

SAF begins recruitment

Acting in coordination with the Ministry of Labour, the Command of the Sultan's Armed Forces (COSAF) on Wednesday began implementing initial procedures to recruit citizens who meet the general conditions for recruitment and employment. Prior to the final stage of admission, the applicants undergo various stages of assessment in accordance with SAF procedures. **SEE ALSO P3**



P10

OMAN TO HOST JUNIOR AHF CUP FROM JAN 6



P13

OQ, SABIC AND KPI TO SET UP PETROCHEM COMPLEX IN DUQM



P17

MONA LISA IN OMANI OUTFIT



MUSCAT

HM RECEIVES THANKS FROM CHINA

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received thanks from President Xi Jinping Of the People's Republic of China in reply to His Majesty's congratulatory cable on the occasion of being re-elected as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party. In the cable, President Xi Jinping expressed his sincere sentiments and best wishes of good health and success to his Majesty. He also affirmed his keenness to develop the bilateral strategic partnership to serve the two countries and their peoples.

KYIV

RUSSIA INTENSIFIES ATTACKS ON UKRAINE

Russian forces stepped up mortar and artillery attacks on the recently liberated city of Kherson in southern Ukraine on Wednesday, Ukraine's military said, while also exerting constant pressure along front lines in eastern regions of the country. Russia fired 33 missiles from multiple rocket launchers at civilian targets in Kherson in the 24 hours to early Wednesday. **SEE P6**

BEIJING

US MAY RESTRICT FROM TRAVEL FROM CHINA

Beijing's sudden pivot away from containing Covid-19 has caused jitters around the world, with the United States saying it may restrict travel from China following its decision to end mandatory quarantine for overseas arrivals. China on Monday scrapped quarantine for inbound travellers from January 8. **SEE P7**

INSIDE



RARE HAIL BRINGS WINTER WHITE TO KUWAIT

P6



FORMER POPE BENEDICT VERY SICK: POPE FRANCIS

P7

HM receives message from Iran President



MUSCAT: His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik received a written message from President Dr Ebrahim Raisi of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The message deals with areas of cooperation between Oman and Iran in various fields. It was handed over to His Majesty the Sultan by Dr Hossein Amir Abdollahian, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, when his Majesty gave him an audience at Al Barakah Palace on Wednesday. The Minister conveyed greetings of the Iranian President to His Majesty and the Omani people. On his turn, His Majesty the Sultan asked the Minister to convey his sincere sentiments to President Raisi and the people of Iran. During the audience, areas of joint cooperation in various fields were reviewed. Viewpoints were also exchanged regarding regional and international developments. It was attended by Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, Ali Najafi, Ambassador of Iran to the Sultanate of Oman, and the delegation accompanying the Iranian Minister. — ONA **SEE ALSO P2**

Follow these simple steps for treatment abroad

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
[@afrahalbalushia](#)

To bring more transparency and simplicity, the Ministry of Health (MoH) has announced new guidelines for citizens seeking treatment abroad. MoH's Department of Treatment Abroad Affairs said applications must be sent only by e-mail (myrequestto-ta@moh.gov.om) or WhatsApp (24946385). The applicant must attach a medical report from a government hospital in the Sultanate of Oman (the date of its issuance does not exceed the last six months). It should also have a recommendation from patient's physician that treatment, which is sought by the patient, is not available in the country. MoH added that after presenting the application to the National Committee for Treatment Abroad, the patient will be informed of the committee's decision by e-mail or WhatsApp within 14 working days. The Ministry of Health has adopted a pragmatic way to handle requests for treatment abroad for serious health issues of the citizens. The Directorate of Treatment Abroad Affairs strives to provide the best foreign medical treatment at MoH expense. For treatment abroad, the following categories of Omanis



Applications must be sent only by e-mail (myrequestto-ta@moh.gov.om) or WhatsApp

are eligible: expatriates married to Omanis, Omanis married to expatriates, and women and children of an Omani woman from a foreign husband. The department shortlists patients for treatment abroad after conducting quality check of healthcare institutions. In some cases, the department invites senior consultants and specialists to Oman hospitals for treatment. It also helps Omani medical staff to keep abreast of latest medical developments and share best practices. Treatment abroad at the state's expense is one of the main pillars of the healthcare for citizens, and it is the last resort for critically ill patients.

Salalah Club wins HM Cup 2021

MUSCAT: Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Dr Saud bin Hamoud al Habsi, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, presided over a ceremony for the announcement of winners of His Majesty the Sultan's Cup for Youth 2021. Salalah Club was crowned champion of HM The Sultan's Cup for Youth, retaining the trophy in its repertory for the second year in a row. Al Bashaer Club bagged silver and Seeb won bronze. Basil bin Ahmed al Rowas,



Sports and Youth Under-Secretary, said in a speech on the occasion that the annual competition celebrates the accomplishments of clubs and, symbolically, rewards their efforts in enabling youth to practise various sports and cultural activities. **TURN TO P2**



NIGHT TEMPERATURES TO FALL

The Wilayat of Al Amerat received heavy rains on Wednesday. Night temperatures in Muscat, Suhar and Sur are expected to drop to under 20 degrees Celsius in the coming days. **REPORT ON P4**



HM receives written message from Iranian President



His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq gave audience to Dr Hossein Amir Abdollahian, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, at Al Barakah Palace on Wednesday. During the audience, areas of joint cooperation in various fields were reviewed. It was attended by Sayyid Badr Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, and Ali Najafi, Ambassador of Iran to Sultanate of Oman, and the delegation accompanying the Iranian minister. – ONA

Oman, Iran discuss means of enhancing cooperation



MUSCAT: Gen Sultan bin Mohammed al Numani, Minister of the Royal Office, received Dr Hossein Amir Abdollahian, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, on Wednesday. The two sides touched on areas of joint cooperation and means of enhancing them to serve the two countries' interests. They also reviewed the march of relations between Oman and Iran. The two ministers also discussed matters of mutual interest. The meeting was attended by the ambassador of Iran to Oman and the delegation accompanying the Iranian minister. – ONA

Number of service projects under way in Al Dakhiliyah

NIZWA: A number of service projects are currently under implementation in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate as part of the governorate's development programme and the balanced development which aim to achieve several development objectives and fundamentals that meet the needs of individuals and keep pace with the commercial, tourism and entertaining activities in cooperation with the public sector.

Shaikh Hilal bin Said al Hajri, Governor of Al Dakhiliyah, said that the upcoming period will see the signing of 55 agreements for the execution of development, services and restoration projects to the tune of RO 18 million. The projects vary between constructions of internal roads, car parks at tourist sites, road lighting, improving service and beautification facilities, improvement and construction of markets and public parks and slaughterhouses. The aim of these projects is to enhance services in the wilayats, creating job opportunities and supporting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and stimulating the economy.

Internal road projects were completed in the wilayats of Izki, Samayil and Manah. Work is under way to repair roads affected by heavy rains and wadis in the wilayats of Nizwa and Al Hamra. In addition, work is under way on the municipal council's abattoir in Nizwa. The work includes paving 700 metres and 4,000 sq metre car parks the implementation of which is currently at 90 per cent. Other projects include construction of 10,000 sq metre car parks at Nizwa Souq.

SALALAH CLUB WINS HM CUP



FROM PAGE 1

The contest, Al Rowas added, is a true interpretation of His Majesty the Sultan's attention to youth. He pointed out that the competition's goals include the motivation of clubs to initiate action for upgrading the level of activities of interest to youth and, thereby, become more capable of maximising their potential and meeting their aspirations.

The 2021 edition of the competition saw the participation of 31 clubs, which were: Al Shabab, Al Musannah, Dhofar, Yanqul, Jaalan, Al Seeb, Al Suwaiq, Al Nahda, Al Bashaer, Saham, Oman Club, Masirah, Qurayat, Salalah, Al Salam, Al Rustaq, Al Nasr, Bahla, Muscat, Al Khabourah, Sohar, Nizwa, Majees, Ibri, Ahli Sidab, Al Itifaq, Al Hamra, Al Wusta, Al Kamil W'al Wafi, Al Wahda and Bausher. — ONA





SEMINAR, EXPO TO SHED LIGHT ON HISTORY OF OMANI CAMEL



MUSCAT: In implementation of the directives of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, the Royal Camel Corps will organise a seminar and exhibition on Omani camel history in Riyadh from January 3 to 7, 2023.

The seminar, held in cooperation with Oman's embassy in Riyadh, seeks to spread awareness about Omani camels, their history, origins and their economic, social and cultural values. It also highlights the Royal Camel Corps' role in preserving breeds of Omani purebred camels.

The seminar reflects ongoing cooperation between Oman and Saudi Arabia in all fields, including exploring opportunities in camel-related economies, scholarly and other aspects of concern to those interested in camel affairs.

An exposition will be held on the sidelines of the seminar. It will highlight four elements: the history of Omani camels, the activities of the Royal Camel Corps (including services it renders to camel rearing communities), the role of the Directorate General of Veterinary

Services at the Royal Court Affairs and the heritage arts associated with camels, including songs of Bedouin people, and two photography exhibitions to be staged by the Omani Society for Fine Arts on the theme of camels.

— ONA

SAF Command begins recruitment process



MUSCAT: Acting in coordination with the Ministry of Labour, the Command of the Sultan's Armed Forces (COSAF) on Wednesday began implementing initial procedures to recruit citizens who meet the general conditions for recruitment and employment.

Prior to the final stage of admission, the applicants undergo various stages of assessment in accordance with SAF recruitment procedures. To achieve speedy implementation of procedures, the COSAF put in place all expertise,

specialised human resources, administrative and health requirements, and transportation in a manner that provides an appropriate environment for citizens to join the military service and play their part of national duty. — ONA

Saudi delegation visits NDC

MUSCAT: A delegation from the Ministry of National Guard of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), headed by Maj Gen Ghazi Sanat al Otaibi, on Wednesday visited the National Defence College (NDC). Upon the arrival of the guests at the headquarters of the NDC at Bait Al Falaj, they were greeted by Rear Admiral Ali bin Abdullah al Shidi, Commandant of the NDC.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed several matters of mutual interest. Members of the visiting delegation were briefed on the college's facilities and equipment, as well as its various departments and halls designed according to the latest specifications and equipped with the best educational systems, training aids and multi-purpose electronic network systems.

The meeting was attended by Brigadier Nasser bin Rashid al Kalbani, Deputy Commandant of the NDC and Dr Salim bin Said al Kindi, Academic Representative of Sultan Qaboos University



(SQU) at the NDC.

Meanwhile, Maj Gen Hamid bin Ahmed Sakroon, Chairman of the Academy for Strategic and Defence Studies, received in his office at Bait Al Falaj the visiting Saudi delegation headed by Maj Gen Ghazi Sanat al Otaibi.

The two sides discussed several

matters of mutual interest.

Members of the delegation were briefed on the academy's facilities and equipment, as well as its academic and training systems that are set according to the latest specifications required for the academy to carry out its national duties. — ONA

Oman Sailing Festival 2022 concludes in Musandam

MUSCAT: The final stop on the Oman Sailing Festival, a nationwide tour organised by Oman Sail to introduce local communities the length and breadth of the coastline, concluded in Musandam with participation of more than 20 SMEs and over 780 people taking the chance to Try Sailing, Try Windsurfing and Try Kitesurfing over the four days.

Held at Bassa public beach, Oman Sail's professional instructors welcomed potential sailors of all ages for an introductory lesson and take the first step towards a life on the water. Even more people from Musandam and the surrounding area visited the festival to see the wide range of traditional delicacies, arts, crafts, and souvenirs for sale courtesy of local SMEs.

Ali al Sheheimi, Oman Sailing Festival Project Manager, said, "This was a fantastic place to conclude a really impactful Oman Sailing Festival. For the past two months, we have visited coastal communities to share the possibilities that sailing can offer – whether competitively or as a leisure activity. Sailing has been an important part of Oman's history



and traditions, and it has been Oman Sail's mission for the past 14 years to reignite this maritime

heritage." "We are very pleased with the enthusiasm of everyone at each

stop this year and are very proud to offer SMEs the chance to show their capabilities and reach a

new audience. Planning for 2023 edition will begin soon and we will be looking to build on the success



of this year to offer an even bigger event next year," he added.

The Oman Sailing Festival has also helped share an important environmental message at each stop by organising a beach clean-up, run in partnership with Environment Society of Oman (ESO). In Musandam, more than 60 people – including community volunteers, and Oman Sail staff – helped to remove waste from the shores and preserve the natural habitat for native wildlife.

The Oman Sailing Festival was supported by Oman Air, National Mineral Water Company (Tanuf), Environment Society of Oman (ESO), and National University of Science and Technology (International Maritime College).



Impact of low pressure to ease gradually





RECALL CAMPAIGN
FOR CADILLAC ESCALADE / CHEVROLET TAHOE,
SUBURBAN / GMC YUKON MODEL VEHICLES



Date of Recall: 29/12/2022

Campaign Type: Safety Recall

Recall Segment: Seat belts

Product Description: Cadillac Escalade 2021-2022 / Cadillac Escalade ESV 2021-2022 / Chevrolet Tahoe 2021-2022 / Chevrolet Suburban 2021-2022 / GMC Yukon 2021-2022 / GMC Yukon XL 2021-2022

Model Year	Division	Vehicle Model	Affected Vehicle Vin Range	No. of Affected Vehicles in Oman
2021-2022	Cadillac	Escalade	1GYS47KL0MR208081 to 1GYS47KLXNR308058	128
2021-2022	Cadillac	Escalade ESV	1GYS48KL1MR326520 to 1GYS48KLXNR179857	18
2021-2022	Chevrolet	Tahoe	1GNSC8K0MR289792 to 1GNSK8KLXNR214982	659
2021-2022	Chevrolet	Suburban	1GNSK9ED2MR210238 to 1GNSK9KD9NR117044	36
2021-2022	GMC	Yukon	1GKS27ED0NR182183 to 1GKS27KLXNR228047	480
2021-2022	GMC	Yukon XL	1GKS28KD0MR166669 to 1GKS28KLXNR237028	29

DESCRIPTION:
In certain of these vehicles, the rivet that retains the buckle to the mounting bracket in the left or right side third-row seatbelt buckle assembly may not have been properly formed during the manufacturing process. If the third-row seatbelt assembly is not properly riveted, it may not properly restrain occupants in a crash, increasing the risk of injury.

PROCEDURE:
Dealers will inspect the rivet head formation on both the left and right side third row seatbelt buckle assemblies and replace seatbelt buckle assemblies which is not having a properly formed rivet.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Customers of the above mentioned vehicles may please call Oman Trading Establishment LLC for Chevrolet & Cadillac and Moosa Abdul Rahman Hassan & Co LLC for GMC.

CONTACT DETAILS:
For OTE, Call Toll free no. 80050002 on all working days between 8.00am to 1.00pm and 2.00pm to 5.30pm.
For MARH, Call Toll free no. 80076200 on all working days between 8.30am to 1.00pm and 4.00pm to 6.30pm.

VINOD NAIR
[@vinot_nair](#)

Even though unstable weather conditions forecast is there for two days, the capital was relatively dry compared to Tuesday, except for the Wilayat of Al Amerat.

The cloud cover continued to prevail in most of the northern governorates of the Sultanate of Oman, including Musandam, Al Buraimi, Al Dhahirah, Al Dakhiliyah, North and South Al Batinah, Muscat, North and South Al Sharqiyah, amid reports of a likely low-pressure system next week. Due to the wind movement, there is also a possibility of rising dust in Al Wusta and Dhofar governorates.

Al Amerat, which was spared on Tuesday, received heavy rains by late afternoon. The Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority urged people not to risk crossing wadis and to adhere to warnings and follow instructions.

The Aqabat Qantab road was closed to traffic as a precautionary measure for public safety.

Night temperatures in Muscat, Suhar and Sur are expected to drop under 20 degrees Celsius in the coming days.

The Water Resources Monitoring Department said that 52 dams in the country stored 73 million cubic metres of water in 2022, which helped raise the levels of aflaj and wells, besides providing some protection from floods.

