

E-payment mandatory
for some activities

Businesses in the Sultanate of Oman are required to make e-payment options available for customers effective from early 2022, according to a notification issued by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion. **SEE P13**



P10

SALALAH
CLINCH
2020 HM
YOUTH CUP



P15

US FIRMS
PUSH STATES
FOR CARBON
MARKETS



P20

VLOGGER WONDERS
WHY SULTANATE
OF OMAN
REMAINS A SECRET



MUSCAT

HM CONDOLENCES TO
US PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of condolences to President Joe Biden of the United States of America (USA) on victims of the tornadoes that hit several US states.

In the cable, His Majesty expressed his heartfelt sympathies to President Biden, families of the victims and the US people, wishing the injured a speedy recovery.

— ONA

CABLE OF THANKS FROM
LEBANESE PRESIDENT

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has received a cable of thanks from President Michel Aoun of the Lebanese Republic in reply to His Majesty's greetings cable on his country's Independence Anniversary. In the cable, President Aoun expressed his thanks and appreciation for His Majesty's greetings and best wishes. He lauded the fraternal ties and cooperation between the two countries, stressing his keenness on enhancing the bilateral relations in all areas to serve the interests of the Omani and Lebanese peoples.

— ONA

Sayyid Fahd to lead Sultanate of Oman's delegation at 42nd GCC Summit



MUSCAT: On behalf of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, HH Sayyid Fahd bin Mahmood al Said, Deputy Prime Minister for Council of Ministers, will leave on Tuesday for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to lead the Sultanate of Oman's delegation in the 42nd Summit of the GCC Leaders. The summit is scheduled to be held on December 14.

HH Sayyid Fahd will be accompanied by an official delegation comprising a number of ministers and government officials. The Sultanate of Oman has affirmed that it would continue to support the GCC march and enhance all endeavours to serve Arab and Islamic issues. It also vowed to consolidate ties of cooperation and understanding with friendly countries.

The summit is expected to discuss coronavirus pandemic, establishment of the Customs Union and the development of the respective governments' technical capabilities and educational systems

In its 150th preparatory session for the summit, held in Riyadh on Sunday by the Ministerial Council, the GCC states affirmed that "The GCC summit of bounty and prosperity will continue to achieve the common goals of member states.

A statement issued at Al Ola

Summit at the conclusion of the 41st GCC summit, "Summit of Qaboos and Shaikh Sabah", underscored the keenness of GCC leaders to safeguard the gains of the GCC region and realise the aspirations of its peoples, as well as joint action to address the challenges that come in the way of the GCC march."

The summit is expected to discuss a number of issues, including updates of coronavirus pandemic, means of protecting societies against the disease, coordination to tackle pandemics, completion of steps for the establishment of the Customs Union and the GCC Common Market and the development of the respective governments' technical capabilities and educational systems.

— ONA



INSIDE



CROWDS KEEP GATHERING AT
KABUL PASSPORT OFFICE

P7



INDIAN CONTESTANT WINS
MISS UNIVERSE CROWN

P19

MoH begins booster dose rollout

VINOD NAIR
[@vinotnair](#)

The Ministry of Health (MoH) has started giving the booster dose or the third dose of the Covid-19 vaccine to those aged 18 or above and have completed six months since receiving the second dose.

The booster dose for the target groups will be of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, regardless of the type of vaccine received by the person previously, the MoH clarified.

The ministry has called on everyone to take the booster dose of the Covid-19 vaccine at the earliest. It has already started giving the booster dose to people above 65 years, healthcare and frontline workers aged 50 and above, patients with chronic diseases.

The curve of Covid infections in the Sultanate of Oman had witnessed a rise last Wednesday



and Thursday, according to MoH, though no deaths were recorded during this period.

"Do not be a reason for the continued rise in injuries, adhere to precautionary and preventive measures," the MoH said.

On Sunday, the Supreme Committee (SC) highlighted the fact that the new Omicron variant has led to a significant increase in the number of cases in various countries, including an increase in the number of inpatients in

Omicron: First 2 cases reported

The Ministry of Health on Monday announced the registration of the first two cases of the new Covid-19 variant Omicron. The ministry said two citizens returned from abroad have tested positive for the variant. The health conditions of the patients are stable. They are currently under epidemiological surveillance.

wards and intensive care units.

"The reports on the epidemiological situation in the Sultanate of Oman indicate a slight increase in positive cases, with the continuation of low rates of inpatients in hospital and intensive care units, and a high rate of immunisation with a single dose to 93 per cent of the target group," the committee said.

Omani discovers security gap in IOS System

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, represented by the National Center for Informatics Safety, has discovered a security gap in the IOS system of Apple corp. The flaw was spotted by Omani researcher Saif bin Hamad al Hinai, Senior Security Data Analyst. The anomaly was reported to the company, which took measures to patch the security gap in its latest version "IOS 15".

Apple also documented this discovery (ref. CVE-2021-30870) through its official page (website) where it lists the security gaps registered/ reported as of October 25, 2021. It has been the third security accomplishment of its kind registered by Apple under the name of the National Center for Informatics Safety of Oman: The first took the number (CVE-2016-7667) and it was dated December 20, 2016 and the second was registered under (CVE-2019-873) and dated October 8, 2019.

— ONA

Fake face! AI synthetic media tech enters perilous phase

LONDON: "Do you want to see yourself acting in a movie or on TV?" said the description for one app on online stores, offering users the chance to create AI-generated synthetic media, also known as deepfakes.

"Do you want to see your best friend, colleague, or boss dancing?" it added. "Have you ever wondered how would you look if your face swapped with

your friend's or a celebrity's?"

The same app was advertised differently on dozens of sites: "Make deepfake video in a sec," the ads said. "Deepfake anyone."

How increasingly sophisticated technology is applied is one of the complexities facing synthetic media software, where machine learning is used to digitally model faces from images and then swap them into films as



seamlessly as possible.

The technology, barely four years old, may be at a pivotal point, according to interviews with companies, researchers, policymakers and campaigners.

It's now advanced enough that general viewers would struggle to distinguish many fake videos from reality, the experts said, and has proliferated to the extent that it's available to almost anyone

who has a smartphone, with no specialism needed.

Policymakers looking to regulate deepfake technology are making patchy progress, also faced by new technical and ethical snarls. Laws specifically aimed at online abuse using deepfake technology have been passed in some jurisdictions, including China, South Korea, and California.

— Reuters



SQU holds graduation ceremony for 1,369

MUSCAT: Assigned by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, presided over the graduation ceremony of the first group of the 32nd batch of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) on Monday. The total number of graduates in this ceremony stood at 1,369 representing the College of Arts and Social Sciences, the College of Education and the College of Engineering.

The Minister of Labour will preside over the graduation of the second group of the 32nd batch on Tuesday.

The graduation ceremony began with a speech delivered by HH Sayyid Dr Fahad bin Al Julanda al Said, SQU Vice Chancellor, in which he said:



“We are so lucky to meet here today to celebrate the graduation of another batch of SQU students from the College of Arts and Social Sciences, College of Education and College of

Engineering. A few weeks ago we marked 35th anniversary of SQU, when this university set off to establish a new scientific and knowledge reality based on the fundamental principles of

science.”

“At the Sultan Qaboos University we are proud to see the university graduates advancing steadily to achieve their aspirations not only on the



national level but also globally. SQU has made constant progress at universities’ ranking on both the regional and international levels thanks to its researchers and academics who are considered

among the leading scientists of the world. We are proud not only of the new graduates but also the university’s alumni who include the chief guest, senior SQU officials and parents.” — ONA

Royal Air Force of Oman marks Armed Forces Day



MUSCAT: The Royal Air Force of Oman (RAFO) marked the Armed Forces Day which falls on December 11 each year, under the auspices of Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, on Monday.

The event, which was held at Seeb Air Base, began with the military salute to the chief guest and then RAFO music band played

the Royal Anthem. A military parade was then staged by RAFO personnel.

The celebration included a parachute show by the RAFO free fall team and a fighter jets show.

The event displayed high skills and unique capabilities of RAFO personnel and showed the level of modernisation witnessed by RAFO in terms of equipment

and progressive technical systems owned by RAFO under the Royal attention accorded by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Supreme Commander.

At the end of the event, the chief guest made a tour around the exhibition showcasing a number of aircraft, weapons and modern technological systems that meet the national tasks and requirements

undertaken by RAFO.

The event was attended by Dr Mohammed bin Nasser al Za’abi, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Defence, Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan’s Armed Forces (SAF), commanders of SAF and other military and security apparatuses, senior officers and retired RAFO officers. — ONA



Maritime link with Saudi Arabia to bolster investments

SAMUEL KUTTY

@samuelkuttvyp

A maritime link between the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is expected to be expanded with more investments in this sector following agreements signed last week.

Joint building and maintenance of ships and yachts, launching of coastal shipping lines and sea taxis are some of the features of the agreements which augur well for investment opportunities.

The Sultanate of Oman's state-owned transport group Asyad and the Saudi Maritime Transport Company have already signed a memorandum of understanding in the field of dry dock, logistics and maritime transport last week.

An agreement for mutual recognition of maritime certificates will enable seafarers to work onboard ships from both sides. In addition, the agreements will help develop passenger ferry services between the two countries.

The Sultanate of Oman-Saudi joint team is working on a number of initiatives

in the field of logistics, to exchange experiences and transfer knowledge between the two sides in the field of road maintenance and implementation, and to encourage investors to implement road projects in both the countries.

During his visit to Saudi Arabia, Dr Said bin Mohammed al Saqri, Minister of Economy, called for improving the maritime link between Saudi Arabia and the Sultanate of Oman by transferring oil and gas exports in the region to the Arabian Sea through the Sultanate of Oman without passing through the Strait of Hormuz.

"The two countries are seeking to accelerate and increase the volume of trade and investment exchange between them through joint strategic projects, increasing investment opportunities, and offering more joint projects and mutual investments in various sectors", he said during the visit.

Coinciding with the visit of His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, Crown

Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to the Sultanate of Oman, the two sides underscored the significance of the study of cooperation in opportunities in different fields including oil, gas and petrochemical sectors.

They agreed to increase the facilities that contribute to the smooth flow of intra-regional trade, enhance cooperation in the field of food security, and take advantage of the opportunities available in the sectors of standardisation, health and pharmaceutical industries.

Both the countries agreed to further cooperate in advanced technologies and innovation, renewable energy and industry projects, as well as in tourism and petrochemical projects, manufacturing industries, and logistical partnership.

They also expressed their determination to enhance and develop joint work in the tourism sector, with underlining this sector's contribution to the gross domestic product, as well as in creating job opportunities for citizens and diversifying sources of income.



Digital, Cultural Exchange Week with China kicks off

MUSCAT: Activities of the Digital, Cultural Exchange Week between youth in the Sultanate of Oman and the People's Republic of China kicked off on Monday at Omantel premises under the patronage of Sayyid Said bin Sultan al Busaidy, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth for Culture.

The event is organised by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture in China.

Activities of the event include a forum for youth pioneers of the digital culture industry between the two countries. In addition, the two countries present experiences of their companies in digital culture, such as cartoon films, games and online broadcasting and podcasting.

The event also includes various activities such as virtual art sculpture and photography



exhibitions for Omani and Chinese artists, as well as Huawei exhibition for the Omani and Chinese youth in the field of advanced technology.

Sayyid Said explained that the activities have an important impact on building confidence and understanding among peoples, besides enabling the international community to address various issues of common concern. He further

added that the strategic location of the Sultanate of Oman within the silk route gives it an important status for cultural exchange and cooperation. On her turn, Li Lingbing, Ambassador of China to the Sultanate of Oman, stressed the importance of such events that serve the bilateral relations between the two countries and their peoples, particularly in the cultural areas.

— ONA

Tender Notice

Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI), announces following E-Tenders for 2021:

Tender Number	Tender Name	Deadline for Specifications Request	Deadline for tender bids	Tender Price
28/2021	FortiGATE Firewalls Renewal with Local Support	20 Dec 2021	27 Dec 2021	25 OMR
29/2021	Supply, Install and Operate of Cyber Security Incidents Analytics with Machine Learning	27 Dec 2021	10 Jan 2022	50 OMR

Interested companies registered with Tender Board may obtain Tender document from the E.Tendering website: <http://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>. The Vendors must provide electronic bank Guarantee issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman for the value of (2%) of the Tender value valid for (120) days on website: <https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om> and addressed to Public Authority for Social Insurance.

CORRESPONDANCE:

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

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

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وزارة المالية
Ministry of Finance

وزارة التجارة
Ministry of Commerce

Request for Expression of Interest

Development, Management, Operation and Maintenance of Liwa Fishery Harbour Project under Public Private Partnership Agreement

December, 2021

The Ministry of Finance (MOF) is entrusted with the supervision of implementing Public Private Partnership (PPP) agreements in order to encourage the private sector to invest in infrastructure and public services. In this regard and in coordination with MOF, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MOAFWR) seeks to engage the private sector in its fishery harbours development under PPP agreements, which would contribute in fostering service innovation and achieve sustained growth.

Specialized Omani companies interested in participating in the implementation of the Liwa Fishery Harbour Project shall download the REOI form through MOF website (www.mof.gov.om) and then submit a duly filled form via ppp.ports@mof.gov.om.

