

"When a community finds itself deprived of its sense of identity, because of whatever historical shock or fracture with its past, it invents traditions to act as founding myths," he said, implying Italy's food history could be more fiction than fact.

"Italian cuisine really is more American than it is Italian," Grandi stated in the interview.

The assertions struck a chord with the Italian government. The same day the article was published, Italy's ministers of Culture and Agriculture made a formal submission of entering Italian cuisine into candidacy for "World Heritage Site" status with Unesco.

That won't be decided until 2025, but the ministries also applied to have Unesco recognize Italian cuisine on the 2023 "Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity."

Unesco, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, is a specialised agency of the United Nations that describes part of



its mission on its website as encouraging "the identification, protection and preservation of cultural and natural heritage around the world considered to be of outstanding value to humanity."

But now the debate for whose culture belongs to whom is heating up. Grandi reacted to the government's attempt, telling *La Repubblica* that there's "a lot of bulls —" in the Unesco application they submitted.

In a separate statement to CNN, Grandi explained his emotion around the controversy, saying part of the idea that Italians emigrated to the US and taught people how to cook is offensive.

"They emigrated because they had nothing to eat here, they were poor," he said. "They left because they were starving. It's offensive to our grandparents to paint it differently."

— tca/dpa

DISCOVERY

It's Not a Stretch: This Dinosaur Had a 50-Foot Neck



FEW CREATURES HAVE pushed anatomy to its limits like sauropods. These supersized dinosaurs moved on pillar-like limbs that supported massive girth, wielded whip-like tails to ward off predators and used long necks to vacuum up foliage.

While this entire group of dinosaurs is referred to as "long necks," *Mamenchisaurus*, which roved around what is now China during the late Jurassic period, would have given other sauropods neck envy. In a new study, researchers estimate that *Mamenchisaurus*'s neck stretched to a length of nearly 50 feet. Longer than the average school bus, its neck may be the longest neck on an animal ever observed.

In 1987, paleontologists discovered the partial skeleton of a sauropod poking out of the rusty red sandstone of the Shishugou Formation in northwest China. The remains were fragmentary, consisting mostly of a lower jaw, bits of skull and a couple of vertebrae, but they hinted at an enormous animal that thundered across marshy plains 162 million years ago.

Researchers named the dinosaur *Mamenchisaurus sinocanadorum* and connected it to several other long-necked sauropods from East Asia.

But *Mamenchisaurus*'s true size remained an enigma. No other fossilised remains of the sauropod have been excavated, leaving scientists with only those couple of vertebrae to examine.

Andrew Moore, a paleontologist at Stony Brook University who studies sauropod anatomy, said that this was the case for many of the largest dinosaurs. "What's particularly tantalising and frustrating is that oftentimes, the longest necks belong to the things that are the least known in the fossil record for the simple reason that it's really hard to bury something that large," said Moore, who led the new study.

So he turned to the fossils of several close relatives of *Mamenchisaurus*, especially *Xinjiangtitan*, a slightly older sauropod discovered in northwest China in 2013. Remarkably, researchers unearthed *Xinjiangtitan*'s entire vertebral column. At nearly 44 feet long, it represents the longest complete neck in the fossil record. — **JACK TAMISIEA NYT/NYT**



ramadhan

Local Scene

f t i y l p v @omanobserver

WEDNESDAY | APRIL 12 | 2023

Diverse cuisine reflects Oman's rich history and heritage

As the sun sets over the Sea of Oman, the sound of the adhan echoes through the streets, signalling the end of another day of Ramadhan. For many Omani families, this is a time to come together and break their fast with a delicious meal. During the holy month of Ramadhan, food plays a central role in the lives of Omanis, and the country's diverse cuisine reflects its rich history and cultural heritage.

Ramadhan is a month-long period of fasting and spiritual reflection observed by Muslims worldwide. It is a time of introspection, prayer, and community, and is also a time for feasting. In Oman, Ramadhan is steeped in tradition and is celebrated with great enthusiasm. Families come together to share meals, exchange gifts, and participate in charitable activities.

Food has always been a central theme of Ramadhan in Oman. Historically, the people of Oman broke their fast with simple meals of dates and water, followed by a larger meal later in the evening. Traditional Omani cuisine is characterised by its simplicity and use of local ingredients, such as fish, rice, and dates. However, over the years, the eating habits of Omanis have evolved, and the cuisine has become more diverse, reflecting the country's changing demographics and cultural influences.

One of the most iconic Omani dishes is shuwa, a slow-cooked lamb or goat that is marinated in a blend of spices and wrapped in banana leaves before being buried in an underground pit oven for up to 24 hours. The result is a tender, flavourful meat that falls off the bone and is often served with rice or bread.

Another staple of the Omani Ramadhan table is harees, a savoury porridge made from cracked wheat and meat that is simmered for several hours until it reaches a smooth, creamy consistency. Harees is often flavoured with ghee, cinnamon, and cardamom, and are traditionally served with a side of dates.

For those with a sweet tooth, Omani desserts are a must-try during Ramadhan. Halwa, a sweet made from sugar, saffron, and rose water, is a favourite among Omanis and is often served as a dessert after the evening meal. Another popular dessert is luqimat, fried dough balls drizzled with syrup.

Preparing these dishes is no small feat, requiring hours of preparation and a keen sense of timing. In many households, the women of the family take charge of the cooking, waking up in the early hours of the morning to start preparing the ingredients for the day's iftar meal.

In some parts of Oman, particularly in rural areas, traditional cooking methods are still used. For example, shuwa is often cooked in a pit oven dug into the ground, with hot coals placed on top of the banana leaves to create an even heat. Harees is often cooked in a large cauldron over an open fire, with family members taking turns stirring the mixture to ensure it cooks evenly.

Over the years, Arabic and Indian, Lebanese and Moroccan cuisines have started to amalgamate into the iftar feast in Oman. Sometimes, it's even harder to distinguish which dish influences which. It is noticeable that there is always generous use of spices such as cumin, coriander, and cardamom to get bold flavours. If you're headed to restaurants or hotels, it's easy to see biryani, samosas, and kebabs mixed with Ramadhan staples like hummus, tabbouleh, and fattoush.

Despite the challenges of preparing these dishes, they remain an integral part of Omani culture and tradition. They serve not only to nourish the body during the holy month of Ramadhan but also to bring families and communities together in a spirit of unity and generosity.

Despite the abundance of food during Ramadhan, Omanis also prioritise giving back to their communities. Charitable acts such as feeding the less fortunate and donating to local charities are an integral part of Ramadhan in Oman. Many families prepare extra food during Ramadhan to give to those in need, and businesses often donate a portion of their profits to charity.

As Oman continues to modernise and evolve, the country's cuisine will undoubtedly continue to reflect these changes. However, during Ramadhan, traditional dishes such as Omani halwa and Arabic fattoush will always hold a special place in the hearts and stomachs of Omanis. Ramadhan in Oman is a time to come together, share food and stories, and celebrate the country's rich cultural heritage.