According to the National Multi Hazard Early Warning Centre, upper air troughs are likely to continue until Thursday though the current weather situation will start gradually weakening.

The Royal Oman Police (ROP) has been operating regular patrols to monitor traffic flow and ensure road safety.

Major Fahd bin Said al Kalbani, acting director of the traffic department at the Directorate-General of Traffic, said: “The ROP is closely monitoring roads to ensure smooth traffic movement and safe driving for motorists. We are coordinating with the relevant authorities to ease the traffic movement following the blocking of Bausher-Al Amerat mountain road.”

The Directorate-General of Traffic called on motorists to exercise caution and follow the weather updates issued by the relevant authorities. It advises the public not to risk their lives by crossing overflowing wadis.

Meanwhile, the operations centre of the Civil Defence and Ambulance Authority received 30 reports of incidents related to heavy rain. A total of 51 people were rescued on Tuesday and no casualties were reported so far.





LONDON: British experts on Wednesday said 2022 was set to be the UK's warmest on record after a year of several heatwaves alongside minimal rainfall.

This year had the “highest annual average temperature across the UK, exceeding the previous record set in 2014 when the average was 9.88 degrees Celsius (49.78 degrees Fahrenheit)”, the Met Office, the UK’s meteorological authority, said in a statement.

The figure for 2022 would be announced later.

Since 1884, each of the 10 years recording the highest annual temperature have occurred from 2002, according to the forecasting body.

“2022 is going to be the warmest year on record for the UK. While many will remember the summer’s extreme heat, what has been noteworthy this year has been the relatively consistent heat throughout the year,” said Mark McCarthy, head of the Met Office’s National Climate Information Centre.

Every month except December had been warmer than average, he said.

“The warm year is in line with the genuine impacts we expect as a result of human-induced climate change.

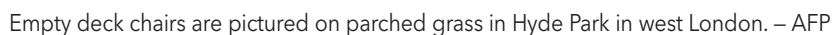
"Although it doesn't mean every year will be the warmest on record, climate change continues to increase the chances of increasingly warm years over the coming decades," he added.

Most of England and Wales experienced drought this summer after exceptionally high temperatures and heatwaves as well as little rainfall.

Similar conditions were seen across northwest Europe.

In July, England also smashed its all-time temperature record when the mercury topped 40 degrees Celsius for the first time ever, while July was the driest on record across the south.

The parched conditions notably saw the



source of the River Thames drying up and shifting several miles downstream.

Satellite imagery showed the nation's traditionally green and lush countryside turning to various shades of yellow and brown, as huge swathes of southern, central and eastern England dried out.

The Met Office said all four of the seasons in 2022 were in the top 10 warmest on record.

Winter was the eighth hottest, spring the fifth, summer the fourth and autumn the third.

McCarthy said temperatures had been above the 1991-2020 long term average for a large proportion of the year, adding that

this “is something that we can anticipate as we become increasingly affected by climate change”.

“Met Office science has shown that the temperatures witnessed in mid-July would have been extremely unlikely in the pre-industrial period — the era before humanity started emitting lots of greenhouse gases from burning fossil fuels,” he said.

"Our climate is still subject to notable cold spells during the winter season, but our observational data show these have generally become less frequent and less severe as our climate warms," he said.

— AFP



ANKARA: Turkey's defence minister and intelligence chief met their Syrian counterparts in Moscow on Wednesday in a clear sign of normalisation between Ankara and Damascus in the decade-long Syrian war.

Turkish defence minister Hulusi Akar and the head of its National Intelligence Organization (MIT), Hakan Fidan, met with Syrian defence minister Ali Mahmoud Abbas and Syrian intelligence chief Ali Mamlouk in Moscow along with Russia's defence minister Sergei Shoigu, the Turkish defence ministry said.

“Syrian crisis, refugee issue and efforts of joint fight against all terrorist organisations on Syrian soil were discussed in the constructive meeting,”

the ministry statement said.

The Turkish, Russian and Syrian sides agreed to continue trilateral meetings, the statement added.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan this month announced that he proposed to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin forming a trilateral mechanism with Russia and Syria to accelerate diplomacy between Ankara and Damascus. He also said he wanted to meet Syria's President Bashar al Assad.

After a deadly bomb attack in Istanbul last month, Erdogan said Turkey would mount a land operation into northern Syria on targets linked to YPG militia, which Ankara says is a wing of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

شركة سياحة الصحراء ش.م.ع
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Sahara Hospitality Co. (S.A.O.G.)

P.O. Box 311, Muscat, Postal Code 100, Sultanate of Oman.

DIRECTORS' REPORT FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR ENDED ON NOVEMBER 30, 2022.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, I am pleased to submit the un-audited Financial Statements of the company for the financial year ended on November 30, 2022 along with related reports.

Revenue was RO 12,620,248 as against RO 11,240,348 in the corresponding period of previous year whereas net Profit after taxes for the period was RO 2,563,932 as against RO 2,124,062 in the previous year.

The total shareholders fund increased from RO 25,718,912 at the end of November 2021 to RO 27,150,948 at the end of current financial year and as a result of this growth, the net assets per share have recorded R.O 3.427.

On behalf of the Board of directors, I express our most sincere gratitude to His Majesty Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq Bin Taimour Al Said for his wise leadership and generous support to the private sector. Furthermore, I would extend our gratitude to his government for their co-operation and assistance with special mention of Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Muscat Security Market and Capital Market Authority.

I conclude this report by expressing our appreciation to our shareholders, Petroleum Development Oman, our bankers and customers for their valued support and cooperation.

For and on behalf of Board of Directors,

TALAL BIN QAIS AL ZAWAWI

CHAIRMAN

Unaudited consolidated Statement of Financial Position as at 30 Nov, 2022

	30th Nov, 2022 RO. '000	30th Nov, 2021 RO. '000
Fixed Assets	14,690	15,719
Current Assets		
Inventories	25	30
Trade & Other Receivables	5,938	5,178
Receivables from Related Party	25	6
Bank and Cash	8,805	7,023
	14,793	12,237
	29,483	27,956
Total Assets		
Current liabilities		
Trade and other Payables	491	495
Payables to related parties	1,171	1,133
Lease liability	21	20
Tax liability	438	374
	2,121	2,022
Long-term liabilities		
Lease liability	46	67
Deferred Tax liability	149	134
Employees' end of service benefits	16	14
	211	215
	2,332	2,237
Total Liabilities		
Net Assets	27,151	25,719
Shareholder's Fund		
Share Capital	7,923	7,546
Legal Reserve	2,641	2,458
Retained Earnings	16,587	15,715
Total Shareholders' Equity	27,151	25,719

Unaudited consolidated Statement of Comprehensive Income for 12 months ended 30 Nov, 2022

	12 months ended 30th Nov,2022 RO. '000	12 months ended 30th Nov, 2021 RO. '000
Turnover/Revenue	12,620	11,240
Gross Profit	3,383	2,909
Other Income	218	191
Administration & General Expenses	(576)	(570)
Operating Profit	3,025	2,530
Finance Charges	(8)	(31)
Profit before taxation	3,017	2,499
Taxation	(453)	(375)
Net Profit attributable to ordinary shareholders	2,564	2,124
Net profit margin	20%	19%

The complete accounts in either Arabic or English will be delivered to any shareholder within 7 days of receipt of the request. Such requests may be sent to the Board Secretary, Sahara Hospitality Co. (S.A.O.G.), P.O Box 311, Postal Code 100, Muscat.

SR No. 1/2023/17



RUSSIA INTENSIFIES ATTACKS ON UKRAINE

KYIV/BAKHMUT: Russian forces stepped up mortar and artillery attacks on the recently liberated city of Kherson in southern Ukraine on Wednesday, Ukraine’s military said, while also exerting constant pressure along front lines in eastern regions of the country.

Russia fired 33 missiles from multiple rocket launchers at civilian targets in Kherson in the 24 hours to early Wednesday, the General Staff of Ukraine’s Armed Forces said in its morning report. Russia denies targeting civilians.

Heavy fighting also persisted around the Ukrainian-held city of Bakhmut, now largely in ruins, in the eastern province of Donetsk, and to its north, around the cities of Svatove and Kreminna in Luhansk province, where Ukrainian forces are trying to break Russian defensive lines.

Air raid sirens also sounded across Ukraine on Wednesday morning, officials said, though there were no reports of any missile strikes and the all-clear

was later given. Ukrainian social media reports said the nationwide alert may have been declared after Russian jets stationed in neighbouring Belarus took off. Reuters was unable to verify that information.

Britain’s defence ministry said in its latest update on the military situation in Ukraine that Russia had likely reinforced the Kreminna section of the frontline as it is logistically important to Moscow and has become relatively vulnerable following recent Ukrainian advances further west.

There is still no prospect of talks to end the war, now in its 11th month.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is vigorously pushing a 10-point peace plan that envisages Russia fully respecting Ukraine’s territorial integrity and pulling out all its troops.

‘TODAY’S REALITIES’

But the Kremlin on Wednesday rejected the plan, reiterating its stance that Ukraine must accept Russia’s annexation — announced



Ukrainian servicemen fire with a CAESAR self-propelled howitzer towards Russian positions in eastern Ukraine on Wednesday. — AFP

in September after “referendums” rejected by Kyiv and the West — of four Ukrainian regions: Luhansk and Donetsk in the east, and

Kherson and Zaporizhzhia in the south.

“There can be no peace plan for Ukraine that does not take into

account today’s realities regarding Russian territory, with the entry of four regions into Russia,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

“Plans that do not take these realities into account cannot be peaceful.”

Russian forces abandoned Kherson city last month in one of Ukraine’s most significant gains of the war. Kherson region, located at the mouth of the mighty Dnipro River and serving as gateway to Russian-annexed Crimea, is strategically important.

The joy of Kherson residents over the city’s liberation has quickly given way to fear amid relentless Russian shelling from the east bank of the Dnipro, and many have since fled.

Russian forces shelled the maternity wing of a hospital in Kherson, Kyrylo Tymoshenko, Zelensky’s deputy chief of staff, said on Telegram. No one was hurt and the staff and patients had been moved to a shelter, he added.

Reuters was unable to immediately verify the report.

A Russian strike killed at least 10 people and wounded 58 in Kherson last Saturday, Ukraine said. — Reuters

■ FLIGHT TO REUNION



Passengers arriving from Tigray are greeted by relatives at the Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa on Thursday. Ethiopia’s national carrier Ethiopian Airlines said it would resume commercial flights to the war-torn region of Tigray on Wednesday after a shutdown lasting 18 months. The announcement comes a day after an Ethiopian delegation made the first high-level government visit to the rebel-held region since the signing of a peace deal last month. — AFP

Rare hail brings winter white to Kuwait

KUWAIT CITY: Kuwait, one of the hottest countries on Earth, has been hit by a rare hail storm that delighted children and their parents, with images of the winter white shared widely on social media on Wednesday.

“We have not seen so much hail during the winter season in 15 years,” Muhammad Karam, a former director of Kuwait’s meteorological department, said.

Pictures and videos of southern roads partially blanketed in hail and ice spread online to celebrate the rare weather event.

Children donned scarves and raincoats as they scooped up hail in the Umm al Haiman district, about 50 kilometres (30 miles) south of Kuwait City.

Kuwait’s meteorological department said precipitation since Tuesday had reached up to 63 millimetres but that the weather was clearing up.

Karam said he expects the phenomenon to reoccur as climate change disrupts weather patterns.

The nation endures blistering summer heat, and scientists predict it could become unlivable in future because of climate change.

In 2016, summer temperatures peaked at 54 degrees



A man and children toss handfuls of hail particles picked up off the side of a road after a storm in the Umm al Haiman district, about 55 kilometres south of Kuwait City, on Wednesday. — AFP

Celsius (129 degrees Fahrenheit). Parts of Kuwait could get 4.5 degrees Celsius hotter from 2071 to 2100 compared with the historical average, the Environment Public Authority has warned. — AFP

On eve of Israel’s new govt, far-rightists offer reassurances

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister-designate Benjamin Netanyahu finalised coalition deals on Wednesday as his prospective far-right partners offered reassurances that they would serve all Israelis and not radically shift strategy in the conflict with the Palestinians.

Netanyahu, a conservative whose bloc of nationalist and religious parties won a clear election victory last month, is expected to swear in his new government on Thursday, completing his political comeback with a record sixth term in office.

The inclusion of the Religious Zionism and Jewish Power parties has stirred concern at home and abroad given their leaders opposition to Palestinian statehood and past agitation against Israel’s justice

system, Arab minority and LGBT rights.

Religious Zionism head Bezalel Smotrich, who will be finance minister and hold authority over Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank, said he would “strengthen every citizen’s freedoms and the country’s democratic institutions”.

Writing in the Wall Street Journal, he said Israel’s far-right wanted to bring it “more closely in line with the liberal American model” — which, he said, would entail guaranteed freedom of worship and reform to “balance” the justice system.

Suggesting a shelving of past calls on Israel to annex the West Bank — a move that could spell diplomatic rupture with Washington and Arab states — Smotrich said his settlements plan “doesn’t entail



Israeli designate Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attends a session at the plenum at the Knesset, Israel’s parliament in Jerusalem on Wednesday. — Reuters

changing (their) political or legal status”.

With peace talks on establishing a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem dormant since 2014, and with no sign of their revival, Netanyahu’s emerging government has darkened an already bleak Palestinian view.

This year saw some of the worst violence in the West Bank in several years as Israeli forces cracked down on Palestinian unrest and militant attacks, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Saturday bemoaned what he called “the establishment of an Israeli government whose motto is extremism and apartheid”.

Smotrich’s party platform says that as formal annexation was not diplomatically

feasible at present, it will seek “de-facto sovereignty” and bolster Israel’s settlements.

The run-up to the swearing-in of the Netanyahu government saw a rush of legislation to satisfy coalition partners, including a bill expanding the authorities of Jewish Power leader Itamar Ben-Gvir as designated minister for police.

Ben-Gvir was convicted in 2007 of incitement against Arabs and supporting an outlawed Jewish militant group. He has disavowed some of his past conduct. But President Isaac Herzog, meeting Ben-Gvir on Wednesday, reminded him of the “worries” stirred up in Israel and among foreign Jews over his ascendancy.

— Reuters

SHORT TAKES

ANKARA

Israeli envoy to Turkey presents credentials

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan received the credentials of Israel’s new ambassador to Turkey on Tuesday, as the two countries normalise ties after four years of strain.

Turkey and Israel began improving relations with high-level visits this year including Israeli President Isaac Herzog’s visit to Ankara. They agreed to appoint ambassadors mutually in August.

After Israeli Prime Minister-designate Benjamin Netanyahu



won elections last month, he and Erdogan agreed to “work together to create a new era in relations” on a basis of respect for mutual interests.

JERUSALEM

Israel thanks Morocco for protecting Jews

Israeli President Isaac Herzog thanked Morocco’s King Mohammed VI for his country’s provision of “safe haven” for Jews during the Holocaust.

The letter — marking two years since Morocco normalised ties with Israel — was the first occasion an Israeli state official has paid tribute to the Holocaust-era actions of Morocco’s monarch at the time, according to the presidency.

Herzog expressed Israel’s gratitude to the king “and the



people of Morocco who, for generations, have acted to protect the security, welfare and cultural heritage of the kingdom’s Jewish community”.

ISTANBUL

Turkish court upholds rights leader’s life jailing

A Turkish appellate court on Wednesday upheld the conviction of a leading critic of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan whose jailing has added to tensions in Ankara’s uneasy ties with the West.

Paris-born activist and philanthropist Osman Kavala was sentenced to life in jail without the possibility of parole in April on the charge of trying to topple the government by financing street protests in 2013. Seven others were jailed for 18



years each for aiding the attempt to overthrow the government of then-prime minister Erdogan during the so-called Gezi Park rallies in Istanbul.