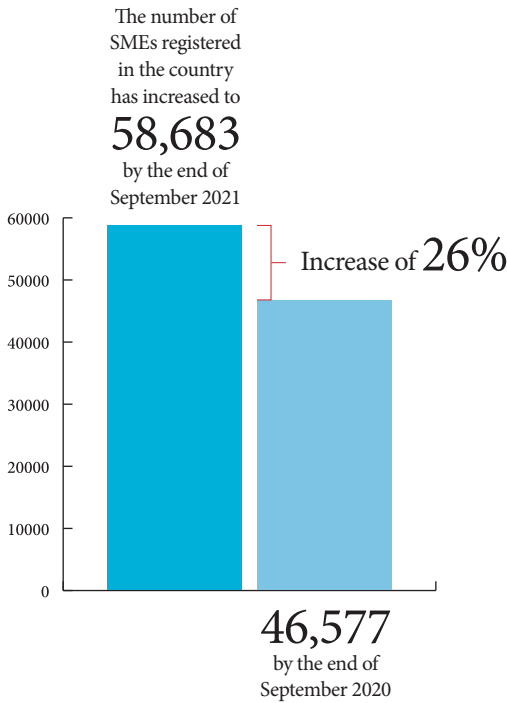
REOI NO.	Project Description	Last date to submit the REOI	Release date of RFQ document	Last date for raising clarification	SOQ Submission Date
RFQ-PI/21	Development, Management, Operation and Maintenance of Liwa Fishery Harbour under PPP Agreement	27 th December, 2021 before or at 2:00 PM	28 th December, 2021	10 th January, 2022 before or at 2:00 PM	24 th January, 2022 before or at 2:00 PM

*Oman Time Zone



For further information, please contact us via 00968-24470511 or by e-mail ppp.ports@mof.gov.om

SMALL BIZ HAS BIG ROLE



Statistics issued by the National Center for Statistics and Information

THE OMAN INVESTMENT
AUTHORITY LAUNCHED
A PACKAGE OF MEASURES
TO SUPPORT SMES,
INCLUDING ALLOCATING
PURCHASES OF NOT
MORE THAN
10,000
OMANI RIALS TO
INSTITUTIONS THAT HAVE
A RIYADA CARD

THE TOTAL NUMBER OF
SMES THAT OBTAINED AN
ENTREPRENEURSHIP CARD
REACHED MORE THAN
22,000
IN AUGUST 2021

The Small and Medium Enterprises are subjected to severe pressures globally due to the coronavirus pandemic. The Council of Ministers approved in March last an economic stimulus plan aimed at accelerating the pace of economic recovery for the various economic sectors including SMEs, and achieving high growth rates as targeted by Oman Vision 2040

ZAINAB AL NASSRI
@zainabalnasseri

The Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) sector is important in the economic diversification efforts of the Sultanate of Oman. The number of SMEs registered in the country has increased to 58,683 by the end of last September, compared to 46,577 by the end of same month in 2020, with an increase of 26 per cent, according to statistics issued by the National Center for Statistics

and Information (NCSI). The total number of SMEs that obtained an entrepreneurship card reached more than 22,000 in August last, an increase of more than 53 per cent over the same period last year, according to statistics issued by Riyada.

SMEs, in particular, are subjected to severe pressures globally due to the coronavirus pandemic that swept the world in 2020 whose impact is still present. This requires packages of government interventions in the form of direct support, legislative

reforms or stimulus initiatives to help them withstand and recover during the pandemic, to reduce the economic cost back on the sectors and to ensure that workers and activities are not affected by the crisis of the business sector in general.

The countries of the world hastened to adopt direct measures for economic recovery, aimed at protecting small and medium enterprises. The basic formula for such measures was financial support packages, emergency loans and payment to facilitate access to

government support for small and medium companies. In addition to exemptions from some fees and deferring loan repayment, pushing towards enabling environments supportive of entrepreneurship and stimulating competitiveness, and directing the SME sector towards determinants of sustainability, forming alternative plans to face risks, and adapting work environments to adapt to the volatile situations created by the pandemic.

The Council of Ministers, headed by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, approved in March last an economic stimulus plan aimed at accelerating the pace of economic recovery for the various economic sectors from the pandemic, and achieving high growth rates as targeted by the Oman Vision 2040.

The plan was based on five main axes, including: incentives related to taxes and fees, improving

the business and investment environment, supporting small and medium enterprises, and incentives for the labour and employment market. Besides, banking incentives aimed at supporting efforts to mitigate the effects of the repercussions of the Covid-19 crisis on the national economy, which focus on banking aspect that supports the growth and recovery of economic activities, promoting and attracting foreign investment, and sustaining existing local investments and projects.

SMEs have had a share of measures, both with regard to reducing the income tax rate from 15% to 12% for the tax years 2020 and 2021, continuing to postpone their loan instalments due to the Al-Rafd Fund until the end of December 2021, and limiting assigning government procurement tenders whose value does not exceed RO 10,000 to small and medium enterprises

whose owners have a Riyada card.

For further support, the Oman Investment Authority also launched a package of measures to support SMEs, including allocating purchases of no more than RO10,000 to institutions that have a Riyada card, allocating 10% of purchases in the companies affiliated with the authority to SMEs, exempting them from bidding fees and requirements of the initial guarantee of contracts and tenders, payment of the financial due within 15 days after completing the work, giving a rate of 10% as a preference to SMEs in purchases and contracts whose value is estimated between RO10,000-RO 50,000 in materials and services.

This package comes within the tenders and procurement policy, one of the policies that were formulated in “Rawabet” programme for the companies affiliated to the Authority.

Acquire future skills to meet demand, experts tell youth

KABEER YOUSUF

@kabeeryousef

Youth need to focus on developing their soft skills and equip themselves with academic recognitions and skills that are needed for the job market, besides for their personal development, opine an Omani scholar and academics.

Besides learning what the job market is in demand for, attention to develop their skills such as critical thinking, communication, and critical analysis should also be in place.

Speaking to the *Observer* on the sidelines of the 'Future Skills and HRD Conference' organised under the auspices of Bakhait bin Ahmed al Mahri, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation for Higher Education (MoHERI), Dr Abdullah Saleh Baabood, Chair of the State of Qatar for Islamic Area Studies and a visiting professor at the Waseda University in Tokyo, said there's a serious mismatch between qualifications and requirements of new skills in the industry.

"There's a serious mismatch between the qualifications that our youth earn from

colleges and the requirements of the job market and one should constantly improve his/her skillset and continue to acquire future skills in the industry," Baabood told the *Observer*.

"We are going through an unprecedented era and one cannot expect the government to give them jobs. Instead, it is the private sector that is the mass job provider in the present era."

He feels that governments in the present world are not to be depended for providing jobs and it's unfair and overinflated especially at a time like this.

"It is not fair to rely upon the governments to provide them with jobs and that is another challenge for the governments across the globe. We need to change the mentality and make a paradigm shift," Dr Baabood who did his studies in international universities said.

"Unfortunately, the private sector is going through a difficult phase because of the crisis and governments need to support the sector that supports the job market.

If the government spending is adjusted due to oil prices changes, there will be a reflection of the same

There's a serious mismatch between the qualifications that our youth earn from colleges and the requirements of the job market and one should constantly improve his/her skill-set and continue to acquire future skills in the industry

DR ABDULLAH SALEH BAABOOD

throughout the economy and its happening in many countries with differences based on their economic features."

"The Future Skills and HRD Conference is a real eye-opener and a reservoir of knowledge on HR. The speakers were so knowledgeable and brainstorming sessions proved to be a real icing on the cake," said Runita Sahay, another educationist.

The skills that we need:
Rania Abdulaziz al Raisi,

Director of HR at the College of Banking and Financial Studies (CBFS), opines that one needs to focus on a few skills to be more competitive.

"In terms of future skills, I believe that there are some skills that need to be developed and the first one is adaptability. This will make the candidate more adaptable to the organisation as well as to life and make them competitive."

According to her, the youth needs to have critical analysis, maths, calculus,

Effective communication skills which are needed by employees besides knowledge of IT.

Kareema al Shukaili, Head of Academic Support Centre feels future belonged to E-commerce and focus need to be shifted to the nexgen mantra.

"E-commerce is another area one needs to focus. Higher education institutions need to incorporate more of such skills into their curriculum. They need to improve their soft skills such as creative and critical skills, and communication skills that take them out of their comfort zone on a daily basis. They need to think out of the box," adds Al Shukaili.



Housing Minister meets Egyptian counterpart

CAIRO: Dr Khalfan bin Said al Shueili, Minister of Housing and Urban Planning, met here on Monday Dr Assem al Jazzar, Minister of Housing, Utilities and Urban Communities of the Arab Republic of Egypt.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed the bilateral relations binding the two countries. They also

explored their countries' experiences in housing, urban planning and related strategies.

The meeting was attended by Abdullah bin Nasser al Rahbi, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the Arab Republic of Egypt and a number of officials.

— ONA

In brief

RNO staff member dies while on duty

MUSCAT: The Morale Guidance department at the Defence Ministry has announced the death of a staff member of the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO), Petty Officer First Class Ali bin Abdulrahman al Balushi, who died while performing his national duty. Al Balushi was on active duty on board one of the RNO vessels currently taking part in a naval drill 'Al Thamar Attayyib' carried out jointly with Pakistani naval forces.

A statement issued by the Morale Guidance also reported the injury of another RNO staff member, Able Rating Sultan bin Salim al Sulaitni, who was immediately transported to a military hospital in Karachi where he received medical treatment. — ONA

Management of Muttrah Fort and Al Bait al Kabir

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism signed on Monday an agreement for the operation and management of Muttrah Fort and Al Bait Al Kabir in the Governorate of Muscat.

The signing of this agreement is in line with the ministry's direction towards offering the landmarks of the architectural and cultural heritage for tourism investment. Located on top of a rocky, narrow hill, Muttrah Fort stands tall facing the sea and inhaling the winds that waft the fragrant memory of ships gone by, ships that once sailed these azure waters.

Currently, it consists of three circular towers: a huge one sitting on the summit and the remaining smaller two are located one at the first point in the West, and the other to the north of the fort near the large tower.

MILITARY TIES WITH IRAN REVIEWED



TEHRAN: Deliberations of the annual meeting of the Omani-Iranian Military Friendship Committee began here on Monday. The five-day meeting is being chaired by Brigadier Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al Manthari, Assistant Chief of Staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) for Operations and Planning and Second Brigadier Mohammad Ahadi, Iranian Deputy Defence Minister for International Affairs. The meeting reviews several topics on the agenda and serve ties of the military cooperation between the two countries. It is worth noting that the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO) and the Naval Forces of Iran will conduct the annual joint naval drill (Search and Rescue) at the end of the committee's meetings. — ONA

Ministry bans import of live birds, products from some countries

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources has announced a ban on the import of live birds and their products, derivatives and waste from several countries listed below.

A ministerial decision was issued on this regard, to be effective from today, December 13, 2021.

This decision was based on the recommendation of the veterinary authority concerned and the report of



the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE).

The countries are the Republic of Togo, Lubuski in

the Republic of Poland, the island of Zealand in Denmark, Flevoland in Netherlands, the Veneto region in Italy, Bache-

Qiskun-Kongrad-Veques-Hadjo Bihar in the Republic of Hungary, Chungcheong-do in Korea, Akita Prefecture in Japan, Rogland in Norway, Biulavisky District in Northern Kazakhstan, Mungan in the Republic of Ireland, Kirov-Bashkortostan in Russia, Trninsky District in Slovak Republic, Nordrhein-Westfalen in Germany, Hotsdo District in France, Sisako-Moslavaka in Croatia and Semnan - Ardabil - Mazandaran in Iran. — ONA



Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

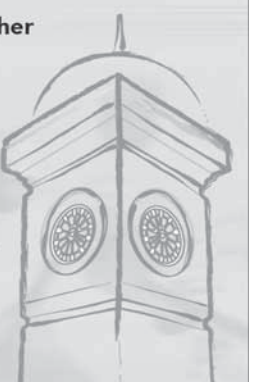
ANNOUNCEMENT

Sultan Qaboos University Hospital announce desire to sell used furniture and their in sealed envelopes. Those wishing to enter the auction must adhere to following conditions:

- View used furniture in auction stores and receive the bidding form during Sunday 19/12/2021 and Monday 20/12/2021 from 03:00 pm to 05:00 pm.
- Submitting the offer in a sealed envelope after viewing the used furniture, entitled the name of the honorable / head of the committee for selling used furniture, and put the envelope in bid box.
- Deposit of (200) Omani riyals in cash as an insurance. This amount will be refunded to the unsuccessful bidders.
- The presented offer is binding on its owner if it is placed on it, and in the event that the buyer does not pay the purchase price on time, the insurance amount will be for forfeited, and the sale will be awarded to another applicant.
- Those who win the bidding will be contacted. They must pay the remaining sum, and they are responsible for moving their items on Wednesday and Thursday 22-23/12/2021.
- The used furniture is sold in their current condition, and SQU and SQUH are not responsible for any loss or damage to the sold material if the moving is not completed after the end of the sale, and (10) Omani riyals will be imposed for each day after 26/12/2021.

Notes:

- Prices are sorted according to groups and the higher price is taken.
- Funds will be collected electronically through visa cards.
- Commitment to Precautionary measures and wearing a mask and only one person is allowed to enter auction's location with the buyer.
- Entering the auction stores through Gate No. (2).
- For more information, please contact: 99469639 - 99324848





A farmer walks past a military tank destroyed recently during fighting between the Ethiopian National Defense Force and the Tigray People's Liberation Front in Damot Kebele of Amhara region. – Reuters

Tigrayan forces recapture Lalibela, UN heritage site

ADDIS ABABA: Rebellious Tigrayan forces have recaptured the Ethiopian town of Lalibela, witnesses said, less than two weeks after the military and its allies took control of it as part of a broader offensive that pushed back Tigrayan forces on multiple fronts.

Lalibela is a town in the Amhara region bordering the northern region of Tigray that is famed for its churches hewn from single lumps of rock and has been designated a UN World Heritage site.

Government spokesperson Legesse Tulu and a military spokesman did not respond to requests for comment on the reported recapture of the town by forces loyal to the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

TPLF spokesperson Getachew Reda tweeted a comment saying "our forces are doing very, very, very good!" but gave no details.

One of the witnesses who spoke to Reuters said that Amhara forces, who are allies of the Ethiopian government, began leaving Lalibela on Saturday night.

"The last batch left this morning. We heard gunshots from a distance last night but the Tigrayan forces recaptured Lalibela without firing guns in the town," the witness, a hotel receptionist, said by phone.

A second witness said on Sunday that residents had begun fleeing the town. "We panicked, we never saw this coming. TPLF forces are now patrolling the town wearing their uniforms," the witness said.

Tigrayan forces had taken control of the town in early August, as part of a push into Amhara territory that began in July. But the tide turned against the Tigrayans at the end of November after they had threatened to march on the capital.

The government declared a state of emergency and Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed went to the frontlines to direct an offensive. On December 1, the Ethiopian military and Amhara forces recaptured Lalibela, a site of enormous religious significance.

— Reuters

Iran sees progress at nuclear talks

TEHRAN: Iran's chief negotiator on Sunday reported progress on an agenda for talks with global powers over its nuclear programme, as Britain said the Vienna negotiations were Tehran's "last chance".

Talks restarted on Thursday to try to revive the 2015 deal between Iran and other nations, which the United States withdrew from under Donald Trump in 2018.

US President Joe Biden has said he is ready to return to the agreement but US officials have accused Iran of backsliding on progress made at talks earlier this year and playing for time.

Iranian officials maintain they are serious about committing to the talks.

"The two parties are at the point of agreeing on the matters which should be on the agenda," Tehran's chief negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani told the official IRNA news agency.

"It's a positive and important evolution since, at the start, they weren't even in agreement on the issues to negotiate."

His comments came as the G7 said on Sunday that time was running out for Iran to agree on a deal.

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, from G7 host Britain, said the Vienna talks were the Islamic republic's "last chance to come to the negotiating table with a



Deputy Secretary General of the European External Action Service Enrique Mora and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani during a meeting of the JCPOA Joint Commission in Vienna. – Reuters

serious resolution".

Her comments were the first time a signatory to the original deal has given an ultimatum for the talks.

The 2015 agreement aimed to prevent Iran from developing an atomic bomb, a goal Tehran has always denied. The deal ensured sanctions relief in return for tight curbs on Iran's nuclear programme, which was put under extensive UN monitoring.

According to Bagheri, the new administration in power in Iran since June, led by President Ebrahim Raisi, has raised

The two parties are at the point of agreeing on the matters which should be on the agenda

ALI BAGHERI KANI
Tehran's chief negotiator

additional points to those negotiated by its reformist predecessors.

Iran wants a lifting of all US sanctions imposed after

Trump's withdrawal but Biden's administration has said it will only negotiate measures taken by Trump over the nuclear programme, not steps imposed over other concerns such as human rights.

Tehran has presented two texts at the talks, one on the sanctions and the other on its nuclear activity.

"With the other parties we jointly recap (the points to discuss) in order that the differences can be resolved and the agenda established in a definitive framework," Bagheri said. — AFP

Gaza shelter turns toy cars, bikes into aids for paralysed animals

GAZA: An animal shelter in the Gaza Strip is using the wheels of toy cars and kids bicycles to build mobility devices for disabled cats and dogs, helping them walk, run and play again despite a lack of access to specialised prosthetics.

Workers at the Palestinian enclave's Sulala Animal Rescue society are working to fit some 32 cats and dogs with the makeshift wheelchairs or with artificial limbs made from recycled wood and metal.

"They (the animals) get exhausted when they are paralysed, so we give them something that allows them to them walk, so they would feel normal. Animals have feelings, too," Said al Aer, who helps run the shelter, said.

One of the dogs, Lucy, whose hind legs were paralysed in a car



Palestinian engineer Ismail al Aer and a blacksmith try to put a paralysed cat on a wheelchair in the central Gaza Strip. – Reuters

accident, was given a wheelchair built using the rainbow-coloured rubber wheels of a discarded childrens' bike.

With the assistance of volunteers, Lucy slips her upper body through a harness

connecting a metal frame to the wheels. Her back legs sit comfortably above the back of the frame. And off she goes.

"It is adjustable to the dog's size," said Ismail al Aer, Said's uncle, who designed the device.

Ismail created a similar apparatus for cats using the small wheels of a toy race car. The animal shelter, in Gaza City, has received donations from charities in Australia and Britain. There are no specialised medical centres for animals in Gaza.

While it does have two prosthesis centres, they are busy providing artificial limbs to some 1,600 amputees in the Strip, including many who were shot during border clashes with Israeli troops.

But the centres do not offer services to animals, making the shelter's initiative all the more important, Gaza veterinarian Bashar Shehada said.

"Amputations drop, as well as ulcers and wounds that result from animals crawling," Shehada said. — Reuters

■ PHOTO SPOT IN IRAQ



An Iraqi woman takes pictures near a Christmas tree in Baghdad on Monday. – Reuters

SHORT TAKES

SANAA

Top military official killed in fight

A senior Yemeni military commander was among 28 troops killed in fighting between government forces and rebels for the strategic city of Marib, defence ministry sources said on Monday.

"Nasser al Zubiani, head of the government forces' military operations, was killed along with 27 other soldiers during clashes with the rebels in the past 24 hours south of Marib," one source told AFP.

A second source confirmed Zubiani's killing and the death



toll. Government forces and rebels have been locked for months in a fierce battle for Marib, the government's last stronghold and capital of the northern province of the same name.

BEIRUT

Three killed in shooting at Palestinian camp

Three members of the Hamas were killed and others injured in a shooting on Sunday in the Palestinian camp of Burj al She-mali in Lebanon, the group said, blaming the bloodshed on rival forces.

Two Hamas officials earlier said four people had been killed. Palestinian Authority officials condemned the attack.

The shootings took place during the funeral of a Hamas supporter who was killed in an explosion on Friday night in the



camp in the southern Lebanese port city of Tyre.

The Lebanese army said one suspect in the shooting has been taken into custody by the Palestinian National Security.

BAGHDAD

'Fraud' case against election results adjourned

A case in an Iraqi court filed by the Hashed al Shaabi former paramilitary alliance contesting its defeat in the October 10 parliamentary election was adjourned on Monday until next week.

Judge Jassem Mohamed Aboud, whose court must rule on the complaint before final results are ratified and a new parliament is inaugurated, adjourned the case until December 22 after a procedural hearing. Firebrand cleric Moqtada Sadr was declared on November 30 as the biggest win-



ner of the election.

Sadr's movement won nearly a fifth of the seats — 73 out of the assembly's total 329, well ahead of the 17 seats of the Fatah Alliance, the political arm of Hashed.

In brief

NEW DELHI



8 ARRESTED FOR 'OFFENSIVE' SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

Eight Indians have been arrested for making "offensive" social media posts about the death of the country's military chief in a helicopter crash, according to officials speaking to AFP on Monday and local reports.

General Bipin Rawat, who was killed along with his wife and 11 others in last week's accident, was a hugely popular figure seen as close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

One man was arrested within hours of the chopper crash for posting to Instagram that Rawat had "burnt alive even before entering Jahannum".

He was arrested along with two others in Rajasthan state for "hurting public sentiment", police confirmed.

NAYPYIDAW



JUNTA ACCUSED OF BLOCKING AIDS FOR REFUGEES

Myanmar's military junta is blocking desperately needed humanitarian aid from reaching millions of displaced people and refugees at risk across the country, Human Rights Watch (HRW) has charged.

According to a Human Rights Watch report issued on Monday, the junta and its security forces have imposed new travel restrictions on humanitarian workers, blocked access roads and aid convoys, destroyed non-military supplies, attacked aid workers, and shut down telecommunications services in recent months.

TOKYO



NO SPOOKY SIGHTS YET AT RESIDENCE: KISHIDA

Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said on Monday he's sleeping soundly after becoming the first premier in nine years to inhabit the official residence, which is reputedly haunted.

The prime piece of real estate in central Tokyo stood empty during the terms of Kishida's most recent predecessors, Yoshihide Suga and Shinzo Abe.

The residence was the site of a 1936 attempted coup, in which several senior officials including a finance minister were assassinated by young military officers.

For years, the ghosts of some of those who were involved in the incident were reported to have haunted its hallways, but Kishida said on Monday he was feeling fresh after the first nights in his new digs.

Kabul passport office urges patience as anxious crowds keep gathering

KABUL: The head of the Kabul Passport Office has asked for patience from thousands of Afghans waiting for documents that would let them leave the country as large crowds continue to gather outside, a month after the office suspended operations.

As winter closes in and economic crisis deepens in the wake of the abrupt withdrawal of foreign aid after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August, the crowds around the biggest passport issuing centre in the country underline the desperate desire of large numbers of citizens to leave.

"We have done our best to reopen the office but we are still facing some equipment shortages," passport office head Alam Gul Haqqani said in an interview on Sunday.

Last month the office was forced to close after equipment



Alam Gul Haqqani, Head of Afghanistan Passport Office, checks documents at his office in Kabul. — Reuters

used for issuing biometric documents broke down under the pressure of processing thousands of applications a day but demand has built steadily.

Even though the office has been closed for weeks, hundreds

of people still gather outside the fortified compound clutching plastic document files, regularly beaten back from the crash barriers by Taliban security forces.

"I am sure the office will restart and we will fulfil all applications,"

We have arrested bribe takers, from inside and outside the office. We will use any possible way to clean the country of bribe takers everywhere

ALAM GUL HAQQANI

Head of Afghanistan Passport Office

Haqqani said. "I assure the nation that no-one will leave our office with any reason to be upset."

He appealed to people to stay away until the office is operational again.

"I am really sorry about this,

I am upset because people are facing hardship. They're wasting their money and standing here uselessly," Haqqani said.

"The office is closed, our systems are not operational."

A number of provincial passport offices are still open and officials in Kabul are processing around 2,000-3,000 passports from these offices each day, he said, but it was still unclear when the Kabul office would reopen.

As well as the equipment issues, Haqqani said officials were working on stamping out corruption and rooting out the so-called 'Commissionkar' - commission agents who promise to ensure swift treatment of applications for a fee.

"We have arrested bribe takers, from inside and outside the office," he said. "We will use any possible way to clean the country of bribe takers everywhere." — Reuters

Pakistan confirms first case of Omicron variant

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has confirmed its first case of the Omicron Covid-19 variant, in the country's most populous city of Karachi, the country's National Institute of Health (NIH) said on Monday.

"The NIH has been able to confirm ... that a recently suspected sample from Karachi is indeed the 'Omicron variant'," the NIH said in a Tweet. "This is the first confirmed case but continued surveillance of

suspected samples is in place to identify the trends"

Authorities in the South Asian nation had begun investigating a first suspected case of the Omicron variant of coronavirus last week, a health ministry official said on Thursday.

After a provincial official in southern Sindh province initially said the variant had been identified in a private hospital patient, the NIH had

then said they were still carrying out sequencing to confirm the case was that of Omicron.

Omicron, first reported in southern Africa and Hong Kong, carries a "very high" risk of infection surges, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Pakistan this month placed travel restrictions on several countries in southern Africa in the wake of the discovery of the variant. — Reuters

Australia and S Korea sign A\$1 billion defence pact

CANBERRA: Australia signed a A\$1 billion (\$716.5 million) defence deal with South Korea on Monday, boosting Seoul's efforts to grow its military exports.

Under the terms of the deal, South Korean defence company Hanwha Corp will build 30 self-propelled howitzers and 15 armoured ammunition resupply vehicles for Australia.

"It's an important further chapter in the defence industry story for Australia as we continue to build our sovereign capability and (South) Korea is an important partner in that journey," Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison

told reporters in Canberra.

The deal positions Hanwha as a frontrunner for Australia's planned A\$30 billion contract to build infantry fighting vehicles for its army.

Shares in Hanwha were up 3 per cent following the announcement.

While the defence deal is the headline of South Korean President Moon Jae-in's four-day trip to Australia, both countries said they have also agreed to work closely to help ensure supplies of Australian critical minerals exports for South Korea's tech sector. Western allies have in recent months moved to reduce

their dependency on China amid heightened concern about Beijing's control over the critical minerals sector.

South Korea needs critical mineral supplies, having pledged to become a global battery manufacturing powerhouse by 2030 as part of its plan to be carbon neutral by 2050.

Australia supplies around 40 per cent of South Korea's critical mineral imports, which are crucial for many of the components needed to drive the world's economies to net zero emissions by 2050.

— Reuters



South Korean President Moon Jae-in greets members of the public after laying a wreath at the Australian National Korean War Memorial in Canberra. — Reuters

Philippines given \$250m loan to buy more Covid vaccines



More than 37.4 million Filipinos have been fully vaccinated against Covid-19. — Reuters

MANILA: The Asian Development Bank (ADB) said on Monday it had approved a \$250 million loan to help the Philippine government purchase 40 million more doses of the Covid-19 vaccine.

"ADB is supporting the government's drive to provide vaccines to protect its citizens and save lives, especially with the emergence of new Covid-19 variants," said Sakiko Tanaka, a social sector specialist for the Manila-based bank.

"Vaccination will allow the health system to better manage the effects of the virus and will help sustain economic recovery," she added. "It is key to the country's full recovery from the pandemic."

Since the government launched the inoculation campaign in March, more than 37.4 million Filipinos have been fully vaccinated against Covid-19 as of Sunday, the Department of Health said. That represents over 34 per cent of the country's total population.

The government aims to vaccinate 54 million people by the end of 2021, and 77 million by next March.

In February, the ADB earlier allocated 25 million dollars in financial aid to the Philippines to help it make advance payments for Covid-19 shots, microsyringes and other

The government aims to vaccinate 54 million people by the end of 2021, and 77 million by next March

vaccine-related items.