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7

In brief

■ TOKYO



JAPAN PM MULLS SNAP ELECTION BEFORE TAX HIKE

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on Tuesday floated the possibility of calling a snap election before a tax increase aimed at funding the country's defence budget comes into place "sometime after 2024".

The government is set to implement tax increases to cover a shortfall of 1 trillion yen (\$7.47 billion) in the defence budget, despite stiff opposition from within the ruling coalition amid Kishida's sagging popularity.

"We will be asking the public to take on the (tax) burden for an appropriate period of time, starting from sometime after 2024 up to 2027. We'll make a decision on when it starts, and I think there could be an election by then," Kishida said.

■ SEOUL



KIM SETS OUT NEW GOALS FOR NORTH'S MILITARY

Kim Jong Un announced new goals for North Korea's military in a report to party leaders, state media reported Wednesday, hinting that sanctions-busting weapons tests will continue next year.

Kim is currently presiding over a major party meeting in capital Pyongyang, during which the top leader and other senior party officials outline their policy goals for 2023 in key areas including diplomacy, security and the economy.

Kim "set forth new key goals for bolstering up the self-reliant defence capability to be pushed ahead with in 2023," the official Korean Central News Agency reported Wednesday, without giving any details.

■ SINGAPORE



SINGAPORE PENNY-STOCKS SCAMSTER JAILED FOR 36 YEARS

A Malaysian businessman convicted of masterminding a stock scam that wiped US\$5.8 billion off Singapore's exchange was sentenced on Wednesday to 36 years in jail by a court in the city-state.

John Soh Chee Wen orchestrated the scheme, according to court documents, and his accomplice, Singaporean Quah Su-Ling, was also given a 20-year jail term.

Both were convicted in May of using more than 180 trading accounts to inflate the share prices of three companies in what High Court judge Hoo Sheau Peng called a "scheme of substantial scale, complexity and sophistication".

ITALY, JAPAN AND INDIA INTRODUCE PCR TESTING ON ARRIVAL FOR CHINESE PASSENGERS

US may restrict from travel from China

BEIJING: Beijing's sudden pivot away from containing Covid-19 has caused jitters around the world, with the United States saying it may restrict travel from China following its decision to end mandatory quarantine for overseas arrivals.

China late Monday scrapped quarantine for inbound travellers from January 8 onwards, dismantling the last remaining piece of its stringent zero-Covid policy and ending some of the world's harshest border restrictions.

The move was greeted with jubilation by Chinese citizens, who rushed to book international flights, triggering a surge in ticket prices.

Hospitals and crematoriums across China continue to be overwhelmed by an influx of mostly elderly people.

AFP reporters saw dozens of mostly elderly Covid patients lying



Travellers wait for their flight at Beijing Capital International Airport in Beijing on Wednesday. — Reuters

on gurneys in overflowing hospital emergency wards in Tianjin, 140 kilometres (87 miles) southwest of the capital Beijing on Wednesday.

Other countries have expressed concerns about the potential for new variants to emerge as China battles the world's biggest surge

in infections. US officials said late Tuesday they were considering Covid entry restrictions on travellers from China, after

countries including Japan and India introduced PCR testing on arrival for Chinese passengers.

"There are mounting concerns in the international community on the ongoing Covid-19 surges in China and the lack of transparent data, including viral genomic sequence data, being reported from the PRC," the US officials said, referring to the People's Republic of China.

Taiwan said on Wednesday that it would also screen travellers from the mainland for the virus.

Italy is making coronavirus tests for visitors from China mandatory following an explosion in cases there, the health minister said on Wednesday. "I have ordered mandatory Covid-19 antigenic swabs, and related virus sequencing, for all passengers coming from China and transiting through Italy," minister Orazio Schillaci said.

— AFP

Bangladesh opens first metro line in traffic-choked capital

DHAKA: Bangladesh's sprawling capital inaugurated its first ever metro rail line on Wednesday as authorities work to ease congestion that has throttled growth and inflamed tempers in the gridlocked metropolis.

Dhaka is one of the world's most densely populated cities, and daily commutes along its car-clogged roads are a source of constant frustration for its 22 million people.

Local researchers say the capital's economy loses upwards of \$3 billion each year in lost work time due to traffic jams, often worsened by regular street protests and monsoonal downpours.

The new elevated train network has been in development for nearly a decade and is slated to grow to over a hundred stations and six lines criss-crossing the city by 2030.

Wednesday saw the start of operations on a section of the first line connecting a neighbourhood on Dhaka's periphery with the city centre, built with a \$2.8 billion price tag and largely funded by Japanese development funds.



Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (centre L) attends an inauguration ceremony of the metro rail service in Dhaka on Wednesday. — AFP

"This metro rail is also another matter of pride for us," said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at a ceremony to mark the first service.

"We promised to eradicate traffic jams from Dhaka," she added. "With the six metro rail lines, we will be able to do so."

The line is expected to carry 60,000 people each hour when it is fully operational and its opening has been keenly anticipated by

commuters.

"We are counting on it. It will reduce public suffering," Mostafizur Rahman, who spends nearly three hours riding a bus to work each morning, told AFP.

Hasina used the opening ceremony to commemorate six Japanese rail engineers working on the project who were killed during an attack on a Dhaka cafe by extremists in 2016. — AFP

Former pope Benedict very sick: Pope Francis

VATICAN CITY: Former pope Benedict, 95, who in 2013 became the first pontiff in 600 years to step down, is "very sick", his successor Pope Francis said on Wednesday, asking the church to pray for him.

The Vatican later said in a statement Benedict had suffered a sudden "worsening" of his health in recent hours. It also said his condition was "under control" and that he was receiving constant medical attention.

"I would like to ask all of you for a special prayer for Pope Emeritus Benedict, who, in silence, is sustaining the Church," Francis said in his surprise announcement in Italian at the end of his weekly general audience.

"Let us remember him. He is very sick, asking the Lord to console and sustain him in this witness of love for the Church, until the end," Francis said, speaking in Italian.

Francis, who visited the former pontiff shortly after his general audience, has often praised Benedict, saying it was like having



a grandfather in a home. But the presence of two men dressed in white in the Vatican has at times been troublesome.

Conservatives have looked to the former pope as their standard bearer and some ultra-traditionalists even refused to acknowledge Francis as a legitimate pontiff.

Until a few weeks ago, those who had seen Benedict said his body was very frail but his mind was still sharp. One of the latest known photographs of Benedict was taken on Dec. 1, when he met the winners of a prize for theologians named after him. He was seated and looked exceptionally weak. — Reuters

Russians flock to Thailand as tourism rebounds from collapse

BANGKOK: Thailand is receiving an influx of Russian visitors, with data showing monthly arrivals doubling in November and up nearly seven times than September, far outpacing rises from other countries in the run-up to peak travel season.

One of Asia's most popular travel destinations, Thailand is seeing a much-needed tourism boom, with 1.75 million visitors in November, quadruple the number received for the whole of last year when flights and foreign arrivals were limited by the pandemic.

Thailand removed the last vestige of its tight Covid-19 entry policies in July to revive its collapsed tourism sector and since September, and arrivals from Russia have grown at a faster rate monthly than any other country, including those rising from low bases, according to official data.

Russia was Thailand's seventh-largest tourism market in 2019, before the pandemic, at 1.48 million visitors, but on a monthly basis in November, it was third behind Malaysia and India, with 108,985 arrivals, up from 44,314 in October and 15,900 in September.

By comparison, arrivals from Malaysia fell steadily from September's 332,493 to 258,873 by November and visitors from India grew incrementally each month from 116,386 in September to 145,628 in November.

Russian arrivals in November represented about 60 per cent of the number who visited in the same month in 2019.

"This year we have seen the Russian market return, particularly after the Ukraine conflict," said Stuart Reading, deputy CEO of Laguna Resorts and Hotels.

He said the strengthening of the



A jet ski drives past a boat near a beach in Phuket. — Reuters

rouble against the Thai baht had helped, as had his chain's hiring of some Russian-speaking staff.

The rouble has been one of world's best-performing major currencies against the dollar this year.

Russian travellers tend to stay longer than others, Reading added, at seven to 10 nights, while "snowbirds" escaping the harsh winter back home were staying up to three months.

A top destination for Russians

is Phuket, where they account for about a quarter of the island's visitors, helped by direct flights to there and Bangkok, according to Yuthasak Supasorn, governor of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT).

"We're seeing Russian families renting homes and extending their stays from 16 days to a few months," Bhumikitti Ruktaengam, Phuket's Tourist Association advisory chairman.

"In the evening you'll see Russian families strolling in the park along with locals," he said, adding some were staying until March.

Overall arrival numbers could exceed 11.5 million by year-end, according to the TAT, just over a quarter of the record of nearly 40 million in 2019, who spent about 1.91 trillion baht (\$55.17 billion).

— Reuters

The Russians fighting alongside Ukraine’s forces

CÉCILE FEUILLATRE

For Russians who have been fighting on Ukraine’s side as part of the “Freedom of Russia” legion since President Vladimir Putin sent troops into Ukraine, secrecy is of the utmost importance.

The exact number of their personnel is strictly confidential, their positions are never disclosed and their statements are carefully worded.

Their spokesman, who uses the nom de guerre Caesar, walks through what remains of an Orthodox monastery in Dolina, a village in eastern Ukraine’s Donetsk region that was recaptured from Russian forces in the autumn.

Among its ruins are a shattered

onion-shaped golden dome, a stucco lion and scattered religious icons -- a scene of destruction that shows the world “what Putin’s values are”, Caesar says.

“I am not fighting my motherland. I am fighting against Putin’s regime, against evil,” he says, switching between Russian and English.

“I’m not a traitor. I’m a true Russian patriot who thinks about the future of my country.”

The legion created at the start of Russia’s attack on Ukraine is part of the corps of international volunteers fighting with the Ukrainian army.

Its emblem features a clenched fist with the words “Russia” and “Freedom”.

According to Caesar, the

“I AM NOT FIGHTING MY MOTHERLAND. I AM FIGHTING AGAINST PUTIN’S REGIME, AGAINST EVIL,” SAYS ONE RUSSIAN SOLDIER

legion boasts “several hundred” Russians who after two months of training were deployed in May to Ukraine’s industrial Donbas region, which Moscow is trying to conquer.

Some of its soldiers are now fighting in the town of Bakhmut on the eastern frontline, the scene of several months of fierce battles.

Under the command of Ukrainian forces, they are usually

engaged in launching artillery.

“They are motivated and professional fighters, they do their job perfectly,” a Ukrainian officer said.

The recruits were subject to several rounds of interviews, psychological tests and even a polygraph to ensure their allegiance, the officer adds.

The contribution of the Russian legion to the war effort is even more significant away from the battlefield, says military expert Oleg Zhdanov.

“They take part in the war but do not have significant impact due to their small numbers,” Zhdanov says.

“Their importance is more political. It’s good for Ukraine to be able to show that there are

Russians who support democracy and freedom and who fight on the right side.”

Its members all have specific motivations for enlisting, some of them more personal than political.

A man who goes by the call sign “Tikhiy”, or “Silent”, is married to a Ukrainian he met in Russia, where they lived with their two children.

The were visiting his wife’s family in Kyiv when Russia attacked.

“She wouldn’t have understood if we stayed in Russia,” says the man in his 40s from the southwestern Russian city of Tolyatti.

He has had barely any contact with his family back in Russia

since the fighting began.

Caesar, the spokesman, used to work as a physiotherapist in Saint Petersburg, Russia’s former capital and second-largest city.

“His system, his government his deputies. All shit. They are losers, corrupt, thieves, who only think of living for money and pleasure. It’s no way to run a country,” he adds.

After Moscow attacked on February 24, Caesar took his wife and four children to Kyiv, and he said he believes he can speak freely now that they are in Ukraine, where he considers them to be safer.

“They too live in fear of the bombardments and in the cold, but they agree with my choices.”

— AFP

Belgian families don gloves for house-heating research

MARIE GENRIES

Outside the family home, frost covers the ground and temperatures in the damp Belgian winter have plunged below freezing.

Inside the 200-square-metre (2,100 square foot) house it is slightly warmer -- the thermostat reads 14.5 Celsius (58 Fahrenheit) -- but the family of six is wrapped up warm.

Geoffrey Van Moeseke, an architect engineer from Louvain-la-Neuve, is putting his family through their third consecutive winter as “SlowHeat” pioneers.

The idea cooked up by academics is to save on the cost and the environmental toll of gas heating, by using directed heat where it’s needed and leaving the unoccupied parts of the house chilly.

“Heat the bodies, not the walls” is the project’s motto, and that starts with appropriate winter clothing. “Right now, I’m wearing a classic cotton sweater and an old, fairly warm jacket,” Van Moeseke said. “Underneath, I have two more layers: a T-shirt and technical sports clothing,” he explains. For the feet, it’s socks and “old, padded slippers which are extremely warm”.

The second part of the project’s advice is the use of electric radiant heaters, which provide intense and easy-to-direct heat.

Van Moeseke owns two, which he runs for only two hours a day -- one in the living room and one in his son’s bedroom, the coldest room in the house, hovering around 12C.

These heaters can be placed on desks and warm only the person sitting in front of them, creating a bubble of comfort without wasting heat on unused parts of the room. On the researchers’ website is a third suggestion: electrically heated capes and neck warmers, which they claim pay for themselves in a month with reduced heating bills.

As they work on their research, the SlowHeat team sometimes wear fingerless gloves to type or use heated mouse mats. When the project began in September 2020 many of their colleagues told them they were mad.

But this winter’s energy crisis, soaring gas bills triggered by the war in Ukraine plus suddenly cold temperatures has sparked renewed interest in the project. “We wondered what would happen if all of a sudden we ran out of gas,” explained Denis De Grave, research assistant at the University of Louvain. “At the beginning, we were taken for crazy,” admitted Gregoire Wallenborn, researcher and teacher at the Free University of Brussels, bundled up in a big jacket and with a woolly hat screwed on his head.

— AFP

France desperately needs workers, but the fixes could anger left & right

WITH UNEMPLOYMENT OVERALL IN THE EUROZONE NEAR A RECORD LOW, SOME ECONOMISTS SAY LABOUR SHORTAGES ARE UNLIKELY TO DISAPPEAR DESPITE AN EXPECTED RECESSION

LIZ ALDERMAN

The sign on the window of Red Rhino, a popular barbecue restaurant in central Paris, has been up for a month: “Closed until further notice due to lack of personnel.” Bus and train service has been cut back in the tourist city of Lyon amid a dearth of drivers. In the Loire Valley, tons of vegetables went unharvested in the summer as thousands of picking jobs were left unfilled.

Economic activity has fitfully revved up again in France and across Europe since the end of Covid-19 lockdowns, only to be knocked back by the effects of Russia’s war in Ukraine. Even so, employers in numerous industries remain desperate to hire, with a range of businesses still not finding the workers needed to operate at capacity.

All of which has prompted France, Europe’s second-largest economy, to seek a variety of solutions — all of them politically combustible.

President Emmanuel Macron’s government is proposing a fast-track legalisation for migrants in the country illegally who want to work in sectors facing staff shortages. For added measure, the government is moving to tighten France’s famously generous unemployment system, with its lengthy benefits, in a bid to cycle jobless people more quickly back into the workforce.

The plans have met with resistance from different ends of the political spectrum. Lawmakers from France’s rising far right say a growing influx of migrants must be brought under tighter control and that French nationals should be given priority for jobs. The country’s powerful labour unions are warning that measures to cut jobless benefits risk pushing the unemployed toward poverty.

For thousands of businesses that form the backbone of the economy, the double-barrelled approach has become necessary to help fix to what appears to be a permanent shift in workplace dynamics since the pandemic, as European workers in droves switch jobs or decide not to return to strenuous work that demands early or late hours on relatively low pay.

Over half a million people in France resigned in the first three months of the year, the highest level in 15 years, France’s statistics agency reported.

“Our society after the pandemic has a different outlook,” said Thierry Marx, a Michelin-starred French chef who is the president of UMIH, France’s influential trade association of restaurants and hotels.