The bank also approved a \$400 million loan in March for the purchase of Covid-19 vaccines.

The Philippines' daily tally of Covid-19 cases has been falling since last month, prompting the government to ease restrictions before Omicron was designated a variant of concern.

On Sunday, the country's total accumulated Covid-19 caseload since 2020 was at more 2.83 million, with 50,280 deaths, according to the Department of Health.

— dpa

Biden declares major disaster in Kentucky as tornadoes kill dozens

MAYFIELD: US emergency workers searched on Sunday for survivors of ferocious tornadoes that killed dozens of people across several states and left towns in ruins, as the governor of hard-hit Kentucky warned that cadaver dogs were still finding bodies.

President Joe Biden called the rare late-season burst of twisters in the US heartland “one of the largest” storm outbreaks in American history, and on Sunday night declared a major federal disaster in Kentucky.

He had previously issued an emergency declaration for the hard-hit state, but upgraded it at the governor’s request to allow for additional aid.

Both federal and local officials have cautioned the death toll, for now at 94, could still rise.

While the heads of the Homeland Security Department and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) went to Kentucky to assess the situation, stunned residents began sifting through the rubble of their homes and businesses.

“The very first thing that we have to do is grieve together and we’re going to do that before we rebuild together,” Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear told an afternoon news conference.

More than 80 people are dead in the state alone, many of them workers at a candle factory in the ravaged town of Mayfield, Beshear said on Sunday, telling CNN: “That number is going to exceed more than 100.”

Later in the day, the governor said the factory’s owner believed more of the workers had been located, and it would be “pretty wonderful” if the toll were to be revised down, but stressed he could not verify that information.



Tornado damage is seen after extreme weather hit the region on Sunday, in Mayfield, Kentucky. – AFP

“Remember, we’re still finding bodies. We’ve got cadaver dogs in towns that they shouldn’t have to be in,” he said. At least six people died in an Amazon warehouse in the southern Illinois city of Edwardsville, where they were on the night shift processing orders ahead of Christmas.

Emergency crews worked through the night into Sunday at both locations, and FEMA agents and Red Cross volunteers were on the scene in Kentucky.

But Edwardsville fire chief James Whiteford told reporters the operation had turned from rescue to focus “only on recovery,” fuelling fears the toll will rise.

Four were killed in Tennessee and two died in Arkansas, while Missouri recorded two fatalities.

Tornadoes also touched down in Mississippi.

‘UNSEEN BEFORE’

Emergency crews were helping stunned citizens across the region clear the rubble.

David Norseworthy, a 69-year-old builder in Mayfield, said the storm blew off his roof and front porch while the family hid in a shelter.

“We never had anything like that here,” he said.

As a nondenominational church in Mayfield was handing out food and clothing to storm survivors, it was also providing space for the county coroner to do his work, pastor Stephen Boyken of His House Ministries said.

People “come with pictures,

birthmarks — they talk now about using DNA samples to identify those who have been lost,” he said.

The storm system’s power placed it in historic company.

Storm trackers said it had lofted debris 30,000 feet in the air, and the deadly Mayfield twister appeared to have broken an almost century-old record, tracking on the ground well more than 320 kilometres.

“The devastation is unlike anything I have seen in my life,” Beshear said.

As Americans grappled with the immensity of the disaster, condolences poured in, with Pope Francis saying he is praying “for the victims of the tornado that hit Kentucky.” — AFP

At least one dead from Omicron as Britain boosts response

LONDON: At least one person has died in Britain after being infected with the Omicron variant, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Monday, as the country launched an ambitious Covid booster shot programme to stop the virus’ spread.

Britain — among the countries worst hit by the global health crisis since last year — is believed to be the first government to officially announce a death from the virus mutation.

On a visit to a vaccination centre in west London, Johnson said Omicron accounted for about 40 per cent of the cases in the British capital, and hospital admissions were rising.

“Sadly, at least one patient has been confirmed to have died with Omicron,” he told reporters, a day after warning the country was facing a “tidal wave” of infection.

Britain on Sunday sounded the alarm by raising the national Covid Alert Level because of high levels and rising rates of transmission.

In a rare televised address, Johnson said emergency measures were needed to prevent hospitals becoming overwhelmed in the weeks ahead.

All adults will now be able to receive a third dose of a Covid vaccine by the end of December after the government brought forward its deadline by one month.

But in a sign of huge demand, the National Health Service (NHS) vaccination booking site crashed and users requesting rapid testing kits were told they were out of stock.

Long queues were seen at London clinics. At one, Sarah Jackson, 29, said she had taken the morning off to get a jab before visiting her grandparents at Christmas.

“I don’t know if it’s going to be enough. I was told there is a queue of two hours to register and then two hours to get vaccinated,” she said.

“But I have to go back to work at 1:30 pm.” — AFP



People queue outside a Covid-19 vaccination centre at St Thomas’s Hospital in London, on Monday. – Reuters

Two crew missing after Danish and British boats collide

STOCKHOLM/COPENHAGEN: Two Danish crew members of a capsized barge were missing in the freezing Baltic Sea on Monday after an overnight collision with a British vessel in a busy maritime route off Sweden.

With the pair unlikely to survive long in water temperatures around 4 Celsius, rescue boats and a helicopter hunted for hours. There was also hope they might still be inside an air pocket within the hull of the overturned *Karin Hoj*.

The 55-metre Danish barge and 90-metre *Scot Carrier* were sailing in the same direction off the island of Bornholm when they crashed in fog and darkness at 3.30 am (0230 GMT), maritime agencies in Denmark and Sweden said.

At least nine boats and a helicopter combed waters near the wreckage-strewn site, while the overturned *Karin Hoj* was towed away to shallower waters where Swedish divers were ready to investigate the hull without risk of being dragged down.



British cargo ship *Scot Carrier* is pictured after colliding with Danish cargo ship *Karin Hoj*, between Ystad and Bornholm, on the Baltic Sea on Monday. – Reuters

Denmark’s Joint Operations Centre (JOC) said it was still possible the pair were inside an air pocket.

The Danish Meteorological Institute said the fog was not dense and conditions were not unusual for the time of year. Sweden’s Coastguard said an investigation was looking into possible “gross negligence” behind the disaster.

With events seeming to have unfolded fast, the JOC said there was no sign lifeboats or other emergency equipment were used

by the *Karin Hoj*’s two-person crew. The Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare said people cannot normally survive much more than an hour without protective gear in waters that cold.

“I can confirm an accident has happened but I do not know the circumstances,” Soren Hoj, managing director of Rederiet Hoj which owns the *Karin Hoj*, said.

The barge was sailing from Sodertalje in Sweden to Nykobing Falster in southern Denmark.

— Reuters

SHORT TAKES

GENEVA

Cancer drugs for children in poor countries

The World Health Organization (WHO) announced on Monday the launch of a programme to supply tested cancer medicines to children in poorer countries.

The WHO and the St Jude Children’s Hospital in Memphis are behind the programme, designed to help young people worldwide. Some 400,000 children are diagnosed with cancer every year, with nine out of 10 living in low- or middle-income countries, where they often lack access to medicines. That lack



of access means their chances of survival are less than 30 per cent, far lower than 80 per cent for children in wealthy countries, said WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

MOSCOW

Russian teenager ‘blows himself up’ at school

A Russian teenager tried to blow himself up at an Orthodox school near a 14th century convent outside Moscow on Monday, wounding at least another student, the interior ministry said.

Russia has seen a rise in similar attacks on schools in recent years but incidents at religious premises are rare.

“An 18-year-old graduate of this educational institution entered the premises of the Orthodox gymnasium of the Vveden-



skiy Vladychniy convent and blew himself up,” it said in a statement. A 15-year-old was injured in the attack in the city of Serpukhov, 100 kilometres south of Moscow, the statement said.

OSLO

Norway to tighten Covid restrictions, says PM

Norway will further tighten restrictions this week in order to limit the spread of the coronavirus, Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere told news agency NTB on Monday. “The situation is serious. The spread of infection is too high and we have to take action to limit this development,” he said. The prime minister’s office was not immediately available for comment.

Norway is setting record highs both in terms of new Covid-19 infections and hospitalisations,



partly due to the spread of the Omicron. In a risk assessment released on Monday, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (FHI) recommended the government move quickly.

Rumba fans aim for coveted UN culture list

LAUDES MARTIAL MBON & ANNIE THOMAS

The band strikes up the rumba, and the dance floor in Kinshasa fills with couples who sway to its slinky, sensual rhythm.

Rumba is a music that has an international following, especially for its brassy Cuban version.

But in Congo, the guitar-driven local variant has a deep and passionate following, and fans hope that next week the genre will be declared a world cultural treasure.

The Democratic Republic of Congo and its smaller neighbour, the Republic of Congo, are jointly pushing for the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) to inscribe their rumba on its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

If so, it will join Cuban rumba, Jamaica's reggae music, Finland's sauna culture, the hawker food of Singapore and other cherished human innovations.

"This is a moment we have been waiting for impatiently," said Jean-Claude Faignond, who manages the Espace Faignond dance bar, a legendary hangout in Brazzaville, the capital of the Republic of Congo.

"Is rumba an intangible heritage?" he asked, before replying: "It's pure happiness — immortality."

"Rumba is a passion shared by all Congolese... It reaches into all areas of national life," said Professor Andre Yoka Lye, director of the National Institute of Arts in DR Congo's capital Kinshasa and president of a "joint commission for the promotion of Congolese rumba".

Rumba is "a unifier, bringing people together, as well as the past and present."

The story of the rumba is rooted in the days of the slave trade.

Africans who were captured and transported to the Americas had no possessions when they arrived, but brought with them their culture and their music.

Once there they crafted the musical instruments they had played back home — "percussion instruments, membranophones, idiophones and also the African piano, the xylophone," explained Gabriel Kele, head of musicology at DR Congo's National Museum. — AFP

Rumba is a passion shared by all Congolese... It reaches into all areas of national life

PROFESSOR ANDRE YOKA LYE

Director of the National Institute of Arts



THE AFTERMATH OF A TORNADO

Tornado damage is seen after extreme weather hit the region in Mayfield, Kentucky. Dozens of devastating tornadoes roared through five US states on Saturday and Sunday leaving more than 80 people dead in what President Joe Biden said was 'one of the largest' storm outbreaks in history. — AFP

The healing power of poetry



Lakshmi Kothaneth lakshmiobserver@gmail.com

TODAY WRITING POETRY IS ALSO CONSIDERED AS A THERAPY TO OVERCOME EMOTIONS THAT WOULD NOT HAVE HAPPENED IF NOT FOR WORDS ON PAPER

We need space — not just physical space, but in our mind too. Left alone, our mind can produce hundreds of thoughts. Where do our thoughts come from? It is not always intentional.

A scenery, at times a fragrance and other times a colour, a flower or voice can all bring us thoughts and memories.

But the beauty of a poem is that it can take us to our own personal space. The poet chooses the words and creates the setting but leaves us to our imagination to visualise accordingly.

Poets are an amazing group of people. They are sensitive, imaginative and of course creative.

They give us, the readers, moments to be mindful and go through the emotions they prescribe us — from happiness, to love to sadness and joy.

They record history too. At times they are major contribution to oral history.

Recently I came across the Poetry and Literary Group (PLG), global forum of International poets, writers and artists and realised how wonderfully they transformed the trying days of the pandemic to days of creativity. Poets need quiet moments and time; they had plenty

of that during the period.

There are many writers — while some hesitate to share their poems and works of words, others enjoy not just publishing but narrating as well and some excel in both.

Today writing poetry is also considered as a therapy to overcome emotions that would not have happened if not for words on paper — that is the expression of writing.

Omani poetess Nasra al Adawi has been promoting this concept through her concept called Healing Pen. Writing is very personal and it is amazing how writing imprints itself in the brain. Reaching to the other level of knowing and understanding is extending oneself to even the concept of mind mapping. Here there is combination of writing, drawing and colouring — all to connect it to our memory.

That reminds one of the poets of much earlier days who chose to leave inscription of poetic verses on the rocks in Musandam, the Sultanate of Oman. Scribes inscribed on rocks, iron and other metals. In the Sultanate of Oman, visiting the little museums could show you how

people had used walls, camel bones, leather and not to forget pots and doors to inscribe verses from the Holy Quran.

Can we even imagine about the first person who took a stone or any tool to write on the cave walls? Or even much earlier than that would be the cave drawing or pictographs.

And I would love to know if digitalisation has changed the way of writing poems today. It is as different as having food using your fingers in comparison to fork and knife.

Do you still write on paper?

The ones who had to write, wrote in any case — even before the arrival of paper. They wrote on palm leaves and many other metal sheets. We are indeed lucky that we are able to see them even today.

In the present day, we do not even spend time on sending out greeting cards, but thankfully, wedding cards as invites are still in fashion.

And as we move to the digital world, while print might be of something from the past one day, enjoy calligraphy and your own handwriting, especially when you write a note of gratitude.

Some Afghan families go back to making carpets

CAROLINE TAIX

Four Afghan brothers have hauled their family's carpet loom out of storage in the desperate hope of earning a living as the nation's economy teeters on the edge of ruin.

The Haidari brothers now spend their days sitting abreast on a squat bench — as generations of the family did before them — weaving the complex rugs for which Afghanistan is famed.

They work long hours each day, keeping a brave face even though there is no guarantee they will have anyone to sell their carpets to.

"We have no other option" to keep the family alive, said Ghulam Sakhi, the 70-year-old family patriarch.

Until August 15, when the

Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan, the Haidari brothers had managed to escape the backbreaking labour of carpet making and were running a successful business supplying flowers for weddings.

The hardline movement's comeback, however, largely put paid to the lavish betrothals so loved by Afghans, and the family enterprise collapsed.

In an act of creativity in the face of adversity, they fell back on their family's rug-making trade.

"Naturally when the Taliban took over... wedding halls didn't have much business. That is why we started carpets again," said Rauf, at 28 the eldest of the brothers who all live and work in Kabul.

"It's a very old practice that our forefathers have passed down to

us," he said.

Now they pick strands from dangling spindles of silk before looping them into the warp and weft of the rug with precise, rhythmic energy.

And when the 12-metre (39-foot) carpet is complete, they hope it will fetch up to \$6,000 dollars (5,300 euros).

NATIONAL TREASURES

Around two million of Afghanistan's 38 million population work in the carpet sector, according to Noor Mohammad Noori, who heads the national carpet makers' association.

But demand has taken a sharp hit since the Taliban's takeover sparked an exodus of expatriates working for international organisations, he says.

Afghan rugs — from intricately

woven silk Persians to the simpler woollen tribal kilims — are sought after around the world.

But in the past few months, "more and more people are making carpets" says Kabir Rauf, a merchant in Kabul who describes his wares as "the national treasures of Afghanistan".

New among the carpet-weaving workforce are women who cannot go to work, girls shut out of school, and unemployed men, he said.

In Herat, near the Iranian border, Haji Abdul Qader already employs around 150 families for his carpet-making business.

But everyday, two or three more people contact him, desperate for work. Even those with no experience get in touch.

"There are no other jobs," Rauf Haidari said.

PROUD

But those who do have skills have a chance to make a living.

"Someone who knows how to weave carpets will never be without work," says Muhammad Taghi, whose family has worked with Haji Abdul Qader for a decade.

Taghi used to weave when he was younger, but now the work is left to his four children — aged between 17 and 24 — who create carpets next to the stove in the family home.

It will take them 120 days to finish four matching, two-by-three metre rugs for which the family will earn around \$500.

"I am proud of this work. We make in our country these carpets that will be sold the world over as Afghan carpets," Muhammad Taghi said. — AFP

NEW AMONG THE CARPET-WEAVING WORKFORCE ARE WOMEN WHO CANNOT GO TO WORK, GIRLS SHUT OUT OF SCHOOL, AND UNEMPLOYED MEN

OMAN  DAILY

Observer

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Abdullah bin Salim al Shueili					
e-mail: editor@omanobserver.om					
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sport

Salalah clinch HM Youth Cup

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, DEC 13

Salalah club was declared as the winner of the 2020 HM's Cup for Youth on Monday.

The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth announced the top winners of the His Majesty the Sultan's Youth Cup for the year 2021 in a ceremony at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Center. Seeb club were positioned as the runner's up after being third in the previous year while Al Bashaer club took third place award.

As many as 42 clubs took part in this edition of the coveted cup. Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Minister of State and Governor of Muscat, was the chief guest in presence of top dignitaries and officials.

The winner, Salalah club, clinched the golden trophy with a cash prize of RO30,000 while Seeb representative Yousef al Wahaibi, vice chairman, delivered the silver trophy with a cash prize of RO27,000.

Seeb won the HM Youth Cup for the 12th time. In a big move, Al Bashaer jumped five positions to snatch the third place award as they won the bronze trophy with a cash cheque of RO25,000.

Ibri club, finished fifth place in 2019 edition, reached the fourth place. Title holders Ahli Sidab dropped to fifth place while Al Suwaiq ended in the sixth position. Al Nasr and Saham clubs finished at the seventh and eighth place respectively. Nizwa placed in ninth place while Qurayat rounded off the top-ten positions.

SIGNIFICANT EVENT
Basil bin Ahmed al Rowas, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth

A special thanks to the ministry officials for their continuous support to the local clubs and for their efforts to improve culture, sport and youth fields. Winning the title of the HM Cup was a result of hard work during the past months as the club took part in all the youth and sporting competitions which was organised by the ministry, sporting committees and associations

SHAIKH ALI AL RAWOOD
Chairman of Salalah club

for Sports and Youth delivered a speech during the ceremony and he said:” HM Youth Cup is a significant event that conveys HM Sultan's care for youth and encourages clubs to achieve the desired objectives that ensure development of youth in different fields,” he added,

Al Rowas said the committee evaluated all the cultural, sporting and youth activities of the clubs including internal and external participation.

“There were marks for the admin and finance sides of the club also to ensure improvement in this field. In this year, the clubs

continued to use the electronic system to add all their internal and external activities. It is a transparent system which will allow all the team on knowing the marks from attending different events. The ministry will work to update the system in the next year inline with the Sultanate of Oman's vision of 2040,”

he concluded.

ALL COMPETITIONS
Speaking after the ceremony, Shaikh Ali al Rawood chairman of Salalah club, expressed his joy on the top clubs' accomplishment. “A special thanks to the ministry officials for their continuous support to the local

clubs and for their efforts to improve culture, sport and youth fields. Winning the title of the HM Cup was a result of hard work during the past months as the club took part in all the youth and sporting competitions which was organised by the ministry, sporting committees and associations,” he added.

The chief of Salalah club pointed out that the club participated in some events organised by the Oman Olympic Committee (OOC). “We are very keen to attend in all the events and allow all the club's members to spread their talents and experience in different competitions,” he concluded.



Al Nasr strengthen the lead

SPORTS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 13

Al Nasr extended their lead with seven points after the end of the third leg of 51st edition of His Majesty the Sultan's Hockey Cup finals following a 1-1 draw against champions Ahli Sidab.

Al Nasr beat Seeb 3-0 and Suhar 4-1 while Suhar came second with six points after defeating Salalah 3-2. Ahli Sidab claimed the third place with four points after a 1-1 draw against Seeb.

Salalah ended the round at the bottom with 1 point.

The third round witnessed a tie of Al Nasr and Ahli Sidab after a 1-1 draw. Both teams are the top favourites to reach the final match given the standard they have displayed and the history of the two clubs in the championship.

Three matches were held in the third round where Suhar gained a hard-fought victory over Salalah with a score of 3-2 putting Suhar in the second place with six points.

The top four teams in the table will directly qualify to the semifinals. The final leg matches will be held on Wednesday when Saham take on Al Nasr at 4 pm and Ahli Sidab will meet Salalah at 6 pm

Salalah's balance remained with one point at the bottom of the standings. Saham-Seeb match ended in a 2-2 draw bringing Seeb's balance to four points in a tie-up with Ahli Sidab, while Saham finished fifth with two points.

The third round of His Majesty the Sultan's Hockey Cup concluded with a great match between leader Al Nasr with the defending champion Ahli Sidab in an exciting match which ended in a 1-1 draw. The result kept Al Nasr at the top of the general ranking with seven points while Ahli Sidab finished

third behind Suhar, bringing Ahli Sidab's tally to four points tied with Seeb in terms of the points and surpassing it by goal difference.

In the derby meeting, as promised, the two teams presented high technical levels, as the match witnessed a remarkable public presence. Especially as it is the match that the fans of the game love to watch at the end of the tournament.

The match between Al Nasr and Ahli Sidab saw a high technical standard in the presence of a huge audience. The draw was fair for both teams who displayed a great performance. The top four teams in the table will directly qualify to the semifinals. The final leg matches will be held on Wednesday when Saham take on Al Nasr at 4 pm and Ahli Sidab will meet Salalah at 6 pm.

In the final match of the round Seeb will take on Suhar at 8 pm. All matches will be held at the hockey ground at the Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher.

DRAW RESULT		
SL BENFICA (POR)	VS	REAL MADRID CF (ESP)
VILLARREAL CF (ESP)	VS	MANCHESTER CITY FC (ENG)
CLUB ATLÉTICO DE MADRID (ESP)	VS	FC BAYERN MÜNCHEN (GER)
FC SALZBURG (AUT)	VS	LIVERPOOL FC (ENG)
FC INTERNAZIONALE MILANO (ITA)	VS	AFC AJAX (NED)
SPORTING CLUBE DE PORTUGAL (POR)	VS	JUVENTUS (ITA)
CHELSEA FC (ENG)	VS	LOSC LILLE (FRA)
PARIS SAINT-GERMAIN (FRA)	VS	MANCHESTER UNITED FC (ENG)

PSG get Real, Man Utd Vs Atletico in revised Champions League draw

NYON: Paris St Germain will face Real Madrid in a titanic clash in the last 16 of the Champions League while Manchester United take on Atletico Madrid after UEFA declared the original draw void due to a technical error in the process on Monday.

Earlier, United were mistakenly drawn with Villarreal, even though both teams had already faced each other in the group stage while the Premier League side's ball was not added to the bowl as a potential opponent for Atletico Madrid.

United were eventually drawn with Paris St Germain while Atletico drew Bayern Munich before the draw was scrapped after the Spanish side complained and UEFA admitted the error.

PSG's initial draw with United was a highly anticipated battle between Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi — the competition's two top goal scorers.

The pair have won 12 of the last 13 Ballon d'Or awards for player of



the year — with Messi leading 7-5 after victory in 2021.

Instead, Messi will now face a familiar opponent in Real Madrid, against whom he has scored 26 times in all competitions when he was at Barcelona.

Real Madrid had also attempted to prise French forward Kylian Mbappe from PSG in the close season but ultimately failed after the Ligue 1 side rejected their bids. United's Ronaldo, meanwhile,



will relish a tie against Atletico having scored 25 goals against them for Real and Juventus.

Holders Chelsea will face French champions Lille, just as they were drawn in the original draw, while six-times champions Bayern Munich will now face RB Salzburg — the first Austrian side to qualify for the knockout stages.

Last year's runners-up Manchester City face Sporting Lisbon while Juventus, who

topped their group above Chelsea, face Villarreal.

Liverpool take on Inter Milan with another trip to the San Siro after Jurgen Klopp's side beat AC Milan twice in the group stage.

UEFA also experienced technical issues while conducting the third-tier Conference League draw later.

LAST-16 DRAW

Bayern Munich v RB Salzburg
Manchester City v Sporting Lisbon

Ajax Amsterdam v Benfica

Lille v Chelsea

Manchester United v Atletico Madrid

Juventus v Villarreal

Liverpool v Inter Milan

Real Madrid v Paris St Germain

Seeded teams (named first) will play the second leg at home. The first legs are scheduled to take place on February 15-16 and February 22-23 while the second legs will be played on March 8-9 and March 15-16. — Reuters

Australia to play Vietnam World Cup qualifier in Melbourne



MELBOURNE: Australia's next World Cup qualifier against Vietnam on January 27 will be held at Melbourne Rectangular Stadium, Football Australia said on Monday.

The match looms as a must-win for the Socceroos who are third in Group B of Asian qualifying on the road to Qatar behind leaders Saudi Arabia and Japan.

The top two teams in the group qualify automatically, with the third-placed team having to win a series of playoffs

to reach the finals in Qatar.

Australia won the away qualifier against Vietnam 1-0 in Hanoi in September.

Vietnam are bottom of Group B, having lost all six of their qualifiers in the current phase.

Due to border restrictions, Australia have played almost all of their home qualifiers on neutral territory since the outbreak of Covid-19 but hosted Saudi Arabia in Sydney for a 0-0 draw in last month's qualifying window. — Reuters

Rohit hopes to end India's world title drought

NEW DELHI: India's new limited-overs captain Rohit Sharma said he hopes to win a world title for the cricket-crazy nation, an achievement that eluded his sacked predecessor Virat Kohli.

During Kohli's five-year tenure India rose in the one-day, Twenty20 and Test rankings but missed out on securing a single international tournament.

India, who last won a world crown — the Champions Trophy — in 2013, failed to make the semi-finals in this year's T20 World Cup and got knocked out in the last four of the 2019 50-over showpiece event.

The team also lost the inaugural World Test Championship final to New Zealand in June.

"The last ICC trophy we won was in 2013, since then we haven't won but I don't think we did anything wrong after that," Rohit, 34, said in a video on the Board of Control for Cricket in India's official website on Sunday. "We played as a team, we performed as a team, it's just that we couldn't get that extra inch that we look forward to," he said.

"There is a lot of World Cup coming up. India will definitely be eyeing to do well in all those World Cups."

Kohli was fired as captain of India's ODI side last week, a month after he stepped down as the T20 leader following the T20 World Cup.

But the 33-year-old remains Test captain and will lead India



in three Tests in South Africa starting on December 26.

Rohit praised Kohli for his leadership since he took over the limited-overs job from M.S. Dhoni in 2017.

"He has put the team in a position where there is no looking back. Those five years that he has led the team, he led from the front every time we stepped onto the park," Rohit said in the BCCI video.

"There was clear grit, determination to win every game. That was the message to the entire squad and we had a great time playing under him."

Kohli's removal capped criticism from pundits and fans, especially after the announcement came in one line at the bottom of a press release about the squad for the South Africa tour, which will also include three ODIs.

But BCCI president Sourav Ganguly defended Kohli's ouster, saying the management wanted one white-ball leader. — AFP

Aguero to announce his retirement

BARCELONA: Sergio Aguero, Barcelona striker, is set to announce his retirement this week following a cardiac evaluation, ending the Argentine's career at 33, Spanish newspaper *El Periodico* reported on Monday.

Barca declined to comment and the player's agent and friends were not available to confirm the information. However, sources close to the situation confirmed to Reuters that a ceremony is being prepared by the club for Wednesday.

The former Manchester City and Atletico Madrid player, who arrived at Barcelona on a free transfer in the close season, received medical assistance on the pitch after he complained of chest pain and dizziness during his team's 1-1 draw with Alaves in La Liga in late October and had to be taken to hospital.

Barcelona announced days later that Aguero was ruled out for at least three months following cardiac analysis and reports appeared about his



possible retirement in Spanish and Argentine media shortly after.

"Aguero has been subjected to a diagnostic and therapeutic

process by Dr Josep Brugada," Barcelona said in a statement in November.