“People are saying, I don’t want to have a sacrificial relationship to work.”

The shortage is tightest in construction, transportation, nursing and agriculture, where nearly 400,000 jobs are vacant in France alone. The hospitality industry is particularly hard-hit, with an estimated quarter-million vacancies, mostly in manual posts including cleaning and wait staff. That has created a further squeeze on restaurants and hotels as tourism has come roaring back in Europe after the pandemic.

At the Hotel des Grands Boulevards, in the Sentier district of Paris, the lobby bustled with visitors on a recent day. But Olivier Bon, a co-founder of Experimental Group, which owns the hotel and several others in Europe, said it had been a struggle to recruit people to help meet the rebound, especially in kitchen or table service jobs that come with long hours and capped wages.

To make the hotel and its restaurant more attractive, the company now offers more entry-level jobs that can lead to careers in the industry and has increased internal promotions. The group has raised wages modestly,

according to a new salary scale agreed to by the industry, and cut back on lengthy gaps in the workday at its restaurant that drag out employees’ shifts. The restaurant now stops service at 10:45 pm to improve hours for workers.

Labour unions say the issue is not a shortage of workers but low wages. If companies increased pay, unions argue, they would find employees.

“People want to be paid decently and treated as more than just a labour unit,” said Denis Gravouil, an official with the CGT labour union, France’s second-largest labour organisation. “Employers will find workers if they change conditions.”

Employers say the predicament is more complicated. In France, for instance, where joblessness is near a decade low of 7.1 per cent, payroll taxes are among the highest in Europe, which companies claim hinders hiring. Retraining programmes have helped people transition to new work in technology or manufacturing, but have had less success attracting people to work as bus or truck drivers, home care aides or caterers, where shortages are rife.

And with unemployment overall in the eurozone near a record low, some economists say labour shortages are unlikely to disappear despite an expected recession. “Countries and sectors with particularly hot labour markets could remain tight,” said Bert Colijn, senior eurozone economist at ING Bank.

— *The New York Times*



As AI rises, lawmakers try to catch up

JOSEPH BOYLE & JULIE JAMMOT

From “intelligent” vacuum cleaners and driverless cars to advanced techniques for diagnosing diseases, artificial intelligence has burrowed its way into every arena of modern life.

Regulators in Europe and North America are worried. The European Union is likely to pass legislation next year — the AI Act — aimed at reining in the age of the algorithm. The United States recently published a blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights and Canada is also mulling legislation.

Looming large in the debates has been China’s use of biometric data, facial recognition and other technology to build a powerful system of control. Gry Hasselbalch, a Danish academic who advises the EU on the controversial technology, argued that the West was also in danger of creating “totalitarian infrastructures”.

“I see that as a huge threat, no matter the benefits,” she said.

But before regulators can act, they face the daunting task of defining what AI actually is. Suresh Venkatasubramanian of Brown University, who co-authored the AI Bill of Rights, said trying to define AI was “a mug’s game”.

Any technology that affects people’s rights should be within the scope of the bill, he tweeted. The 27-nation EU is taking the more tortuous route of attempting to define the sprawling field. Its draft law lists the kinds of approaches defined as AI, and it includes pretty much any computer system that involves automation.

The problem stems from the changing use of the term AI. For decades, it described attempts to create machines that simulated human thinking. But funding largely dried up for this research — known as symbolic AI — in the early 2000s. The rise of the Silicon Valley titans saw AI reborn as a catch-all label for their number-crunching programs and the algorithms they generated.

This automation allowed them to target users with advertising and content, helping them to make hundreds of billions of dollars.

“AI was a way for them to make more

BEFORE
REGULATORS
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use of this surveillance data and to mystify what was happening,” Meredith Whittaker, a former Google worker who co-founded New York University’s AI Now Institute, said.

So the EU and US have both concluded that any definition of AI needs to be as broad as possible.

But from that point, the two Western powerhouses have largely gone their separate ways.

The EU’s draft AI Act runs to more than 100 pages. Among its most eye-catching proposals are the complete prohibition of certain “high-risk” technologies — the kind of biometric surveillance tools used in China. It also drastically limits the use of AI tools by migration officials, police and judges. Hasselbalch said some technologies were “simply too challenging to fundamental rights”.

The AI Bill of Rights, on the other hand, is a brief set of principles framed in aspirational language, with exhortations like “you should be protected from unsafe or ineffective systems”. The bill was issued by the White House and relies on existing law. Experts reckon no dedicated AI legislation is likely in the United States until 2024 at the earliest because Congress is deadlocked.

Opinions differ on the merits of each approach.

“We desperately need regulation,” Gary Marcus of New York University said. He points out that “large language models” — the AI behind chatbots, translation tools, predictive text software and much else — can be used to generate harmful disinformation.

Whittaker questioned the value of laws aimed at tackling AI rather than the “surveillance business models” that underpin it. “If you’re not addressing that at a fundamental level, I think you’re putting a band-aid over a flesh wound,” she said.

But other experts have broadly welcomed the US approach.

AI was a better target for regulators than the more abstract concept of privacy, said Sean McGregor, a researcher who chronicles tech failures for the AI Incident Database.

But he said there could be a risk of over-regulation. — AFP

PRANK FEST



Revellers take part in Els Enfarinats held in the Spanish town of Ibi on Wednesday. In this 200-year-old traditional winter festival, the participants – known as Els Enfarinats (those covered in flour) – dress in military clothes and stage a mock coup d’etat as they battle using flour, eggs and firecrackers outside the city town hall as part of the celebrations of the Day of the Innocents, a traditional day in Spain for pulling pranks. – AFP

Did the Tesla story ever make sense?

If you’re one of those people who bought bitcoin or another cryptocurrency near its peak last fall, you’ve lost a lot of money. Is it any consolation to know that you would have lost a similar amount if you had bought Tesla stock instead?

OK, probably not. Still, Tesla stock’s plunge is an opportunity to talk about what makes businesses successful in the information age. And in the end, Tesla and bitcoin may have more in common than you think.

It’s natural to attribute Tesla’s recent decline — which is, to be sure, part of a general fall in tech stocks, but an exceptionally steep example — to Elon Musk’s purchase of Twitter and the reputational self-immolation that followed. Indeed, given what we’ve seen of Musk’s behavior, I wouldn’t trust him to feed my cat, let alone run a major corporation. Furthermore, Tesla sales have surely depended at least in part on the perception that Musk himself is a cool guy. Who, aside from MAGA types who probably wouldn’t have bought Teslas anyway, sees him that way now?

On the other hand, as someone who has spent much of his professional life in academia, I’m familiar with the phenomenon of people who are genuinely brilliant in some areas but utter fools in other



Paul Krugman

THE ANSWER,
AS BEST AS I CAN
TELL, IS THAT
INVESTORS FELL
IN LOVE WITH
A STORYLINE
ABOUT A
BRILLIANT, COOL
INNOVATOR,
DESPITE THE
ABSENCE
OF A GOOD
ARGUMENT
ABOUT HOW
THIS GUY COULD
FOUND A LONG-
LIVED MONEY
MACHINE

domains. For all I know, Musk is or was a highly effective leader at Tesla and SpaceX.

Even if that’s the case, though, it’s hard to explain the huge valuation the market put on Tesla before the drop, or even its current value. After all, to be that valuable Tesla would have to generate huge profits, not just for a few years but in a way that could be expected to continue for many years to come.

Now, some technology companies have indeed been long-term moneymaking machines. Apple and Microsoft still top the list of the most profitable US corporations some four decades after the rise of personal computers.

But we more or less understand the durability of the dominance of Apple and Microsoft, and it’s hard to see how Tesla could ever achieve something similar, no matter how brilliant its leadership. Apple and Microsoft benefit from strong network externalities — loosely speaking, everyone uses their products because everyone else uses their products.

In the case of Microsoft, the traditional story has been that businesses continued to buy the

company’s software, even when it was panned by many people in the tech world, because it was what they were already set up to use: Products like Word and Excel may not have been great, but everyone within a given company and in others it did business with was set up to use them, had IT departments that knew how to deal with them, and so on.

Apple’s story is different in the details — more about individual users than institutions, more about physical products than about software alone. And Apple was widely considered cool, which I don’t think Microsoft ever was. But at an economic level it’s similar. I can attest from personal experience that once you’re in the iPhone/iPad/MacBook ecosystem, you won’t give up on its convenience unless offered something a lot better.

The question is: Where are the powerful network externalities in the electric vehicle business?

Electric cars may well be the future of personal transportation. In fact, they had better be, since electrification of everything, powered by renewable energy, is the only plausible way to avoid climate catastrophe. But it’s hard to see what would give Tesla a

long-term lock on the electric vehicle business.

But the lesson from Apple and Microsoft is that to be extremely profitable in the long run, a tech company needs to establish a market position that holds up even when the time comes, as it always does, that people aren’t all that excited about its products.

So what would make that happen for Tesla? You could imagine a world in which dedicated Tesla hookups were the only widely available charging stations, or in which Teslas were the only electric cars mechanics knew how to fix. But with major auto manufacturers moving into the electric vehicle business, the possibility of such a world has already vanished. In fact, I’d argue that the Inflation Reduction Act, with its strong incentives for electrification, will actually hurt Tesla. Why? Because it will quickly make electric cars so common that Teslas no longer seem special.

In short, electric vehicle production just doesn’t look like a network externality business. Actually, you know what does? Twitter, a platform many of us still use because so many other people use it. But Twitter usage

is apparently hard to monetise, not to mention the fact that Musk appears set on finding out just how much degradation of the user experience it will take to break its network externalities and drive away the clientele.

Which brings us back to the question of why Tesla was ever worth so much. The answer, as best as I can tell, is that investors fell in love with a storyline about a brilliant, cool innovator, despite the absence of a good argument about how this guy, even if he really was who he appeared to be, could found a long-lived money machine.

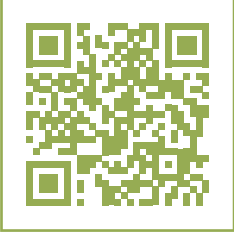
And as I said, there’s a parallel here with bitcoin. Despite years of effort, nobody has yet managed to find any serious use for cryptocurrency other than money laundering. But prices nonetheless soared on the hype, and are still being sustained by a hard-core group of true believers. Something similar surely happened with Tesla, even though the company does actually make useful things.

I guess we’ll eventually see what happens. But I definitely won’t trust Elon Musk with my cat.

— The New York Times.

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Oman to host Junior AHF Cup from Jan 6

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, DEC 28

Oman will host the Junior AHF Cup hockey championship from January 6 to 12, 2023 at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex. Oman, runners-up behind champions China, in the last edition held in Muscat, are the second best-ranked team in the men's Junior AHF Cup 2023 tournament. Eight teams are vying for the honours in two groups. Pool A includes hosts Oman, Thailand, Chinese Taipei and

Indonesia. Pool B comprises top-ranked Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong and Uzbekistan. Oman Hockey Association (OHA) Chairman Dr Marwan bin Juma al Juma hoped for a repeat performance from Oman junior side. "We hope to repeat last edition's performance and go on to win the title this year," Dr Marwan said. "Our national team also has presence of several junior players and we expect to put up a good performance at the AHF Cup," he added.

Shakir Muneer, OHA technical official and goalkeeping coach, said the squad is well prepared. "We are match-ready and the youngsters are pumped up to show their skills in the Asian tournament. We hope to make the most of it," he said. In their first match, Oman will take on Chinese Taipei on January 6. The hosts will meet Thailand on January 8 and will wrap up their Pool A matches with a match against Indonesia on January 9. The semifinals and classification matches for fifth to

eighth places will take place on January 11. The tournament will conclude with the final and play-off matches for third place and other classifications on January 12. Five teams from the tournament will join the already qualified India, Pakistan, South Korea, Japan and Malaysia in the Men's Junior Asian Cup. Also, the Men's Junior Asia Cup is a qualifier round for the FIH Hockey Junior World Cup 2023 with four spots available excluding the hosts Malaysia. The 13th edition of the Men's

FIH Hockey Junior World Cup, the biennial men's under-21 field hockey world championship organised by the International Hockey Federation will be held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. **GOOD RECORD** In the last edition of Junior AHF Cup in December 2021, also held in Muscat, Oman missed the silverware very closely after losing to China 2-4 in the penalty shoot-out. Oman though created more chances in the full time, earning four penalty corners and coming

close to score on quite a few occasions in an intense game. Chinese goalkeeper Junyuan Hu was the star of the final who helped China salvage a goalless draw in the regulation time. Chinese Taipei won the bronze medals after beating Uzbekistan 5-3 in the third-place play-off. Oman captain Rashad al Fazari claimed the top-scorer award after netting eight goals in the tournament. Uzbekistan captain Gaybullo Khaytboyev won the player of the tournament award.



Sultanate of Oman
MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH

TENDERS ANNOUNCEMENT

MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH, Muscat, hereby give notice of tenders for the following projects

Tender No.	Project Category	Location	Fees R.O.	Grade In Tender Board Registration
26/2022	Services	TENDER DOCUMENTS FOR CONSTRUCTION FOR GRASSED FOOTBALL PITCH AT OF MADHA SPORTS CLUB AT MUSANDAM GOVERNORATE	25/-	Excellent & First Grade
27/2022	Services	RENOVATION OF GRASSED FOOTBALL PITCH FOR ALTALEIAH SPORTS CLUB AT SOUTH SHARQIYA GOVERNORATE	25/-	Excellent & First Grade
28/2022	Services	CONSTRUCTION OF SYNTHETIC TURF FOOTBALL PITCH AND FLOODLIGHT TO MADHA SPORTS CLUB AT MUSANDAM GOVERNORATE	25/-	Excellent & First Grade
29/2022	Supply	SUPPLY AND INSTALLATION OF FLOODLIGHT TO MAIN FOOTBALL PITCH AT ALMUDHAIBI SPORTS CLUB NORTH SARQIYA GOVERNORATE	25/-	Excellent & First Grade
30/2022	Consulting Office	CONSULTANCY SERVICES (DESIGN AND SUPERVISION) SWIMMING POOL AT MADHA SPORTS CLUB MUSANDAM GOVERNORATE	25/-	First Grade
31/2022	Consulting Office	CONSULTANCY SERVICES (DESIGN AND SUPERVISION) PLATFORM AT AL MUDHAIBI SPORTS CLUB NORTH SHARQIYA GOVERNORATE	25/-	First Grade

Companies, which are registered with the Tender Board and engaged in same category with experience in and same Grade as noted above, can obtain the Tender Documents at the Tender Board E-tendering digital portal link (<http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) until 11/01/2023.

The last date of tender submission on above E-tendering site at 09:00am 06/02/2023

A Tender Bond equivalent to 1% of the tender sum issued from a registered bank, in the prescribed form, in Sultanate of Oman and valid for 90 days should be enclosed with the tender.

Any tender without the bond will be rejected and the tender committee is not bound to accept the lowest or any tender received.

INTERNAL TENDER COMMITTEE OF MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS and YOUTH

Any participants have doubt in adopting e-tendering can contact over the phone 24402200 or through email etenderhd@ita.gov.om

HM Cup hockey final on New Year Day

ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, DEC 28

The postponed final of the 52nd His Majesty's Cup hockey championship will be held on January 1, 2023, the New Year Day, the Oman Hockey Association announced on Wednesday. The match will kick off at 7 pm at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Muscat. The title-clash between Ahli Sidab and Al Nasr was scheduled to be held on Tuesday but was postponed due to the rainy weather conditions to Sunday. Shaikh Salim bin Mustahail al Mashani, Adviser at the Diwan of Royal Court, will be the chief guest and present the trophy. Ahli Sidab, coached by Aiman al Katheri, are targeting their 13th title in the



tournament while Mohammed al Battrani-coached Al Nasr are aiming to clinch their ninth trophy. Ahli Sidab captain Salah bin Nasser al Saadi said his team is

having good momentum in the tournament. "Ahli Sidab are in good form in the tournament. We are confident to lift the second title of the season after the OHA League," the Ahli Sidab captain said. Al Nasr's Bassim al Durbait hoped to claim the first title for the club in this season. "We want to end the year with a trophy. We have a good chance to win the first title for the season. Our boys will work hard for this target," the Al Nasr captain said. Jasjeet Singh and Ravinder Valmiki, Indian professional players of Ahli Sidab and Al Nasr respectively, promised a cracker of a match. "The match will be keenly fought between the well-experienced teams. We have been playing the HM Cup for some years now. We can feel the difference in

technical standards and match competitions over the years," they said. Al Seeb edged Salalah 6-5 in penalty shoot-out to finish third after the play-off match last Sunday. After the final round, Al Nasr topped with 13 points, followed by Ahli Sidab in second place with 11 points and qualified for the final. Al Seeb came in third place with 7 points. Salalah were fourth with 6 points and Bausher finished in fifth place with 5 points. Nizwa came sixth with no points. Defending champions Sohar failed to get through to the final round from Group A with other three – Al Nasr, Al Seeb and Bausher advancing to next stage. From Group B, Ahli Sidab, Nizwa and Salalah made it to the final round as Saham were eliminated.

Williamson, Latham punish fumbling Pakistan

KARACHI: Kane Williamson and Tom Latham hit contrasting hundreds on Wednesday to propel New Zealand to 440-6 at the close on the third day of the first Test against Pakistan in Karachi.

Williamson survived two stumpings and a leg-before decision before knocking an unbeaten 105, while Ish Sodhi was on one, with the tourists leading by two runs.

Williamson's 25th Test century is his first in international cricket since he racked up 238, also against Pakistan, in Christchurch in January last year.

He built on a solid foundation laid down by openers Latham, who cracked 113 en route to his 13th Test century, and Devon Conway, who fell for 92.

With the National Stadium pitch likely to take spin on the last two days, New Zealand will look to press home their advantage in the first Test of the two-match series, their first in Pakistan since 2002.

Williamson pushed fast bowler Mohammad Wasim for a sharp single to complete his hundred, a fifth against Pakistan.

In all he has batted for 356 minutes, cracking 11 boundaries.

But Pakistan were left ruing missed chances as wicketkeeper Sarfaraz Ahmed fumbled two stumpings with Williamson on 15



New Zealand's Kane Williamson (R) plays a shot during the third day of the first Test against Pakistan at the National stadium in Karachi. — AFP

and 21 — spinner Nauman Ali the unlucky bowler on both occasions.

"I think they were chances but one of the deliveries was on the leg side and Sarfaraz did his best," said Nauman.

"This pitch is on the slow side so our effort will be to get the last four wickets early on day four and then set a good target of close to 200 — which will be good on this pitch."

Williamson added a solid 90 for the fifth wicket with Tom Blundell, who fell to Wasim after scoring 47.

Pakistan's spin duo of Nauman and Abrar Ahmed took two wickets in the post-lunch session,

with Henry Nicholls falling for 22 and Daryl Mitchell scoring a robust 47-ball 42.

Ahmed, who has figures of 3-143, also had Michael Bracewell for five.

SCOREBOARD

Pakistan 1st innings 438	
New Zealand 1st innings	
T Latham c sub b Ahmed	113
D Conway lbw Nauman	92
K Williamson not out	105
H Nicholls b Nauman	22
D Mitchell c Sarfaraz b Ahmed	42
T Blundell lbw Wasim	47
M Bracewell c Wasim b Ahmed	5
I Sodhi not out	1
Extras (b6, lb6, nb1)	13
Total (for six wkts, 136 overs)	440
Fall of wickets: 1-183, 2-231, 3-272, 4-337, 5-427, 6-436	
Bowling: Hamza 20-3-56-0, Wasim 24-3-81-1, Ahmed 45-4-143-3, Nauman 44-2-137-2, Azam 3-0-11-0	

DECISION OVERTURNED

Williamson, who also overturned a leg-before decision against him on 13, added 65 for the fourth wicket with Mitchell.

Mitchell smashed seven boundaries and a six including four consecutive fours off Wasim after Pakistan took the second new ball at 272-3.

Earlier, resuming on 165 without loss, New Zealand were lifted by Latham's 13th hundred — the most centuries by a New Zealand opener.

Latham swept Ahmed for a single to reach three figures, eclipsing John Wright's 12 centuries as an opener for New Zealand.

He was finally dismissed for 113 after miscuing a reverse sweep and being caught at slip. — AFP

India promotes Pandya, drops Pant for Sri Lanka series



NEW DELHI: All-rounder Hardik Pandya will lead India's T20 side at home against Sri Lanka next week after selectors left several heavyweights out of the side.

Sri Lanka's tour begins with the first of three 20-over matches in Mumbai on January 3 before a three-match ODI series from January 10-15.

Out-of-form wicketkeeper-batsman Rishabh Pant has been dropped from both white-ball squads.

Ageing superstars Virat Kohli, 34, and Rohit Sharma, 35, were not included for the three-match T20 series but both return for the ODI portion of the tour.

Sharma returns as 50-over captain after a thumb injury that forced him to sit out most of this month's Bangladesh tour.

Veteran ODI opener Shikhar Dhawan, 37, who led the team for a three-match series against hosts New Zealand in December, was also dropped from the squad

for up-and-coming rookies Shubman Gill and Ishan Kishan.

Sri Lanka has announced a 20-man squad for the tour with Asia Cup-winning skipper Dasun Shanaka leading the visitors in both formats. — AFP
INDIA SQUADS:
T20Is: Hardik Pandya (capt), Ishan Kishan (wk), Ruturaj Gaikwad, Shubman Gill, Suryakumar Yadav, Deepak Hooda, Rahul Tripathi, Sanju Samson, Washington Sundar, Yuzvendra Chahal, Axar Patel, Arshdeep Singh, Harshal Patel, Umran Malik, Shivam Mavi, Mukesh Kumar.

ODIs: Rohit Sharma (capt), Shubman Gill, Virat Kohli, Suryakumar Yadav, Shreyas Iyer, KL Rahul (wk), Ishan Kishan (wk), Hardik Pandya, Washington Sundar, Yuzvendra Chahal, Kuldeep Yadav, Axar Patel, Mohammed Shami, Mohammed Siraj, Umran Malik, Arshdeep Singh.

SRI LANKA SQUAD:
Dasun Shanaka (capt), Pathum Nissanka, Avishka Fernando, Sadeera Samarawickrama, Kusal Mendis, Bhanuka Rajapaksa, Charith Asalanka, Dhananjaya de Silva, Wanindu Hasaranga, Ashen Bandara, Maheesh Theekshana, Jeffrey Vandersay, Chamika Karunaratne, Dilshan Madushanka, Kasun Rajitha, Nuwanidu Fernando, Dunith Wellalage, Pramod Madushan, Lahiru Kumara, Nuwan Thushara.

Bangladesh coach Domingo quits after India Test whitewash

DHAKA: Bangladesh coach Russell Domingo has quit just days after the side's disappointing Test series defeat at home to India with a year left on his contract, authorities announced on Wednesday.

Domingo, 48, had already been partially sidelined earlier this year when he was stripped of his role overseeing the T20 side right before the Asia Cup.

The South African's departure will leave Bangladesh scrambling to find a replacement before they host England in February.

"We received his resignation letter last night. We will now start working to appoint a new head coach before our next series," Bangladesh Cricket Board operations chief Jalal Yunus said.

Jalal said all other coaching staff members, including pace bowling coach and fellow South African Allan Donald, will remain in their roles despite Domingo's resignation.

Bangladesh won its ODI series against India 2-1 but lost both Tests, despite an impressive showing by its bowlers in the final match.

England will play three ODIs and three T20 matches during their tour which concludes on March 14 in Dhaka. — AFP



Russell Domingo

Australia eye victory after Carey century

MELBOURNE: Australia closed in on winning the second Test and the series against South Africa on Wednesday after Alex Carey struck a maiden century to leave them in a commanding position.

The hosts declared at tea on 575-8 on day three with an ominous lead of 386 after South Africa were bowled out in their first innings for 189.

In reply, the Proteas were 15-1 when play was abandoned early at the Melbourne Cricket Ground due to persistent drizzle.

Their bid to save the Test, and the three-match series after losing the opener in Brisbane, got off to a horror start with under-pressure skipper Dean Elgar caught by Carey off Pat Cummins without scoring in the second over.

Theunis de Bruyn, who was dropped by David Warner on three, was not out six alongside Sarel Erwee on seven.

Wicketkeeper Carey, playing in his 14th Test, was superb in reaching three figures for the first time before he was caught and bowled by Marco Jansen for 111.

At the declaration, a battling Cameron Green was not out 51 despite a fractured finger, alongside Mitchell Starc on 10.

"It was nice to be able to consolidate from our start from yesterday," Carey, only the second wicketkeeper to make a Test century at the MCG after Rod Marsh, told reporters. "This one's really special, obviously it's a big moment. But it's also great to help the Australian cricket team be in a strong position. That's what we play for, to win games."

Carey and Green piled on the misery in a 117-run partnership after South Africa gave themselves a glimmer of hope with early wickets, including Warner first



SCOREBOARD

South Africa 1st innings 189	
Australia 1st innings	
D Warner b Nortje	200
U Khawaja c Verreynne b Rabada	1
M Labuschagne run out	14
S Smith c De Bruyn b Nortje	85
T Head b Nortje	51
C Green not out	51
A Carey c & b Jansen	111
P Cummins c Verreynne b Rabada	4
N Lyon c Zondo b Ngidi	25
M Starc not out	10
Extras (b5, lb12, nb5, w1)	23
Total (8 wkts declared, 145 overs)	575

Fall of wickets: 1-21, 2-75, 3-314, 3-363, 4-395, 5-395, 6-400, 7-440, 8-557
Bowling: Rabada 28-1-144-2, Ngidi 22-1-2-98-1, Jansen 28-1-89-1, Nortje 25-1-92-3, Maharaj 41.5-3-135-0

South Africa 2nd innings
D Elgar c Carey b Cummins

ball after he resumed on 200.
Warner returned to the crease when Head was out for 51. "I probably woke up six or seven times," he added, and was bowled first ball by an Anrich Nortje yorker as Australia lost three wickets for five runs. — AFP



MBAPPE, NEYMAR BACK IN SQUAD FOR LIGUE 1 ACTION

LIONEL MESSI

TO MAKE JANUARY RETURN FOR PSG

PARIS: Lionel Messi will not return to Paris Saint-Germain until early January, but Kylian Mbappe is set for an immediate return to Ligue 1 action against Strasbourg on Wednesday.

Head coach Christophe Galtier revealed Messi will miss the Strasbourg game, and Sunday's trip to Lens, after being given dispensation to stay in Argentina for an extended post-World Cup break.

Messi headed home after Argentina's Qatar 2022 triumph, to be feted for his leading role in the team's triumph after their dramatic win on penalties against France in the December 18 final.

Mbappe, who hit a hat-trick for France in that game but still finished as a runner-up, has returned to full training with the capital club and

looks set to line up at the Parc des Princes against Strasbourg, with Brazil's Neymar and Marquinhos and Morocco's Achraf Hakimi also available after rejoining Galtier's group.

Galtier said: "There are individual cases with the players who went very far. Achraf Hakimi played in every game at the World Cup for Morocco. He was in the team of the World Cup."

"He wanted to get back as quickly as possible, as did Kylian Mbappe. He also turned in some brilliant performances and was the top goalscorer at the World Cup."

"After speaking to him and all my different teams who stayed in regular contact with the players, Kylian Mbappe wanted to join backup with us pretty quickly."

"There could be a time when

Achraf Hakimi and Kylian Mbappe need to rest. Not necessarily physically, but definitely mentally.

"As for Leo Messi, who had a brilliant tournament, given they won the competition, he went back to Argentina for the celebrations. We made the decision to give him until January 1, so he will be back herewith us on the second or third to get back into the swing of things after 13 or 14 days off."

Reports have claimed Messi, who scored seven goals and won the World Cup's Golden Ball prize, has agreed a contract extension with PSG, who will be hoping to get that deal completed soon after his return to France.

NEYMAR FULLY FIT
An ankle blow for Neymar during the World Cup is no longer

troubling the former Barcelona forward, Galtier said.

He returned to France on December 22, and Galtier said: "He has been working outside as normal without any restrictions. Physically he is fine, and mentally he is looking forward to playing."

The PSG boss dismissed any suggestion of a possible problem emerging between Messi and Mbappe, after Argentina's post-final celebrations in the dressing room saw goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez mock the PSG and France striker.

Galtier suggested all the blame for that episode was with Martinez.

"What happened in the celebrations belongs to the Argentinians, and it is not down to me. What matters to me is what I saw in the final and on the

sidelines - I saw Kylian Mbappe and Lionel Messi embrace," Galtier said.

"There is a lot of respect between them. They have an exemplary attitude after the games. And of course, [Messi] needs to be congratulated for the trophies, and the Argentina coach as well."

"So I would focus on the relationship between them. It wasn't Leo Messi winding anybody else up. What I saw after the final, what I have experienced, is there is no reason to mix these things up because the goalkeeper's behaviour is down to him."

"What matters to me is the relationship between the players. Kylian Mbappe had a very good attitude, despite losing. Of course he was very disappointed, but he did that in a classy way. He

congratulated Leo Messi and that is a very good thing for the club and for the team."

For the players who returned from the World Cup disheartened, Galtier says throwing themselves back into club duty has been a welcome escape.

"When they came back, our medical and coaching teams have spoken to the players to understand how they are feeling, because they are top-level footballers who enjoy playing and training to be able to play," Galtier said.

"There is no better remedy than to go back to your club where there is a very good atmosphere, a good feeling. Everyone is showing their commitment based on the training sessions I've been involved with." — dpa



Moriyasu becomes first Japan coach to stay on after World Cup

TOKYO: Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu will stay in his job after leading the Samurai Blue to the last 16 at the World Cup in Qatar, the Japan Football Association said on Wednesday.

There had been speculation about his future after a rollercoaster performance by Japan, who again failed to reach the quarterfinals but produced stunning wins against Germany and Spain.

"This is really the happiest job", Moriyasu said of his re-appointment.

"It's a job that gives me a chance to compete on a global stage with the pride of being Japanese. That's why I decided to accept the offer", he said.

It was the fourth time Japan had exited at the first knock-out stage and denied them a much-coveted quarterfinal debut in

their seventh straight World Cup appearance.

Moriyasu becomes the first Japan coach to stay on after a World Cup.

The 54-year-old's new contract will run "until the next World Cup", said Japan Football Association head Kozo Tajima, who lauded Moriyasu for "elevating the international status of Japan's football".

After the heartbreak of their exit in Qatar, Moriyasu insisted Japan are on the right path.

"We weren't able to overcome this hurdle of losing in the last 16 and you might say that we didn't achieve anything new," he said.

"But the players have shown us something that we haven't seen before by beating former champions like Germany and Spain." — AFP

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MAISARAH

OQIC and Vision Insurance approve merger

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, DEC 28

In a filing to the Capital Market Authority (CMA) on Wednesday, publicly-listed Oman Qatar Insurance Company SAOG (OQIC) announced the approval of a proposal to merge with Vision Insurance Company through the consolidation route in accordance with the Companies Law issued by Royal Decree 18/2019.

Announcing the resolutions of an EGM held on December 27, 2022, OQIC CEO Hasan al Lawati said the meeting also agreed to increase the capital to RO 30 million, up from RO 20 million.

At the same time, the EGM approved the increase of the company's issued capital from RO 10 million to a maximum of RO 22 million and to allot the increased shares to Qatar Insurance Company QSPC and Al Hosn Investment Co SAOC at a price of 196 baisas after the completion of the merger procedures and registration of the new capital.

Vision Insurance Company, also a publicly listed firm, had also disclosed that its EGM had approved the proposal to merge with the Oman Qatar Insurance Company on December 26, 2022.