Aguero has made five appearances in all competitions

so far in his short tenure as a Barca player, scoring one goal, in El Clasico against Real Madrid, after starting the season with a calf problem. — Reuters



HAMILTON TO BE KNIGHTED JUST DAYS AFTER F1 TITLE WOE

LONDON: Lewis Hamilton will receive his knighthood on Wednesday as the British driver comes to terms with controversially losing the Formula One world title. Hamilton is due to attend an investiture at Windsor Castle to be honoured for services to motorsports.

The 36-year-old was given his knighthood in the New Year Honours list in 2020 following pressure on Prime Minister Boris Johnson to approve the accolade.

Despite being one of the UK's most successful sportsmen, Hamilton, who matched Michael Schumacher's record seven world titles in 2020, had previously been overlooked.

Hamilton's knighthood was awarded in the overseas list as he relocated to Monaco in 2010.

His royal appointment comes just days after he was denied a record eighth Formula One crown.

Max Verstappen pipped the

Mercedes star to the world title on Sunday after his battle with Hamilton came down to a one-lap shootout in Abu Dhabi.

CLOSING STAGES

The Red Bull driver stormed past his title rival in the closing stages of the Grand Prix season finale at the Yas Marina Circuit, having benefited from a late safety car decision that bunched up the pack.

Mercedes are expected to appeal

again after two protests they made against Verstappen's victory were rejected by stewards.

The man in their sights is race director Michael Masi and his controversial decision to withdraw the safety car for the final lap.

The appeal must be lodged within 96 hours from the moment they indicated their intention to appeal, which in this case would be 0700AEDT Friday (2000GMT Thursday). — **AFP**



Ayman al Busaidy

Sultanate of Oman Team gear up for Pan Arab Golf Championships in Egypt

MUSCAT: Following a series of qualifying events the team of four players have been selected who will travel to Egypt to represent the Sultanate in the 40th Pan Arab Golf Championships.

Testament to the overall development of golf in the Sultanate, and in particular to the focus on juniors, the team of four includes three 'graduates' from the OGA's Junior Development Program. Joining National Team stalwart Azaan al Rumhy will be Hamood al Harthy, Fahad al

Kitani and current Junior Squad Member Ayman al Busaidy who at the age of 15 saw off several more seasoned players through qualifying to claim his spot on the team.

Last played in Morocco in 2019, the 2021 event will be played from December 16 to 23 at the Dreamland Golf Club in Cairo and will bring together the finest golfers from the Middle East who compete over 4 days, both as a team and individually.

The best three scores from four

are counted each day for the team championship and individual scores from each country are also recognised for gold, silver, and bronze medals.

Mundhir al Barwani, Chairman of the Oman Golf Association (OGA) is quoted as saying "We are very excited to be sending our team to participate in the 40th Pan Arab Championships, Dreamland is a course that our players know well as it has been the host venue on several occasions before. It is sad that the previous hosts,

Morocco, will not be able to travel to compete this year but we look forward to a good four days of competition against the other teams from the region.

It is great to see our younger players qualifying to represent the Sultanate at senior level and we must thank the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth along with our partners, in particular Sohar Aluminium, Moore, Haya Water and Oman LNG for their ongoing support of golf development in Oman".

Cyclists celebrate opening of Sultanate of Oman, Saudi road

IBRI: Twenty cyclists from Al Dhahirah Cycling Team cycled for 150 kilometres on Friday, December 10, 2021, from the centre of Ibri to the Omani-Saudi border to celebrate the opening of the new road. This event took place a few days after the visit of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to the Sultanate of Oman. This road makes travelling between the Sultanate of Oman and Saudi Arabia easier and faster and is expected to enhance tourism and trade.

Officials at the Omani border welcomed the cyclists after their arrival and expressed their gratitude for such an initiative. On the other hand, officials at the Saudi border welcomed the cyclists with enthusiasm and eagerness and were delighted to see the Omani cyclists carrying both Omani and Saudi flags. After being photographed with the Saudi officials, the cyclists returned to the Sultanate of Oman

border, where transportation was arranged to take them back.

Abdulsalam al Manthari, Head of Al Dhahirah Cycling Team, stated that "One of our main aims in this event is to showcase solidarity between the Sultanate of Oman and Saudi Arabia. The Omanis are happy to see that travelling between the two countries is now faster and easier. We are proud that we are the first group of cyclists to cross the border."

Hamed al Ghafri, a cyclist who took part in the event said, "It took us seven hours to reach the border, but this was one of the best experiences we have ever had."

Nasser al Sarkhi added, "The scenery along the road is amazing and we succeeded in the challenge of cycling non-stop 150 kilometres."

This event was sponsored by Al Anan construction, a leading construction company in Ibri.



ISC Annual Tennis Tournament concludes

MUSCAT: ISC Annual Tennis Tournament concluded in style at the ISC courts on December 7, 2021. Suhail Khan stole the limelight of the tournament winning all the events participated which includes Men's Singles, Veteran's singles, Veteran's doubles and runner up in ISC Men's doubles.

The coach Sivan G along with the organising team comprises of Mohan Kannan, Sanjit K, Suhail Khan, Girish KK and Mrs Arudra took all initiatives to conduct the event in a systematic and professional manner. The tournament saw various nationalities including Omanis participated in the three week-

long event.

The Awarding and Closing Ceremony were held right after the Open Men's doubles final, making a perfect end of the ISC Annual Tennis Tournament 2021.

Sports Secretary Saji Abraham thanked all the officials, tournament committee, staff, coach and parents for their support

and dedication in conducting the tournament successfully. ISC Chairman Dr Sathish Nambiar while addressing the gathering emphasised the importance of sports events and expressed his happiness to see the tennis court open for the members after the closure for almost 2 years due to pandemic. He appreciated the

efforts of organising committee and extended all the support to forthcoming Junior Open Doubles tournament which will be held in February 2022.

LEADERSHIP

Mohan Kannan congratulated all the winners and appreciated the efforts of ISC under the leadership

of Dr Nambiar in handling the distress during the pandemic period.

Dr Sathish Nambiar along with Karanjeet Singh Vice Chairman distributed the trophies and certificates to the winners. Executive committee members Shakeel KM, Sanjit and Faigee also present during the ceremony.

business

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\$1bn project to create green ammonia export hub

SALALAH HAS ALL OF THE KEY INGREDIENTS NECESSARY TO SUPPORT GREEN HYDROGEN AND GREEN AMMONIA PRODUCTION: OQ PROJECT LEAD

CONRAD PRABHU
[@conradprabhu](#)

An international consortium behind the proposed development of a green ammonia project in Salalah in Dhofar Governorate plans to invest around \$1 billion in the implementation of the world-scale clean energy venture.

Led by OQ — the global integrated energy group of the Sultanate of Oman — the so-called ‘SalalaH2’ project envisions the decarbonisation of OQ’s existing ammonia plant in Salalah and its integrated into a wider complex of facilities that will include, among other things, 1 GW of solar and wind based renewable energy capacity, and 400 MW of electrolyser capacity to produce green hydrogen and other green products.

Besides OQ, partners in the SalalaH2 project include Japanese trading and investment business conglomerate Marubeni Corporation, global multinational chemical engineering company Linde and UAE-based diversified business house Dutco.

In October, the consortium members signed a Joint Development Agreement (JDA) for the implementation of the scheme at Salalah Free Zone.

But in an update on the venture presented recently by two key project executives, it was revealed that the SalalaH2 scheme will also lead to the creation of a new



OQ's Juman al Saqlawi (left) and Linde's Rudolphe Kotliar giving an update on the SalalaH2 green ammonia project

export hub for green ammonia and other green products from Salalah in the far south of the Sultanate of Oman.

In effect, Salalah will eventually complement Duqm on the country's southeast coast and Suhar on the Sea of Oman coast as green energy production and export hubs as well.

Salalah has all of the key ingredients necessary to support green hydrogen and green ammonia production, according to Juman al Saqlawi, SalalaH2 Project Lead at OQ's Alternative Energy Unit.

“Salalah and Dhofar in general, is a governorate with exceptional conditions, with wind speeds of

over 10 metres per second, and like the rest of the Sultanate of Oman, has world-class solar PV conditions. Moreover, Salalah has an existing free zone with infrastructure that comes with it; It also has a modern and well-connected port, and most importantly, Salalah has an existing ammonia plant of OQ.”

Salalah has an existing free zone with infrastructure that comes with it; It also has a modern and well-connected port, and most importantly, Salalah has an existing ammonia plant of OQ

JUMAN AL SAQLAWI

Project Lead, OQ's Alternative Energy Unit

Speaking at the Green Hydrogen Summit Oman (GHSO) held in the city recently, she said the proposed SalalaH2 project will be integrated with OQ's Salalah Cluster currently hosting an LPG extraction plant and a methanol project, besides the ammonia plant. All three projects currently depend on natural gas as the initial feedstock for their operations.

According to Rudolphe Kotliar, Business Development Manager at Linde Clean Energy, the integration of the existing ammonia plant with new renewable energy capacity and green hydrogen production components will result in green products emerging from Salalah.

“Thus, in addition to the

production of green hydrogen and green ammonia based on renewables, we will also have 100 per cent green energy and accordingly 100 per cent green products.

Renewable energy will also be supplied to the air separation units to produce green nitrogen that will be mixed with ammonia. Likewise, water production will be based on renewable energy, thus making green water. Oxygen output will be integrated into the process as well,” he said.

In the upshot, the grey ammonia currently being produced by the existing ammonia plant based on natural gas will be decarbonised to produce green ammonia – a process envisioned to take place over several years.

Upon the completion of this process, all of OQ Ammonia's 1,000 metric tonnes/day capacity of grey ammonia will become green, at which point the export of grey ammonia from Salalah will cease, he noted.

At the same time, the consortium will explore opportunities for the use of green hydrogen from the SalalaH2 project in local industry and mobility applications. Longer term, the potential to liquefy and export green hydrogen will be studied as well, he stated.

“Given the presence of an ammonia plant makes us believe that Salalah will become the first exporter of green ammonia in the Sultanate of Oman, Kotliar added.

E-payment to become mandatory in early 2022



BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 13

Businesses in the Sultanate of Oman are required to make e-payment options available for customers effective from early 2022, according to a notification issued by the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion. According to Azza bint Ibrahim al Kindiyah, Director of Commercial Affairs and E-commerce at the Ministry, e-payment will become mandatory for businesses practicing certain types of commercial activities in the first phase of the roll-out of the

initiative starting in early 2022.

However, customers can continue to exercise the cash payment option if they so choose, she noted, adding that the initiative is in line with the digital transformation strategy set out in Oman Vision 2040.

She urged commercial institutions in the Sultanate of Oman to press ahead with the completion of procedures to enable e-payment services.

According to the Ministry, e-payment options ensure faster and secure transactions, minimise the risk of fraud, and facilitate easy record-keeping.

(With inputs from ONA)

Turkish lira plummets to new low, central bank announces intervention

ISTANBUL: The Turkish lira crashed as much as 7 per cent to a new record near 15 to the dollar on Monday, gripped by worries over President Tayyip Erdogan's risky new economic policy and prospects of another interest rate cut on Thursday.

The central bank announced its fourth market intervention in two weeks, selling dollars, as the slide to 14.99 left the lira worth just half of its end-2020 value. Last week, the bank moved to keep the lira (TRY) below 14 as depreciation fuels inflation in a big emerging market economy which depends heavily on imports.

“Last week's apparent relative stability of TRY was artificial and non-sustainable. Now we see the build-up pressure unfolding, driving lira weakness to the next level,” Commerzbank said in a note.

Any further attempts of CBT to



Banknotes of US dollars and Turkish lira are seen in a currency exchange shop in Istanbul. — Reuters

stabilise TRY by interventions is probably bound to fail.” By 10:44 GMT, the lira had trimmed losses in thin market trading and stood at 14.25 - still 2.5 per cent weaker on the day.

Turkey's central bank, under pressure from Erdogan, is

expected to cut its policy rate by 100 basis points to 14 per cent this week, a Reuters poll showed on Friday, despite inflation soaring to 21.3 per cent last month.

However, there was scepticism about whether the bank would go through with it given the volatility.

“Honestly I don't think they can carry out another 100 bps cut this week. The lira has been very volatile for the past few weeks, and S&P has downgraded to a negative outlook. The markets will have very little tolerance to such a move,” said Ipek Ozkardeskaya, senior analyst at Swissquote Bank.

Erdogan was expected to hold talks with Central Bank Governor Sahap Kavcioglu, Finance Minister Nureddin Nebati and the heads of state banks in Istanbul on Monday, sources said.