OQ, SABIC and KPI sign pact to set up world-scale petrochem complex in Duqm

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 28

OQ, SABIC and Kuwait Petroleum International (KPI) have signed a Project Development Agreement of a jointly owned petrochemical complex in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD), the Sultanate of Oman. The three companies aim to establish a petrochemical complex consisting of a steam cracker and derivative units and a natural gas liquid (NGL) extraction facility.

They will conduct the necessary studies and collaborate using their wealth of technical and commercial experience to develop the project with unique attributes that make it globally competitive and profitable for all three partners.

The agreement was signed by Talal bin Hamid al Awfi – OQ Group CEO, Abdulrahman bin Saleh al Fageeh, CEO (A) of SABIC, and Shafi Taleb al Ajmi, CEO of KPI. Commenting on this agreement, Talal al Awfi said, "OQ is proud of this historic agreement with our partners SABIC and KPI.

"The agreement is a significant milestone reached between the partners and comes at an important time in Oman along with our 52nd National Day celebrations and the near completion of the OQ8 refinery project in SEZAD being undertaken by OQ and KPI through the OQ8 joint venture.

"This agreement also comes in line with Oman Investment



Authority (OIA) plans to attract foreign investments to support Oman Vision 2040 in its endeavour to diversify Oman's economy."

Abdulrahman al Fageeh, SABIC CEO (A), said, "SABIC's collaborative approach has built longstanding relationships of collaboration, delivered innovative solutions and created mutual value for more than 45 years.

"This agreement enables us to identify and assess opportunity for ambitious and sustainable growth by bringing together our capabilities, expertise and technologies and work collectively with our partners.

THE PROJECT INTENDS TO MONETISE NATURAL GAS LIQUIDS AND OTHER FEEDSTOCKS FROM OQ AND KPI'S JOINT VENTURE REFINERY, OQ8 IN DUQM, TO MANUFACTURE PETROCHEMICAL PRODUCTS TARGETING GROWING MARKETS LINKED TO ENERGY TRANSITION, CLEAN TECHNOLOGIES, MOBILITY, CONSTRUCTION, DURABLE GOODS, HEALTHCARE AND PACKAGING AMONGST OTHERS.

Our involvement in this well-positioned project is consistent

with our growth strategy and Saudi Vision 2030 goals to develop a stronger downstream business addressing challenges in petrochemicals industry such as carbon neutrality and providing diversified and sustainable products."

KPI's President and Chief Executive Officer, Shafi Taleb al Ajmi, commented, "We are pleased to work side by side with OQ and SABIC on this pioneering project in Oman, because working with our regional partners supports KPC's 2040 strategy for growth in the petrochemical industry and enhances integration between the refining and petrochemical sectors. The project

also supports the economic growth and development of the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD)."

Petrochemicals' demand is expected to continue its growth path as living standards and human development improve, particularly in growing markets close to Oman. The project intends to monetise Natural Gas Liquids and other feedstocks from OQ and KPI's joint venture refinery, OQ8 in Duqm, to manufacture petrochemical products targeting growing markets linked to energy transition, clean technologies, mobility, construction, durable goods, healthcare and packaging amongst others.

TURN TO P14

Oman's fish production surges to 1,703K tonnes in 2022

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, DEC 28

Supported by strong investments in new fisheries infrastructure and necessary institutional, legislative, technical and economic frameworks, fish production in the Sultanate of Oman has increased from 284K tonnes in 2014 to 1,703K tonnes in 2022.

Dr Dawood bin Sulaiman al Yahyai, Director-General of Fisheries Research at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, has paid great attention to the fisheries sector through the development of plans, programmes and projects aimed at achieving sustainable fisheries development and investment in

this field."

The workshop, held under the auspices of Dr Ahmed bin Nasser al Bakri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, was attended by a number of specialists in fish farming including Prof Dr Salah El Din Moselhi, Head of the Agency for the Protection and Development of Lakes and Fisheries, a biosecurity expert in the Arab Republic of Egypt.

Al Yahyai stressed that the fish farming activity has received great attention from the ministry as a supportive industry for the fisheries sector to contribute to increasing fish production, providing job opportunities for future generations and providing food security.

The ministry's interest in the sector paved way for creating the necessary institutional, legislative, technical and economic frameworks for its development



on sound and sustainable basis. As a result of this interest, fish farming production in Oman increased from 284K tonnes in 2014 to 1,703K tonnes in 2022.

Commercial production from fish farming in 2022 reached about 1,350K tonnes of European coffer fish. The efforts of the ministry and its focus on small fish farmers have contributed to the increase in fish production from integrated fish farms in fresh water of 5K

tonnes in 2014 to 353K tonnes in 2021. It is also expected that Omani abalone production will start commercially next year. Currently there are 28 integrated fish farms in fresh water in Oman.

With regard to the commercial sector, Al Yahyai said there is a floating sea cages project for production of coffer fish, two projects for shrimp production and a project for Omani abalone production, in addition to other

There is a floating sea cages project for production of coffer fish, two projects for shrimp production and a project for Omani abalone production, in addition to other requests in various stages of approvals.

He said, "The fish farming sector, like other sectors of food

production, may face challenges and difficulties, the most important of which are diseases and epidemics that may affect farms for various reasons, which may cause large economic losses. In some cases, it may lead to complete closure of fish farms."

Referring to the statistics, he said, "The economic losses associated with diseases and epidemics have reached about \$6 billion. Therefore, biosecurity has emerged as one of the important aspects of fish farming." Biosecurity can be defined simply as a set of procedures and measures that are taken to protect fish farms.

Biosecurity measures include components of the fish production chain in aquaculture, starting from caring for the mothers of cultured organisms, producing fry, transporting them, rearing them, handling and harvesting procedures. TURN TO PAGE 14

Omani private equity firm sets up first women and children hospital in Suhar



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 28

Aman Healthcare Services SAOC (Aman Healthcare), a private equity management vehicle of Oman Investment Corporation SAOC (OIC) in the healthcare sector, announced that it had completed the construction of Oman's first dedicated women and children hospital facility in Suhar named 'Saada Hospital'.

It has received a completion certificate from the municipality and is all set for a soft launch in the first quarter of 2023.

Eng Kalat al Balushi (pictured), Chairman of Aman Healthcare and the Chief Executive Officer of OIC, stated: "We are proud to successfully complete the construction work of Saada Hospital and deliver state-of-the-art hospital facilities with high international standards within the planned timeline despite the Covid-19 pandemic. "We thank our investors, lenders and stakeholders who have shown continuing confidence in us. Saada Hospital will provide much-needed quality infrastructure and medical services to its customers and the local community in Suhar and North Al Batinah Governorate."

With its purpose-built state-of-the-art medical facilities, Saada Hospital provides high-quality medical services, modern healthcare technology, and a family-friendly environment.

With a built area of 10,600 square metres, Saada Hospital will open with 50 beds that can be



extended to 80 beds in the future. Saada Hospital's facilities include nine modern delivery suites, three hi-tech operation theatres, 15 outpatient consultation rooms, a full-fledged emergency department, and a full range of NICU and ICU services.

Each inpatient room of Saada Hospital is designed to accommodate women's and children's requirements and local cultural needs.

Saada Hospital offers focused-quality medical services for women and children in the fields of Maternity, Surgical Gynaecology, Paediatrics, Neonatal Intensive Care (NICU), Fetal Medicine, and Infertility as well as general healthcare services such as Internal Medicine, ENT, Cosmetic Dermatology, General Surgery, and General and Paediatric Dentistry.

With globally trained obstetricians, midwives, paediatricians, healthcare specialists, and nurses, the Saada Hospital ensures the topmost personalised care for each patient and offers normal and high-risk pregnancy care, ante-natal, and post-natal care, breastfeeding support, and parenting education with its patient-centric approach.

Insurance premiums in Oman reach RO 431 million until Q3

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 28

The insurance sector in Oman increases 13 per cent in total direct written insurance premiums, reaching RO 133 million during Q3 2022, compared to RO 118 million in the same period in 2021.

The latest unaudited financial statements for insurance companies issued by the Capital Market Authority indicated that the share of national companies accounted for the largest part of the volume of written premiums at a rate of 83 per cent, or about RO 111 million, compared to RO 99.4 million in the same period in 2021.

The volume of written premiums until the end of last September amounted to more than RO 431 million.

The underwriting results of the insurance companies showed a discrepancy in the indicators of the value of the total insurance premiums written by sectors during the Q3 of 2021 and 2022, as insurance premiums for the liability sector increased by 19 per cent, insurance premiums for the vehicles (third party) increased by 21.1 per cent, and insurance premiums for engineering increased by 21.1 per cent.



The highest percentage increase by 41 per cent, to reach approximately RO 6.7 million.

Whereas, insurance premiums for the transportation and property insurance sectors decreased by 16 per cent and 11 per cent, respectively.

According to the order of insurance product shares out of the total insurance portfolio, indicators show that health insurance products continued to lead at a rate of 36 per cent, followed by property insurance and vehicle insurance (third

party) at rates of: 14 per cent and 11 per cent, respectively.

The data indicated an increase in the total net direct insurance premiums — which the insurance company maintains after deducting what is reinsured with reinsurers — for Q3 2022 by 14 per cent, compared to the same period in 2021.

This is due to the increase in net premiums in most insurance branches, as the net premiums of the (group) life insurance branch recorded the highest increase

among all branches, by 53 per cent, to reach about RO 4.8 million, and the vehicle insurance branch (third party) increased by 23 per cent to reach about RO 13.3 million.

On the other hand, the data on operating results for Q3 recorded a decrease in net commissions by 185 per cent, while the value of earned premiums, net compensation item, and general and administrative expenses item increased by 26 per cent, 28 per cent, and 14.7 per cent, respectively.

OQ, SABIC and KPI sign pact to set up world-scale petrochemical complex in Duqm

FROM PAGE 13

The project intends to deploy state-of-the-art technologies to minimise carbon footprint and incorporate circular economy aspects and commit to high environmental standards. This mega project would support the region's development aspirations, maximising socio-economic impacts as well value addition to these companies. In addition, the project would also benefit from the excellent location of Duqm

being close to markets and taking advantage of the infrastructure which has been developed in the area, as OQ continues in its strategy to help develop SEZAD as manufacturing and logistics hub in line with vision 2040.

OQ is a global integrated energy company with roots in Oman — operating in 17 countries around the world and covering the entire value chain from exploration and production to marketing and distribution of

end-user products.

SABIC is a global diversified chemicals company, headquartered in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, manufacturing on a global scale in the Americas, Europe, Middle East and Asia Pacific. It makes distinctly different kinds of products: chemicals, commodity and high performance plastics, agri-nutrients and metals.

SABIC enables key end-use applications in industries such as construction, medical devices,

packaging, agri-nutrients, electrical and electronics, transportation and clean energy.

KuwaitPetroleumInternational is the international downstream subsidiary of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, ranked as one of the world's largest national oil companies. Established in 1983, KPI operates over 4700 service stations across Europe under its brands, Q8, Q8Easy and Tango, and provides over 70 airlines with jet fuel in major airport hubs.

MoU signed to promote digital transformation of South Al Sharqiyah Governorate

MUSCAT: The South Al Sharqiyah Governorate signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Omantel in the field of communications, which includes exchange of experiences in related fields, including the support and implementation of the digital transformation programme in the governorate.

The MoU was signed by Dr Yahya bin Badr al Ma'awali, Governor of South Al Sharqiyah, and Talal bin Said al Ma'amari, CEO of Omantel.

The memorandum includes exploring opportunities for cooperation in many fields including communications infrastructure, information technology, mobile communications solutions for business, marketing and sustainability programmes.

It also includes a study to develop the technologies used in the development projects implemented by the units affiliated with the South Al Sharqiyah Governorate, including the uses of the 5th Gen network, smart phone applications, smart monitoring systems, Internet of Things and the provision of smart city services and solutions.

Dr Yahya bin Badr al Ma'awali, Governor of South Al Sharqiyah, said in a statement, "The signing of MoU comes within the framework of cooperation between the Governorate and Omantel, with the aim of meeting the needs of activities and businesses in the Governorate, enhancing cooperation in marketing and promotional field and exchanging knowledge and experiences in various fields.



"We seek, through this agreement, to discover opportunities related to digital transformation, with the aim of accelerating its implementation in the Governorate, in order to enable

it with smart communication services and high-quality technical solutions, which in turn is reflected in improving the quality of digital services provided to its beneficiaries, and improving

the quality and efficiency of institutional performance," Al Ma'awali added.

Talal bin Said al Ma'amari, CEO of Omantel, said, "The signing of MoU with South Al Sharqiyah Governorate reflects the company's leadership in digital transformation programmes in the country. It will also contribute to raising the level of readiness of communication and information solutions in the Governorate.

"The MoU will enable us to explore opportunities for cooperation to develop the infrastructure for development projects in the Governorate of South Al Sharqiyah, in addition to opening up broad horizons for cooperation by providing systems, communication technologies and advanced information to the Governorate." — ONA

Oman's fish production surges to 1,703K tonnes in 2022

FROM PAGE 13

It is very important for fish farm owners to adhere to these measures to protect the farm and provide healthy and quality products

"This workshop, organised by the General Directorate of Fisheries Research, represented by the Fish Farming Centre, aims to introduce the most important of these (biosecurity) procedures for fish farming, especially freshwater fish farms, and to raise the level of awareness and familiarity with these procedures among specialists and owners of fish farms.

"We hope that this seminar will contribute to achieving the desired goal of exchanging experiences among the participants," Al Yahyai concluded.

Balancing budget deficits and public debt



HAIDER AL LAWATI
haiderdawood@hotmail.com

The author is a Muscat-based economic analyst who previously worked for the CBO and OCCI.

Some countries in the world used to record deficits in their annual financial budgets to achieve their financial and economic objectives, notably by obtaining loans from international financial institutions and regional banks, as well as giving the impression that the state could not implement all the projects and items included in the annual programmes of its official institutions.

As is well known, the deficit is the negative number in any state's general budget, with expenditures exceeding revenues. This means that the state will need to borrow to cover the expenses, unlike a surplus budget, where excess funds go to a reserve or a sovereign fund in that country.

Preliminary estimates of Oman

2023 Budget indicate that total public revenues are projected at about RO 11.650 billion (\$30.29 billion), an increase of 10 per cent over the 2022 budget, while the volume of public spending is expected to reach about RO 12.950 billion (\$33.67 billion) with an increase of 7 per cent of the 2022 budget.

Thus, the deficit will reach RO 1.3 billion (\$3.38 billion), which constitutes 11 per cent of total revenues and 3 per cent of GDP.

The good thing about the budget is Oman's expectations to increase its average oil production quantity to 1.175 million barrels per day, at an average price of \$55 per barrel, which is the price that was recorded in the current year 2022 budget, in order to hedge against any shocks to global oil prices due to variables and geopolitics in the

THE GOOD THING ABOUT THE BUDGET IS OMAN'S EXPECTATIONS TO INCREASE ITS AVERAGE OIL PRODUCTION QUANTITY TO 1.175 MILLION BARRELS PER DAY, AT AN AVERAGE PRICE OF \$55 PER BARREL, WHICH IS THE PRICE THAT WAS RECORDED IN THE CURRENT YEAR 2022 BUDGET, IN ORDER TO HEDGE AGAINST ANY SHOCKS TO GLOBAL OIL PRICES DUE TO VARIABLES AND GEOPOLITICS IN THE WORLD.

world.

It was possible to increase the average price of Omani oil by another \$10, i.e. by \$65, to

eliminate the deficit item in light of the recent numbers of the average selling price of a barrel of oil, which recorded between \$75 and \$90 in the past 11 months of this year.

However, the Omani government takes into account future expectations in the event of a decline in the price due to some circumstances, and to the ambiguity surrounding future expectations about the performance of the global economy, at a time when countries are likely to enter into a global recession and inflationary stagnation, in addition to the continuation of the Russian-Ukrainian war, and to instability of global supply and demand rates for oil production and prices in general.

Oman also takes into account all these reasons and directs the increase in oil prices to pay off the

public debt, which has increased since 2014 as a result of the increase in salaries, but the debt has been reduced over the past years to reach 43 per cent, equivalent to RO 17.7 billion (\$46 billion) in 2022.

Oman is still considered one of the countries that have external debt, as it is estimated that the volume of public debt will reach RO 18.6 billion (\$48.36 billion) by the end of 2023, at a time when the state continues to manage its lending portfolio to reduce it, and enhance its ability to face financial challenges.

It also works to reduce the cost of servicing the public debt with the aim of improving its credit rating, diversifying its sources of income, and promoting its economic growth, in addition to allocating new funds to finance upcoming development projects.

Carmakers will reverse out of public markets

Automotive groups may soon be in line for a private equity pimping. Shares of carmakers like Stellantis and BMW are suffering, as investors fret over a potential recession and falling car sales.

It's an opportunity for deep-pocketed funds or backers to steer them out of public markets altogether.

There are plenty of reasons to feel nervous about auto stocks. The transition to electric vehicles may sap margins, while Chinese upstarts are threatening to grab market share. Still, carmakers are already priced for the scrap heap, especially in Europe. Volkswagen, Mercedes Benz, BMW and Stellantis are trading on average at 5 times forward earnings, a roughly 25 per cent discount to their 10-year average.

True, a 2023 recession may depress demand for vehicles and cut prices. Yet the outlook is far from bleak. Auto groups sold fewer cars in recent years due to the semiconductor shortage, and so are not the bloated beasts they once were.

The same four carmakers are expected to grow revenue by 3 per cent a year through 2024, according to Refinitiv data, a far cry from the more than 10 per cent annual declines seen in 2009.

One way to profit from the depressed valuations is to buy back stock. BMW, for example, has a 2 billion euro repurchase programme, but has the authority to retire up to 10 per cent of its shares in coming years.

Assuming that the controlling Quandt family doesn't participate, its stake will rise. More companies may follow BMW in 2023.

A bolder move would be to delist a company altogether. There are risks: Carmakers are loath to borrow too much, for fear of damaging their financial services divisions. Yet the sector is also sitting on cash: BMW, for example, will in 2023 have net cash equivalent to 47 per cent of its market capitalisation in December, according to Refinitiv data.

Assume a private equity buyer teamed up with the Quandt clan and acquired minority investors' shares at a 25 per cent premium, using debt, for 37 billion euros. After netting off cash, BMW would only have around 10 billion euros of borrowings, which is less than half of forecast 2023 EBITDA and not much more than its medium-term free cash flow target of almost 7 billion euros.

That implies the buyers could pay off the debt fast and subsequently extract hefty dividends. If public markets dislike European carmakers, there may be a private market solution. — Reuters

Is the Bank of Japan holstering its bazooka?



TAKATOSHI ITO

The writer, a former Japanese deputy vice minister of finance, is a professor at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University and a senior professor at the National Graduate Institute for Poli.

On December 20, the Bank of Japan (BoJ) decided to raise its ceiling on ten-year government bond yields from 0.25 per cent to 0.5 per cent. Within minutes of the announcement, the yen appreciated against the US dollar by 3 per cent, the Nikkei 225 fell by 2.5 per cent, and the ten-year bond rate jumped almost 25 basis points to approach the new ceiling.

This sharp reaction owed much to the fact that the decision took investors by surprise. The BoJ has long been intervening in the bond market to keep yields anchored close to the zero-bound, and the market was expecting

it to maintain its current "yield curve control" (YCC) policy until the end of Governor Haruhiko Kuroda's ten-year tenure in early April 2023.

But, according to Kuroda, allowing more flexibility in the ten-year bond market has become necessary to reinforce the YCC's effectiveness. The BoJ had been purchasing increasingly large sums of ten-year bonds at the 0.25 per cent level, often adding them to its balance sheet a day after the Ministry of Finance issued them.

Now, one can infer that the BoJ was alarmed to find itself purchasing bonds at an accelerating rate. After all, the yield curve recently dipped at the ten-year mark, meaning the ten-year bond rate was lower than both the nine-year and 15-year rates.

Although the YCC change is tantamount to a long-term interest-rate hike, Kuroda insists that it should not be interpreted as the first step in a broader process of monetary-policy tightening. The real interest rate, he notes, has been declining this year as the inflation rate has risen.

By raising the cap on ten-year yields, the BoJ is effectively adjusting for inflation, not actually hiking the real interest rate. Kuroda is correct on this technical point. But the tweak to the YCC could still be the first step toward monetary-policy normalisation. If so, it should

be heralded as a sign that the BoJ had had some success with its decade-long ultra-easy monetary policy.

Kuroda's Bazooka, as it is colloquially known, may have hit its mark. Since Kuroda's appointment in 2013, the Japanese inflation rate mostly hovered above zero but far below 2 per cent, leading some critics to argue that the BoJ's inflation-targeting framework was a failure. But others — including me — defended the framework.

From the perspective of a flexible inflation-targeting regime, we argued, the BoJ was balancing below-target inflation with Japan's strong GDP growth (or the unemployment rate) in its evaluation.

But one point was always clear: The BoJ had failed to anchor inflation expectations at 2 per cent, which was supposed to be one of the great benefits of the inflation-targeting framework. Now, the inflation rate (excluding fresh food) has risen sharply.

In January 2022, it was still at just 0.2 per cent; but it had reached 2.1 per cent by April, and 3 per cent by September. As in many other countries, this spike was driven by global energy- and food-price increases and a weakening currency. Still, because Japanese inflation has been far below that of the United States (7.11 per cent), the United Kingdom (10.7 per cent) and the eurozone (10.1

per cent), the BoJ — until December 20 — has consistently refused to raise interest rates.

As recently as October 2022, the members of its Policy Board projected that inflation would fall back to 1.6 per cent in 2023. But there is now reason to suspect that this forecast will be proven wrong.

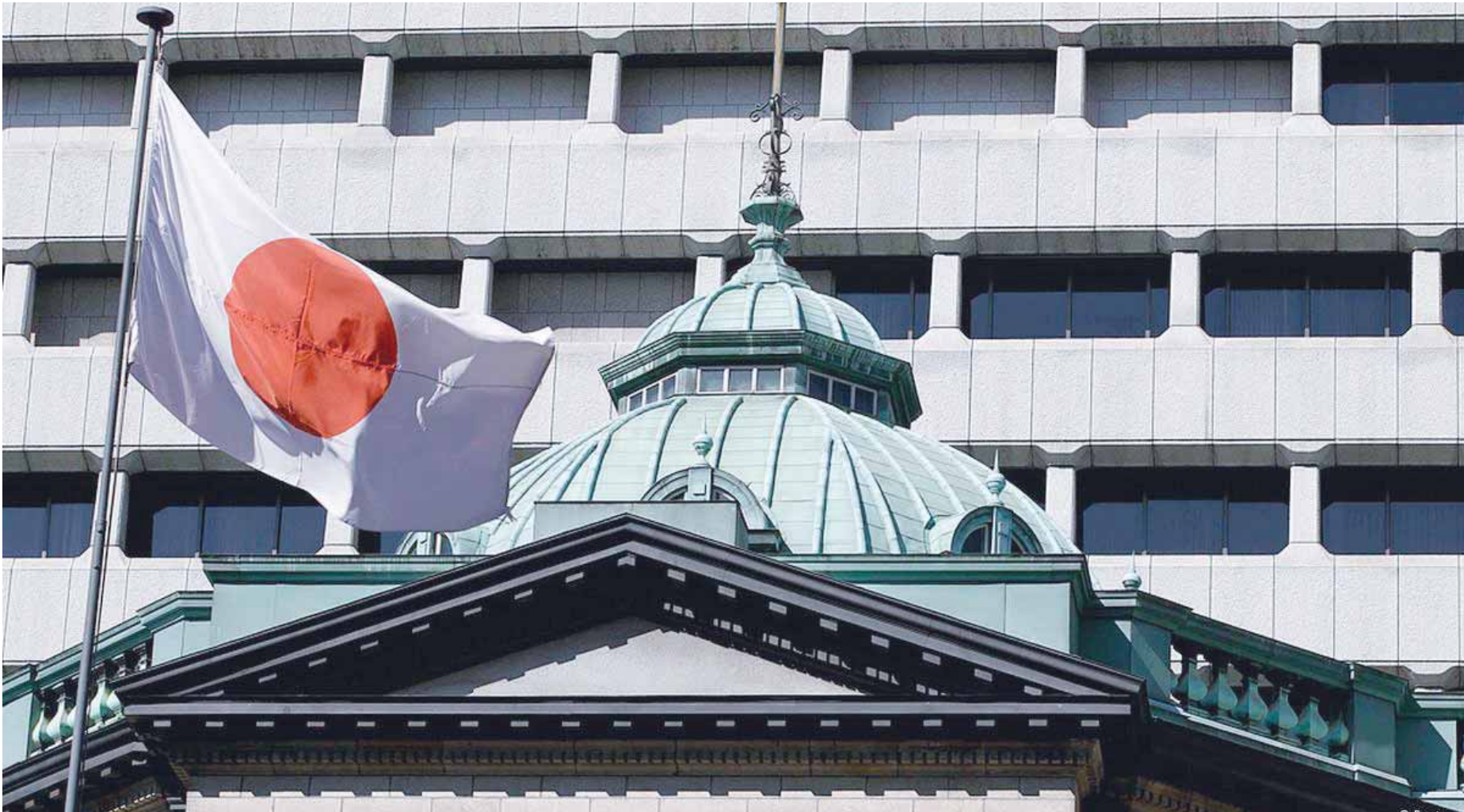
First, just-released data for November show that the inflation rate, excluding energy and food prices, is at 2.8 per cent. Thus, even if energy and food prices stop rising in 2023, the inflation rate could remain above 2 per cent.

Second, next year's "spring offensive" — annual pay negotiations — is expected to bring large wage hikes, partly to compensate for the higher inflation rate in 2022, and partly to redistribute the higher profits stemming from yen depreciation.

In the event, substantial wage increases would replace some of the "cost push" inflation of 2022 with "demand pull" inflation (by increasing many households' relative spending power), which tends to be relatively easier for consumers to accept.

That would be an ideal initial condition for the BoJ to start hitting its inflation target on a more sustainable basis. The New year may yet bring a happy ending to Japan's decade-old ultra-easy monetary policy.

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A Japanese flag flutters atop the Bank of Japan building in Tokyo, Japan. — Reuters

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I Disha Mahesh Sampat (holder of Indian Passport No. U0368555) D/o/Sr Mahesh Bhagwandas Sampat having permanent residence in 33A Sindhu Bang, B Tilak Road, Ghatkopar East, Mumbai 400077, India (complete postal address in India) and presently residing at Muscat, Post Box No 899, Postal Code 114, Sultanate of Oman (Complete postal address in Sultanate of Oman), intend to marry Mr/Ms Dhairya Uday Pratap Singh Khimji (Holder of Omani Passport bearing No HN8244003, S/o Uday Pratap Singh Khimji having permanent residence in P O Box 948, PC111, CPO, Sultanate of Oman (complete permanent address) at Embassy of India, Muscat. I swear that I am marrying him/her at my own free will and not under any duress and intimidation. Any objection towards this marriage may please be communicated to Embassy of India, Muscat, Diplomatic Quarters, Al Khuwair, P.O. Box No. 1727, Postal Code No. 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman within 30 (thirty) days of publication of this newspaper advertisement.

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I, Jacquilin (holder of Indian Passport No. L0074311) daughter of Mary Dominic John having permanent residence in Charuvila Puthen Ceedu, Kottapuram and presently residing in Hills Avenue, madinat Al Irfan, Muscat Hills, Seeb, Oman, intend to change my name from Jacquilin to Jacquilin Mary Dominic for all practical purpose. Any objection towards my name change may please be communicated to Embassy of India, Muscat, Diplomatic Quarters, Al Khuwair, P Box No. 1727, Postal Code 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman.

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HIS MAJESTY ADMINISTERS OATH TO NEW MINISTER

MUSCAT: Before His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries Dr. Saif bin Abdullah bin Ahmed al-Saifi, Chairman of the Supreme Court Saif bin Abdullah bin Ahmed al-Saifi, Chairman of the Supreme Court Saif bin Abdullah bin Ahmed al-Saifi, Chairman of the Supreme Court

NEW RO 50 BANKNOTE FROM THIS MONTH

MUSCAT: To mark the 50th anniversary of the Omani Revolution and in commemoration of the memory of the founder late His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) issued a sixth series of new RO 50 banknote, which will begin circulating this month.

SAMEL BUTTY

MUSCAT: The frequent orders and hours spent by the author to follow social distancing guidelines are trying on dual side.

SOME FROM A HOT FOLLOWING SOCIAL DISTANCING MOVIES

are out. In these critical moments of uncertainty with social, physical and mental health, we should discipline ourselves.

and in some cases, it is necessary to pull the shoulders of other people as well. said Saif bin Abdullah bin Ahmed al-Saifi, Chairman of the Supreme Court



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MONA LISA IN OMANI OUTFIT

This piece of art was created by innovative Omani artists who are passionate about presenting their work in a distinctive and contemporary manner. **P20**

Bayreuth Festival to feature two open-air performances again in 2023

BAYREUTH'S RICHARD Wagner Festival has published the programme for the coming summer, starting in the traditional way with "Parsifal" and the "Ring" and featuring two open-air performances again. The world-famous festival in the southern German town will start on July 25, 2023 with a new "Parsifal" in 3D directed by US professor of music and theatre arts Jay Scheib. There had already been debates about the new production recently as only a

few spectators will be able to fully enjoy the new 3D "Parsifal." For financial reasons, only 330 augmented reality glasses will be purchased - although there is room for almost 2,000 people in the festival theatre's auditorium. The title role is to be sung by Joseph Calleja, who is making his Bayreuth debut. Pablo Heras-Casado is the musical director. The festival programme officially begins in the Bavarian town on July 24. Festival director Katharina Wagner is once again

inviting the public to an open-air event with free admission. Last summer, the two concerts of the Festival Orchestra and several soloists were very well received, especially by the people in the Bayreuth region. The programme again includes the four-part "Ring of the Nibelung" directed by Valentin Schwarz. The production was highly controversial at its premiere last summer and triggered veritable storms of protest in the theatre hall. Also on the programme: "Tristan and Isolde," "Tannhäuser" and "The Flying Dutchman." The "Tannhäuser" performance will be the first time Nathalie Stutzmann, the music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, conducts in Bayreuth. John Lundgren, who had pulled out of the role in 2022, is scheduled to sing "The Flying Dutchman." — dpa

Also on the programme: "Tristan and Isolde," "Tannhäuser" and "The Flying Dutchman." The "Tannhäuser" performance will be the first time Nathalie Stutzmann, the music director of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, conducts in Bayreuth. John Lundgren, who had pulled out of the role in 2022, is scheduled to sing "The Flying Dutchman." — dpa



READ

I HAVE SOME QUESTIONS FOR YOU

BY REBECCA MAKKAÏ

A successful film professor and podcaster, Bodie Kane is content to forget her past—the family tragedy that marred her adolescence, her four largely miserable years at a New Hampshire boarding school



GIFT OF LOVE

Nearly 200 new Waterford crystals were installed on the New Year's Eve ball in Times Square in New York on Tuesday in preparation for Saturday's celebration to welcome the welcome in 2023. — Reuters



SPECIES

A young female black panther, a six months survivor of the trafficking of exotic pets in Ukraine, which arrived in France in a shelter for wild animals at the zoo in Saint-Martin-la-Plaine. — AFP





You’re going to need a smaller boat: Island hopping in the Grenadines

STORM CLOUDS BUNCHED ahead like an unmade bed as our captain gunned his single outboard motor straight into the oncoming swells. Thwack! Every 10 seconds, we bounced high then slammed down hard, drenched in salt spray, on the wooden bench. Even more thrilling — or maybe terrifying — we could see no life jackets aboard. It was just another island crossing in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

To see more than one or two of this Caribbean nation’s 32 mostly uninhabited islands, which stretch in a roughly 56-mile-long crescent closer to Venezuela than to North America, you’ll need a boat. Flights between islands are hard to come by, and if you do find one, takeoffs are unpredictable.