Turkey's sovereign dollar bonds dropped, with the 2034 issue down 0.8 cents, according to Tradeweb data. Lira implied volatility gauges jumped, data from Fenics showed. The lira crash has sharply eroded Turks' earnings, fuelling poverty and leading to lines of people waiting to buy cheap bread as the price of goods surges. — Reuters

Six Omani start-ups join Omantel’s Innovation Labs

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 13

Six innovative Omani Start-Ups have joined the Omantel Innovation Labs as part of the first cohort of the Omantel Accelerator. The Omantel Accelerator, delivered in partnership with Brinc, is tailored to the needs of each of the participating startups to support them to refine the technical feasibility, market desirability, and financial viability of their products and operations. Only six startups were selected after a rigorous selection process led by Oman Technology Fund, which included online applications, a three-day bootcamp and interviews with subject-matter experts from Omantel, OTF and Brinc. The six companies are: **Autoplant** an AI and IoT



solutions for the farming industry to improve agricultural decision making **Lamma**, Oman’s first super app, a unified communication platform with payment integration **Mamun**, an embedded credit, payments & insurance platform **Mubader**, an IoT and AI tool

providing data to support in the management and care for livestock **Pixel Tech**, a subscription-based tool that allows sellers in the GCC to easily set up digital stores and sell their products online **Remedy.om**, a platform that connects patients with clinics and therapists. The selected startups will have access to local, regional and global networks of mentors, technology, perks, guidance for successful geographical expansion, and potential investment opportunities offered by Omantel, OTF, and Brinc. Startups will also receive a free working space at the Omantel Innovation Labs located in the Omantel headquarters. Commenting on this, HH Al Sayyida Ghada bint Jaifar Al Said, Senior Manager Omantel Innovation Labs said: “The Omantel Innovation Labs aim to put Omantel at the heart of Oman’s technology startup ecosystem and to apply our resources to boost entrepreneurial growth, knowledge sharing, collaboration and economic development. We want to support and tap into new ideas and technologies, stay ahead of the curve and drive local innovation. Our ambition is to leverage Omantel’s expertise, partnerships, reach, and access to technology to contribute to Oman’s Vision 2040 and promote innovation and entrepreneurship in new and emerging technology.” The key focus of the programme is to cultivate entrepreneurial skills among the youth and accelerate the growth of relevant Oman-based technology startups across five technological verticals: 5G, Internet of Things, Cybersecurity, Customer Experience Technology, and Big Data.

ahlibank announces final draw of 2021 Wafra prize scheme



MUSCAT: ahlibank has announced that the fourth quarter draw of its popular 2021 Wafra prize scheme will be conducted in the last week of December. The highly awaited draw will pick 20 lucky winners, with one of them winning the generous ‘Salary for Life’ prize, which carries a grand sum of RO 250,000, disbursed equally over 250 months. This will be the final draw of 2021 Wafra scheme, which was launched early this year in a brand new format to encourage a culture of savings among its customers and introduce attractive avenues for financial growth for all account holders. With cash prizes worth over two million Omani rials, awarded through various draws held across the bank’s network of branches, the scheme has proven to be a major milestone in the bank’s customer first approach to banking. Muneer al Balushi, AGM — Head of Retail Distribution at ahlibank, said, “2021 has proven to be a lucky year for more than a thousand account holders who savoured the joys of financial abundance that we promised through our prize scheme Wafra. Our ‘Salary for life’ prize, in particular, has been a game-changer in every sense of the word. The fourth quarter draw of Wafra will further augment chances for more winners, ending the year on a winning note, despite the initial economic slowdown from the pandemic.” “Our intent was, and is to target a wider customer base; we have accomplished the set objectives by adding more categories — with weekly, monthly, quarterly and special event draws — as part of the prize scheme.”

Bank Muscat’s Children’s Account fosters healthy savings habits

MUSCAT: In line with its vision ‘To serve you better, everyday’ and commitment to fostering healthy savings habits amongst children, Bank Muscat’s Children’s Savings Account is designed to promote financial inclusion and help the younger generation learn how to manage their money and prepare for the future. The bank launched this account and developed it further after studying in great detail the needs of this age group. Special incentives in the form of an assurance of a financially secure future encourage children and their parents to learn about the importance of savings. Speaking about the importance of the bank’s Children’s Accounts, Abdullah bin Tamman al Maashani, Deputy General Manager — Institutional Sales & Product Development, said: “Bank Muscat is very keen to provide products and benefits in line with the needs of its customers and as a translation of its customer-centric vision. The bank is continuously working to develop different banking products and solutions



for its customers based on their unique needs. In particular, the bank’s Children’s Account has several features that allow children to learn how to save and manage their money for the future.” All children under the age of 14 are entitled to open a Children’s Account. To open the account, parents / legal guardians should visit their preferred Bank Muscat branch to submit their applications along with copies of the required documents. These include a copy of the ID card or passport (for Omanis), passport with the visa page (for residents) and a birth certificate. The parent or authorised guardian should sign the account opening form on behalf of the child. All customers maintaining a minimum balance of RO 50 in their account are eligible for free insurance coverage. For more details about the Children’s Account, please call 24795555 or go to: <https://www.bankmuscat.com/en/accounts/Pages/details.aspx#children>.

Khedmah App sets new benchmark with more than 600K downloads

MUSCAT: With its top-notch solutions that make daily life easy for customers, Oman Investment and Finance Company’s (OIFC) Khedmah mobile app has accomplished a new milestone by surpassing 600 thousand downloads since its launch. Taking a quantum leap in digital banking, Khedmah app is known for its ease of use and high level of security. It is considered an ideal alternative to cash payments, as well as to visiting branches to pay electricity, water and communication bills. This new benchmark underscores the trust bestowed upon the company by the beneficiaries due to the variety of its seamless and high-quality services that can be utilised by all segments of the society. The app provides a plethora of features under one platform that customers can benefit from with a push of a button. Through the app, customers can easily pay their electricity,



water and telephone bills, recharge their phone, and also pay their electricity prepaid meter bills. In addition, customers can make payments to the Public Authority for Social Insurance (PASI), recharge entertainment subscriptions and subscribe to Awaser Internet. Khedmah recently added a new service in the field of collecting vehicle insurance premiums. Through the direct integration between Khedmah and the systems of Dhofar Insurance Company, customers of Dhofar insurance can now pay the insurance premiums for renewal of their vehicle insurance through the app and website.

Own A Ford Explorer with exclusive benefits

MUSCAT: Ford SUV enthusiasts wishing to own the Explorer with exclusive offer can benefit with service 3 years / 60,000 kms and 1 year registration. (Conditions apply. For details visit a Ford showroom.) The offer is valid until December 30, 2021. The Explorer has more power and space than ever and smart new technologies to help tackle life’s adventures. Improved off-road capability comes courtesy of intelligent four-wheel drive and an available new Terrain Management System that features seven easy-to-engage drive modes. Standard features include a power liftgate, 8-inch digital touch screen with SYNC 3, and a comprehensive package of driver assist and safety technologies. Building upon Ford’s push to bring more driver-assist



technology to market, the all-new Explorer is packed with the very latest innovations from Ford. Every Explorer comes standard with Ford Co-Pilot360, a suite of driver-assist technologies including Pre-Collision Assist with Automatic Emergency Braking, which includes

Assist+ technologies include Evasive Steering Assist, which provides steering support to help avoid a collision; and Post-Impact Braking provides braking after a collision to lessen injury and damage caused by a secondary crash event. Explorer also is available with Ford’s all-new Intelligent Adaptive Cruise Control which automatically slows the vehicle down when traffic ahead slows. It also helps keep the vehicle centred in its lane. The Explorer’s 8-inch touch screen mounted in the centre of the dash with navigation maps fills the entire screen for easy viewing, or split the space with audio information. The screen provides a quicker, more responsive interaction with the updated SYNC 3 system. Standard SYNC 3’s more

intuitive layout gives drivers compatibility with available Apple CarPlay feature. A wireless charging pad is available that allows customers to recharge compatible mobile devices, and up to four USB ports, including new type-C outlets, charge next-generation mobile devices. Up to five 12-volt outlets and a 230-volt outlet are also available. For music lovers, Explorer offers an available 980-watt, 12-speaker B&O premium audio system. In the Sultanate of Oman, Ford vehicles are brought to you by Arabian Car Marketing Co. LLC. Please log on to www.fordoman.com, or www.facebook.com/FordOman or www.youtube.com/FordOmanChannel or www.instagram.com/ford_oman for the latest news, test drive requests and the latest press releases.



Marafiq receives ISO 9001 certification

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 13

Wholly government-owned integrated utility services provider Marafiq has been awarded a ISO 9001 certification, demonstrating its commitment towards customer satisfaction by ensuring high standards in all processes, products as well as services.

The recognition also emphasises the sustainable and continual improvements in the entire company operations. ISO 9001 certification affirms that Marafiq applies a well-designed and effective quality management system in all process which will ensure efficiency through consistent quality improvement efforts.

Abdullah bin Mohammed al Hashimi, Marafiq Managing Director said, “We are pleased to achieve ISO 9001 certification, which attests to a well-executed system in Marafiq and reflects our strategic objectives in maintaining high quality measurements which will

definitely support us in meeting our customers’ expectations. We also aim to achieve other ISO certifications.”

Marafiq is a one-stop service provider that serves industries in the Special Economic Zone at Duqm through a central utility services agreement with the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones.

It has started implementing a number of vital projects in Duqm, such as the integrated power and water plant with a total production capacity of 320 megawatts of electricity and 36,000 cubic metres of water per day, in addition to a seawater intake with a capacity of 1.5 million cubic metres per day and a high voltage 80 km transmission line 132 KV, to transmit electricity to Ras Markaz

In addition, Marafiq is also licensed by the Authority for Public Services Regulation to generate, transmit, distribute and supply of potable water to customers in Duqm zone.

GCC M&A market rebounds with 39 per cent volume growth

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 13

Following an unprecedented economic shock caused by the sudden global health crisis, mergers and acquisitions (M&A) activity stopped in its tracks in 2020.

However, the segment has since rebounded strongly, with deals soaring in volume and value in 2021, according to a new report by Boston Consulting Group (BCG) in collaboration with Germany’s Professor Sönke Sievers of Paderborn University.

The report, titled Master the Art of Breaking Up, sheds light on both positive and negative scenarios that have transpired across global markets in recent times, including in the GCC. This 18th annual analysis of the GCC’s M&A landscape is based on BCG’s M&A database of more than 4,500 deals from January 1990 to June 2021.

This edition of the report comes after the impact of Covid-19 had been seen on the sector. The volume of deals in the GCC between 2019 to 2020 had decreased by 15 per cent and the deal value declined by 61 per cent (from \$85 billion in 2019 to \$33 billion in 2020).

The report further shows that while the GCC’s M&A deal value of the first half of 2021 has not fully picked up (\$14 billion for the first half of 2021, 47 per cent below the levels of the first half of 2020), the GCC’s M&A market is



recovering from the pandemic, with the volume of deals for the first half of 2021 relative to the first half of 2020 increasing by 39 per cent.

“Despite the ongoing crisis, the impact on M&A deals being made has proven to be temporary, with volume rallying substantially this year following an intense period of difficulty not long ago,” explained Ronald Maalouf, Managing Director and Partner, BCG.

“The outcome for the region is attributed to a higher volume of transaction, as well as corporate decision-makers, investors, and deal brokers operating across the region.

Their adaptability has collectively enabled the M&A segment to rebound favourably generally, although deal value must now follow the volume of deals in rebounding before the re-emergence processes are

concluded, which rests with a collective effort from respective local markets.”

Notwithstanding global M&A deal value rallying thus far in 2021, the GCC has seen a contrary trend in this area, with overall regional deal value down by 47 per cent when comparing the first half of 2020 to the first half of 2021.

For example, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), had recorded a decrease in deal value in the first eight months of 2021, albeit an increase in the volume of deals by 13 per cent.

The decrease of deal value is an indication of less large-scale transactions that the Kingdom has seen in previous years – such as Saudi Aramco’s acquisition of SABIC in 2019 and the National Commercial Bank’s merger with Samba Financial Group in 2020.

Similarly, in Qatar, deal value decreased in the first eight months

of 2021, although the volume of deals had grown by over five times when compared against the first eight months of 2020.

Akin to the trends in KSA, Qatar’s 2020 figures were propelled by a large merger in 2020 — a \$2.2 billion merger between Masraf Al Rayan and Al Khaliji Commercial Bank propelling overall value in 2020 to \$4 billion (double the country’s \$2 billion deal value average between 2015 to 2020).

Meanwhile, deal value in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has increased sharply alongside the volume of deals in the first eight months of 2021, recording a total of 100 deals amounting to \$11 billion.

This is mainly due to a rebound in large deals, with four such transactions valuing over \$1 billion in total, contributing to a 433 per cent increase compared to the first eight months of 2020.

NCSI and ODP sign technical partnership

BUSINESS REPORTER
MUSCAT, DEC 13

The National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) and Oman Data Park Company (ODP) signed a partnership and cooperation contract covering the provision of cloud services.

The partnership will contribute to enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the work of the government entities.

Dr Khalifa bin Abdullah al Barwani, CEO of NCSI, stated: “Global technological developments have underscored the importance of cloud services in enhancing the financial and operational capabilities of



public sector entities, ensuring uninterrupted business continuity, and enabling access to the Centre’s data from any geographical location.

It will also enable to Centre to adhere to the standards of the e-government and digital transformation applications.”

Eng Maqbool bin Salim

al Wahaibi, CEO of Oman Data Park Company, said: “This cooperation reflects the confidence of government and private agencies in the capabilities of Oman Data Park. It also enables organisations to gain the various benefits of the cloud services, its high cyber security protection systems, and its technical support service around the clock, seven days a week.”

ODP, he said, provides homogeneous data solutions with international standards, in addition to top quality cyber security services, including the Security Operations Centre services and Network Operations Centre services.

Oil prices steady but Omicron risks weigh

LONDON: Oil was steady on Monday, but new concerns about the Omicron coronavirus variant and doubts around the effectiveness of vaccines against it were weighing on prices.

Brent was up 6 cents, or 0.1 per cent, at \$75.21 a barrel by 09:47 GMT and US West Texas Intermediate (WTI) gained 9 cents, or 0.1 per cent, to \$71.76 a barrel.

Both benchmarks posted gains of about 8 per cent last week, their first weekly gain in seven. “The major oil contracts registered decent weekly gains,



A man fills an oil container while another checks a money at a gas station in New Delhi, India. — Reuters

but it is noticeable that current prices are still way below the pre-Omicron levels,” said Tamas Varga, oil analyst at London brokerage PVM Oil Associates. — Reuters

US energy companies push states for carbon markets

WASHINGTON: The United States energy companies are pressing states to speed development of low-carbon fuel markets, warning that numerous proposed projects to make renewable natural gas and other biofuels may fizzle.

State programmes, led by California’s Low Carbon Fuel Standard (LCFS), reward fuel producers for decarbonising by producing renewable fuels, who have responded by ramping up their production of such “greener” supply.