During our nine-day tour of the archipelago, my husband and I visited eight islands — including one barely larger than a sandbar — by ferry, water taxi, small yacht and the occasional swim to shore.

It was a far cry from my previous Caribbean forays. Those land-based trips culminated in daily hot showers and hair dryers back at the hotel or Airbnb. Here, we lived in our swimsuits and bathed in the sea, immersed in the consonance of land, ocean and culture that is island life.

RUM PUNCH WITH THE ‘YACHTIES’
Our journey began on St. Vincent, the island “mainland” of the Grenadines. We rented a car, loaded up on water and an addictive regional snack of molasses, coconut and spices called toolum, and hit the winding roads, dodging stray dogs, goats and roosters. The northernmost island in the chain, just 18 miles long, St. Vincent is a tangle of hibiscus, bougainvillea, pastel cottages and corrugated-metal-roofed bars with names like Joe’s Bla Bla and Chillspot.

We found a muddy hiking adven-

ture at the Vermont Nature Trail, a 2-mile path winding around a pair of towering pitons (pointed volcanic peaks), dense with Caribbean pines, palms, epiphytes and tall trees with thick buttresses. The guide we hired at the entrance was worth the \$20: The slippery trails might have persuaded us to turn around before reaching the preserve at the top, where we glimpsed a pair of the endangered St. Vincent

join their island hopping.
On the aft deck of the Wind Kat, the pair inducted us into “yachtie” life with a toast of rum punch. The yachties form a sort of floating, nomadic expatriate community in the Caribbean. They are laid-back (some boast of spending weeks naked on their boats); meet up when the wind blows them into the same bays; exchange news about swells, weather and which



parrots soaring over the green valley.
The next morning, we boarded a ferry loaded with pallets of potatoes, concrete, diapers and other necessities, bound for the island of Canouan, where a floating Airbnb awaited us. When we disembarked two hours later, we met Johan Kotze and Nelia Lindeque, a South African couple who left their aerospace jobs a decade ago and sailed across the Atlantic on their 34-foot catamaran, the Wind Kat, where they now welcome visitors to

islands are short on supplies like butter and lettuce; and gather to lash their boats to the roots of coastal mangroves when hurricanes are coming.
Some of the Grenadines are private — Mustique and Petit St. Vincent, for example. Canouan is open to the public, but increasingly colonised by the 1 per cent. Travel sites have called it “the next billionaires’ playground,” on a course to become a superyacht destination like St. Barts. Rooms at the

Mandarin Oriental start at \$1,800 a night. Not far away, the new Soho House Canouan, a members-only resort, offers an elegant outdoor bar and restaurant that is open to the public, but the yachties scoffed at paying \$6 for a Carib beer, when local bars sell them for less than half that.

That night, we slept under an open hatch. The glup-glup of waves on the hull woke me just before sunrise, and I opened my eyes to see a square of starry sky turn from violet to pink.

After a breakfast of coffee and eggs, followed by an obligatory rum punch toast (yachties day-drink without shame), we set sail. Fish splashed and glittered along the hull. Above, the mast tilted back and forth like a compass needle aimed at the sky. An hour later, we were anchored at Salt Whistle Bay on the island of Mayreau.

From above, Mayreau, which is less than 2 square miles, looks a bit like a manta ray, one of the creatures that live in the nearby waters. It is roughly 7 miles from Canouan, but economically, another world. It has no gas stations or ATMs. It had no electricity until the early 2000s, after the national government persuaded the family that had owned the island since colonial times to sell 24 acres to its approximately 250 residents.

Mayreau is the only inhabited island within the Tobago Cays Marine Park, a protected area that also includes three islets and five cays (including one, Petit Tabac, that served as a setting in “Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl”). The surrounding reefs teem with sea turtles, rays, sharks and other marine life. The park attracts yachties, private charters and some medium-size cruise ships. But its fishing restrictions also pose hardships for the local population. — NYT

ENVIRONMENT

Bangladesh farmers swap rice for vegetables as water dries up



F OR DECADES, Shafiqul Islam Babu grew rice on his land in northwest Bangladesh - until climate change made rainfall more erratic and overused groundwater began drying up in the mid-2000s.
As his rice harvest declined, so did his earnings.
In response, the 45-year-old farmer decided to grow cabbage on his land - a high-value crop that uses less water than rice, has plenty of buyers, and provides him with a steady income.
“I didn’t know what to do instead of paddy farming, which was my ancestor’s profession, (and) I had to maintain my family with my savings,” he said in an interview while cleaning weeds and dead leaves from his 20-hectare (49-acre) cabbage farm.

“Then, vegetable farming showed me a ray of hope.”
Babu said he sold his entire cabbage crop ahead of harvest this year, with demand for the vegetable high in Dhaka, the capital. He managed to make about 215,000 taka (\$2,000), up from the 80,000-odd taka he used to receive for his rice harvest.

Accelerating climate change impacts have led many farmers in Bangladesh’s Rajshahi district to swap rice for vegetables as they strive to make their business pay on an ever-hotter planet.

Eight years ago, rice was the region’s main crop - but now it is the “loser crop”, with vegetables from cabbage to gourds increasingly favoured as they need less water; produce higher yields and bring in more money, according to Shams Wadud, head of the district’s Department of Agricultural Extension.

Farmers in Rajshahi used to struggle to grow rice for two seasons a year, but many are now cultivating vegetables three or four times annually on the same land, Wadud explained.

“They are getting good prices (and) the production of vegetable crops has now increased many times,” he said.

Since 2009, the area of land dedicated to growing vegetables has almost quadrupled to about 78,500 hectares in Rajshahi, making it the nation’s largest vegetable-producing district, agriculture ministry figures show.

But it’s not just Rajshahi that is looking beyond rice. Bangladesh’s agriculture minister Muhammad Abdur Razzaque said the government was aiming to use “all kinds of abandoned and sandy land” to expand vegetable production.

Sandy soil is considered superior for growing vegetables rather than rice because it requires less water and fertiliser, officials said.

DEPLETING GROUNDWATER
While some parts of Bangladesh have been experiencing record-breaking monsoon rains and flooding, drought is becoming increasingly common in the Barind region, which covers most of Rajshahi and some of Rangpur district.

The area’s annual average rainfall is about 1,100 mm (43 inches) - less than half the nationwide average - said Chowdhury Sarwar Jahan, a geology professor at the University of Rajshahi.

And, due to accelerating climate change, average rainfall in the Barind region “is going down day by day”, he said.

Because there is so little rain, farmers in the region rely on deep wells to get water to irrigate their crops, putting intense pressure on groundwater supplies, Sarwar Jahan added.

Groundwater levels in Barind are dropping by 50 to 60 cm every year, according to the Bangladesh Water Development Board.

This spurred some farmers in Rajshahi in the late-2000s to try growing cabbage and pointed gourd - which is similar to cucumber - on land where they had given up on rice, according to Dewan Ali, 55, a farmer living in the village of Godagari.

“A few months later, they were surprised to see that with less water and less fertiliser they were getting a good harvest,” said Ali.

“This good news was flying all over. Within two years, most of the farmers started to farm different types of vegetables.”

The Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) estimates that certain vegetables - including tomatoes, okra and radishes - can be grown using about 336 litres of water per kg, nearly ten times less than it takes to grow the same amount of rice.

Boosting vegetable production is a priority for the Department of Agricultural Extension in Rajshahi, which is training farmers - from how to use fertilisers to controlling disease - giving them seeds free of cost, and raising awareness to encourage more to make the switch, according to Wadud.

He said the Rajshahi government is only focusing on areas where farmers are struggling to grow rice, so there is no danger of the shift to vegetables affecting overall paddy production.

“An adequate amount of paddy (rice) is grown in other parts of the country,” Wadud added.

GROWING ‘HOPE’
While many farmers say their livelihoods have been saved by the discovery that vegetables can thrive on parched land, those abundant harvests can sometimes prove too much of a good thing.

In particularly productive seasons, oversupply drives down the prices farmers can charge for their produce, while storage is also an issue, said Hossain Ali, a farmer in the Godagari area of Rajshahi.

When farmers grow more rice than they can sell, it can be dried and stored easily for six months, he said, but surplus vegetables quickly rot unless they are kept refrigerated.

—Thomson Reuters Foundation



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INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



AROUND THE WORLD

CARNIVAL

Nigeria dance carnival helps residents reclaim the streets



IN A STREET IN a poor neighbourhood of Lagos, a bare-chested young man, Gift Eze, holds his screaming partner, helping calm the rage within and stop him fighting. Residents of Oworonshoki have seen their share of violence, with robberies and tit-for-tat gang murders once commonplace in this part of Nigeria's vast, boisterous commercial capital. But the scene on Christmas Eve, a dance routine between two men caked in chalk, showed how far the community has come since the annual Slum Party, an art event using dance to tell stories of the local community, was established four years ago. Days of dance workshops culminated with an all-day carnival aiming to reclaim the streets and reduce tensions between rival gangs. Before long,



onlookers were dancing along with the drums, blurring the lines between performers and their audience. "We are using dance as a focal point ... to come to the community and just talk about the various socio-political issues that needed to be addressed, using a party as the template," said Sunday Ozegbe-Obiajulu, who founded the event. Eze, one of the Slum Party's participants, said the event has been transformational. "I've been able to achieve a big goal in my life, and Slum Party has really changed a whole lot for me," he said. Community leader Oriyomi Akeem said Slum Party has helped bring peace to a neighbourhood once known as a no-go area overrun by gangs. "Now everything is calm and good," Akeem said. Ozegbe-Obiajulu hopes the carnival's success could be replicated by people in other troubled areas of Nigeria and beyond. "With their dance, their poetry, their music, they can definitely use it to bring some sort of attention to their community, they can also use it to inspire the young ones." — Reuters

FASHION

In Hong Kong, designers try out new assistant: AI fashion maven AiDA



AT THE FASHION X AI show in Hong Kong, attendees noticed a certain "alien" quality about the new clothes modelled on the event's narrow catwalk - and the designs were, in fact, not entirely human. The show put more than 80 outfits from 14 designers in the spotlight, all of which were created with the help of the artificial intelligence software AiDA, short for "AI-based Interactive Design Assistant". The software was developed by PhD students and academics at the Hong Kong-based AiDLab. Masked in monochrome blue, wearing outfits that ranged from down jackets to translucent skirts, models strutted past rows of critics and fashion designers. Attendee Cynthia Tse said it felt like she was witnessing the future of fashion at the show on Dec. 19. "I think the face covering is definitely alien-like, and exciting," said Tse. According to AiDLab CEO Calvin Wong, the soft-

ware was created to serve as a "supporting tool" for designers. "AiDA is an assistant for fashion designers just to help them, you know, to work together," Wong said. "Designers and AI can work together to come up with the final collection." The AiDA system is supported by AI technologies such as image recognition, detection, and image generation, Wong said. Designers can upload draft sketches, materials, and colour palettes to a virtual mood board, and the software's algorithm generates blueprints that designers can tweak and add their own flair to. The system can produce a dozen fashion templates within 10 seconds, saving designers precious time, Wong said. Hong Kong-based fashion designer Mountain Yam has been using AiDA for the past six months and said it not only saved him time, but inspired him. "Our relationship is comparable to a romantic rela-

tionship in that I seemed to gradually get to know her (AiDA), and she gradually got to know my own designs," Yam said. "In accordance with my lines, styles, and databases, the system will propose something for me that I may not have ever considered, but she (AiDA) thinks is suitable for me. Therefore I believe we are developing a long-term relationship." Fashion designer Yulia Tlili said she had hoped the AI designs would be more at the forefront of the collection, noting that they weren't nearly as radical as the futuristic collections she had helped design when she started her career. "I think AI is full of possibility and it's really an amazing opportunity for the students and for the professors to really collaborate with this really interesting field," Tlili said. AiDA was officially launched with the Fashion X AI show, and is available to designers in Europe and Asia Pacific. — Reuters

LIFESTYLE

Peru communities settle scores with Christmas ritual fighting



MOST CHRISTMAS CEREMONIES would be ruined if attendees threw a punch. But in Peru's mountainous south, participants of one Dec. 25 festival have exactly that in mind. On Christmas Day, hundreds of residents of Chumbivilcas province in Peru's Cusco region gather to take part in an ancient fighting ritual aimed at settling scores and resolving conflict before the year's end. The tradition, which dates back generations, is known as Takanakuy, a Quechua name that roughly translates to hitting each other with fists. The ritual has been described as a method of alternative governance outside Peru's justice system. Fighters aim to settle family, romantic or territorial disputes with their fists as animated spectators sing, dance and cheer for their favourites. Fighters are traditionally men, but women



are increasingly taking part, according to local media. Ronderos, members of a grassroots justice system in Peru's Andean communities, stand by to break up the fighting when necessary. The fights involve only kicks and punches and end if a combatant bleeds, falls to the ground, or cannot defend themselves. This year's event involved more than 40 fights lasting approximately 2 minutes each, according to local outlet La Republica, which live-streamed the battles. The festivities are not all violent. Fighting is traditionally preceded by eating, drinking and processions. Attendees also incorporate masks and costumes to channel historical and indigenous symbols from the region, such as a dancing condor. Finally, with scores settled, the fights typically end with a hug, smile or handshake. —Reuters

art & life

Local Scene

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THURSDAY | DECEMBER 29 | 2022

Mona Lisa in Omani outfit



By Zuwaina al Sulimani

The history of the Mona Lisa painting is so profound. It currently stands as the one of the world's most famous paintings. The artist's notion that humanity and nature are interconnected through a cosmic link serves as the theme of this work.

The sitter's hesitant smile serves as further evidence of the harmony it conveys.

The Mona Lisa is so important to the world of art because it revolutionised portrait painting and the way that artists dressed their models. It is extremely well-known everywhere.

The painting has left a lasting impression on people all over the world because it is referenced in numerous contemporary works, including songs, movies, books, and commonplace items.

THE OMANI PAINTING

Salim Swakhroon created the Omani-Dhofari Mona Lisa as a portrait photo with the assistance of a creative team that performed makeup, hair, painting, modelling, and designing to produce an exceptional impersonation of the famous painting of the Mona Lisa. They provided insight into how the world is a compact space where eastern and western cultures coexist.

It is a unique and creative work of art that captures the harmony between the traditional Omani-Dhofari dress and the legacy of the Omani history and its interactions with the outside world.

The artists preserved the authenticity and uniqueness of the Omani costume and embodied it in a model who resembled the Mona Lisa in her features and surroundings. By fusing the famous Mona Lisa painting with the Omani costume, they added a

new and creative mark to it.

This piece of art was created by innovative Omani artists who are passionate about presenting their work in a distinctive and contemporary manner. It depicts the beauty of the Omani costume and how it has survived generational changes, the blending of various cultures and fine arts, and its embracing of various forms.

THE TEAM MEMBERS

The talented Omani artists behind the portrait include photographer Salim Swakhroon, who has developed a distinctive and original style of photography, painter Fakherataj al Ismaili, a well-known and creative young artist, well known film makeup artist Iman al Balushi, a famous and hairstylist Ghada al Siyabi, who began her career in 2012 and has won numerous local and international competitions,

the owner of Azal Fashion, Asma, a fashion designer who is passionate about showcasing the beauty and intricate details of traditional Omani dress, and model Asara al Lawati, a social media influencer.

This painting is regarded an echo to the original painting with an addition of some terrain from the Omani environment and landscapes. The painting is 182 cm by 140 cm in size, and it took two months to complete.

This piece of art aims to portray the Omani identity in an understated and contemporary manner. It was done over the course of several shooting days that began in August 2022 and ended in October of that same year.

Salim, the photographer, added that there would also be a number of photo shoots highlighting other traditional outfits from various wilayats in the Sultanate of Oman.