As a result, the price of credits that refiners and other polluters can generate has dropped sharply — thereby making it less likely that companies will invest in more production facilities in coming years.

Nearly every US independent petroleum refiner has announced plans to produce fuel from waste and vegetable oils because the incentives can prove profitable for their industries. The US Energy Department projects renewable diesel will be about 7 per cent of the overall diesel pool



Calgren’s renewable fuels facility that cleans dairy methane into natural gas is shown in Pixley, California. — Reuters

by 2030; it is currently just 5 per cent.

However, the price of LCFS credits in California, which are generated and traded by companies that produce fuel at a lower carbon intensity than a benchmark set by various states, has fallen nearly 30 per cent in the last two months to below \$145 per metric tonne of carbon, according to California’s Air Resources Board (CARB).

That is the result of rising renewable diesel sales as refiners plan to boost output of the fuel,

according to industry experts. If oversupply continues to lower the price of these credits, investor interest to build more advanced biofuel projects will wane, the industry warned.

“Every \$5 the credit falls, another set of investors are not going to invest in this short-term experiment that has only lasted for 10 years,” said Eric McAfee, chairman and chief executive of Aemetis, a renewable fuels company, to California regulators on a virtual public workshop held on Wednesday. — Reuters

Rio Tinto CEO’s Mongolian hardball ends up looking soft

Jakob Stausholm’s hardball tactics have taken a softer turn. Rio Tinto’s chief executive has offered to write off \$2.3 billion of debt owed by the Mongolian state in exchange for making progress on the country’s \$10 billion Oyu Tolgoi copper mine. The concession should let the \$105 billion Anglo-Australian group keep hold of a bigger prize.

The reward is potentially very large. Once its key second phase starts production, probably in 2023, Oyu Tolgoi will be on track to become the world’s fourth-biggest copper mine at a time when the red metal’s price has soared. Yet the project is around two years late. Its rickety governance is partly to blame.

Rio is the majority shareholder in Turquoise Hill Resources, which holds 66 per cent of Oyu Tolgoi, with the Government of Mongolia holding the remaining 34 per cent.

The problem is that the cash-strapped nation borrowed the cost of its initial stake from Turquoise Hill’s forerunner and agreed that any dividends from the project would first repay the loan.

With interest accruing annually at Libor plus 6.5 per cent the balance has reached \$2.3 billion. Mongolia correctly feared it could be decades before it pocketed any dividends from the project.

Stausholm initially offered to cut the interest rate. Yet ultimately Mongolian Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene Luvsannamsrai had a stronger hand. In extremis the country could have thrown Rio off the project, putting Turquoise Hill’s \$7 billion investment at risk. Hence the write-off.

The decision means Rio gives up potentially billions of dollars of future interest that Mongolia would have owed.

However, it had no prospect of collecting the debt without the project going ahead. It’s also not a bad moment for Stausholm to take a hit. Rio Tinto has a \$50 billion balance sheet, minimal net debt, and made a return on capital employed of 50 per cent in the first half of 2021.

Meanwhile, Oyu Tolgoi ought to generate lots of cash.

On average it could produce 350,000 tonnes of copper for 30 years, which at a 70 per cent EBITDA margin and the current market price of \$9,000 a tonne implies over \$2 billion in annual EBITDA. A softball approach looks more profitable for everyone involved. — Reuters

The problem is that the cash-strapped nation borrowed the cost of its initial stake from Turquoise Hill’s forerunner and agreed that any dividends from the project would first repay the loan



EXAMINING THE WORLD’S LARGEST BLUE GEM

Gemological Institute of Ratnapura Director of research and development, Chamila Suranga, inspects the world’s largest natural corundum blue sapphire, weighing 310 kilogrammes, which was found in a gem pit, at a private residence in Horana, Sri Lanka. Local gemologists, who have examined the sapphire, said it was one of the rarest gems in the world as it weighed more than 300 kilogrammes. International organisations are yet to certify the precious stone.

– Reuters

Conservative central banker returns



DANIEL GROS

The writer is a member of the board and a distinguished fellow at the Centre for European Policy Studies

CENTRAL BANKS CLAIMED THAT THIS LOW AND STABLE INFLATION WAS THE RESULT OF THEIR SKILFUL MONETARY POLICY

In recent decades, central bankers’ job had become somewhat boring and frustrating. They were given independence in the 1990s, because that seemed the best way to ensure price stability. The prevailing view (then) was that leaving governments in control of monetary policy would result in economic stimulus that ultimately fuelled higher inflation without any appreciable increase in output or employment. The solution was to appoint prudent technocrats whose only task would be to set and adhere to an inflation target.

In one sense, this approach was too successful. Inflation remained subdued for 20 years, and especially after the global financial crisis — an episode that taught central bankers the hard way about the vital importance of financial stability.

Price growth did not decelerate by much, even as the economy tanked in 2009 (the so-called “missing deflation puzzle”), and remained low when the recovery slowly gained steam and led to full employment.

During these two decades, inflation hovered in a narrow corridor around 2 per cent in the United States, between 1-2 per cent in the eurozone, and below 1 per cent in Japan.

Of course, central banks claimed that this low and stable inflation was the result of their skilful monetary policy, despite the handicap of being unable to push interest rates much below zero.

But for an outsider, it remains puzzling as to why, for example, the European Central Bank could not achieve its previous inflation target of “below, but close to, 2 per cent over the medium term,” despite implementing a bond-buying programme worth trillions of euros.

The ECB’s own research purports to show that the bank’s asset purchases (quantitative easing) were very effective. But this raises the question of whether a few hundred billion euros more would have achieved the inflation goal.

Moreover, a critical review of central bank research suggests that quantitative easing was not as potent in fighting deflation as some made it out to be. It thus seemed that the ability of monetary policy to push up inflation to exactly 2 per cent was limited.

For central bankers, this was a source of frustration. But the public did not care much, because deflation was never a live danger, and consumers do not really feel the difference between an inflation rate of,

say, 1.2 per cent and 2 per cent.

The long-standing absence of serious concerns about price stability may have been one reason why central banks recently ventured into other fields, like greening their monetary policy. Furthermore, because inflation had run slightly below target for many years, both the ECB and the US Federal Reserve updated their monetary-policy strategies.

Earlier this year, the ECB adopted a new symmetric 2 per cent inflation target. And in 2020, the Fed stated explicitly that it would allow inflation “moderately above 2 per cent for some time” if it had been persistently below this level previously.

Moreover, the Fed, whose dual mandate includes promoting maximum employment, added that it would aim at limiting “shortfalls of employment.” But the era of stable low inflation that prompted these changes has suddenly ended. Inflation is now increasing sharply on both sides of the Atlantic, owing to the combined impact of massive fiscal stimulus, a stronger-than-expected recovery of private demand, supply constraints stemming from logistical bottlenecks, and higher energy prices.

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Green growth at the end of the flat world



RICARDO HAUSMANN

The author is a professor at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government and Director of the Harvard Growth Lab

We do not expect pineapples to come from Norway or papayas to come from the Sahara Desert.

These fruits instead tend to grow in places with lots of sun and water. So, why is it that energy-intensive products like steel come from energy-poor countries like Japan and South Korea?

The answer is that coal and oil have a unique feature when compared to wood, natural gas, or hydrogen: they are amazingly energetic per unit of volume and weight. This fact, combined with advances in transportation technologies in the twentieth century, meant that the world became ‘flat’ from an energy point of view.

Because oil could be transported from the Persian Gulf to New York or Seoul for a fraction of what a barrel of oil cost at its source, the absence of local energy sources was not an obstacle.

This was not always the case. Before railways, proximity to coal mattered for iron production, and before the steam engine, being close to fast-moving rivers that could power waterwheels was crucial for manufactures.

But today, locally available energy sources are not a prerequisite for engaging in most energy-intensive activities.

Except for natural gas (which in any case is a bit greener than coal and oil), energy can be brought to most places at modest cost. Yet, as the world weans itself off coal and oil, energy flatness will become a thing of the past. With

the exception of nuclear power, all green sources of energy – sun, wind, hydro, and geothermal – are unevenly distributed and costly to transport.

Even if firms insist on using fossil fuels together with carbon capture and storage, they will benefit from proximity to geological formations that can store carbon dioxide – and these are not ubiquitous.

In a decarbonising world, therefore, energy-intensive activities will again have to take place near specific locations, just as in the days of waterwheels.

That is not good news for cities like Gwangyang, South Korea, home to the world’s largest steel plant, or for the Middle East’s aluminum industry, which is currently powered by natural gas.

Who benefits from this shift will depend on the outcome of

a brewing conflict involving the Earth and its atmosphere.

The environmental movement has long worried about the impact of human activity on the planet, from local pollution of land, air, and water to the destruction of forests and animal species. But climate change and the need to decarbonise dramatically increases the trade-offs of addressing these different concerns.

We are already seeing the effects of this. While the recent increase in the oil price helps decarbonisation by making fossil-fuel energy more expensive, the fact that aluminum and copper prices are near historic highs means that the price of electric alternatives also is going up, dampening the speed of green-energy substitution.

These metal-price increases are to some extent inevitable,

because the time required to install new capacity means that supply responds slowly to demand. But the speed of the supply response does not depend on technical factors alone.

So, while the losers from decarbonisation are relatively obvious, the winners will be those that combine geographic luck with smart action. Sun and wind do not become electricity without human effort.

Cities, regions, and countries that want to benefit from the relocation of energy-intensive industries will need to ensure that they can credibly offer secure access to green energy.

Decarbonisation will change national development paths, and force policymakers to rethink their economic strategies.

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Observer

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HIS MAJESTY ADMINISTERS OATH TO NEW MINISTER

NEW RO SO BANNNOTE FROM THIS MONTH

STAY APART AND BREAK THE CHAIN

Need a Job

A young Omani
Women looking for a
job in Muscat. She
holds a bachelor's
degree in computer
networks and
has experience
at Muscat
International Airport.

zozaalmashari4@gmail.com

features

Travel vlogger wonders why beautiful Sultanate of Oman remains a secret

Commanding an army of nearly 10 million followers across his different social media channels, Wil Dasovich took a side trip to the Sultanate of Oman without any expectations and hoping only to tick a travel box. An ambitious itinerary took him on a whirlwind 4-day adventure across historic cities, 'Martian' mountains and adventure-filled deserts that at the wrap of his trip, he can't help but confess that he fell in love with its beauty and people... **P20**



ENTERTAINMENT

READ



UGLY LOVE
BY COLLEEN HOOVER

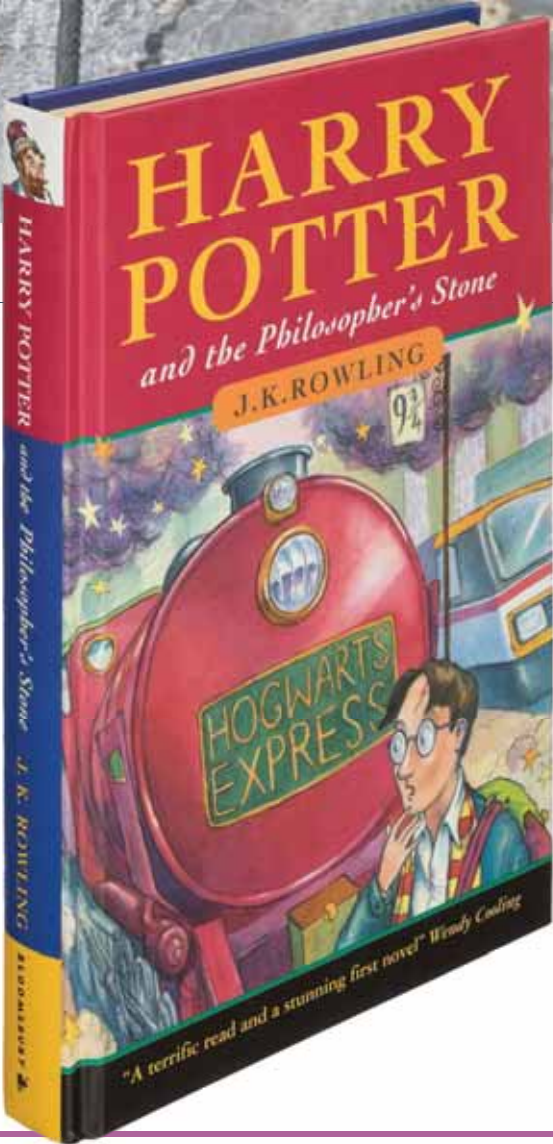
A casual sexual relationship between Tate and Miles becomes more complicated than they expected.

'Harry Potter' first edition sells for smashing \$471,000

A FIRST EDITION of Harry Potter sold for \$471,000 in the United States on Thursday (Dec 9) in what the auctioneers said was a world record price for a 20th century work of fiction. The hardback 1997 British edition of "Harry Potter And The Philosopher's Stone," with a colour illustration on the cover, was described by Heritage Auctions as "magical, incredibly bright and so

very near pristine". The book was published in the United States as "Harry Potter And The Sorcerer's Stone". The Dallas-based auction house said only 500 copies with the specific binding were printed. The final price was more than six times the pre-sale estimate of \$70,000. Previous auction prices for Harry Potter first editions have ranged from about \$110,000 to

\$138,000. "Not only is it the most expensive Harry Potter book ever sold, it's the most expensive commercially published 20th-century work of fiction ever sold," Heritage Auctions Executive Vice President Joe Maddalena said in a statement. The book was sold by an American collector and the name of the buyer was not released. British author J K Rowling went on to write six more books about the adventures of the orphaned boy wizard that have sold about 500 million copies worldwide in 80 languages, according to US publisher Scholastic. The books were turned into eight films which made \$7.8 billion at the global box office. — Reuters





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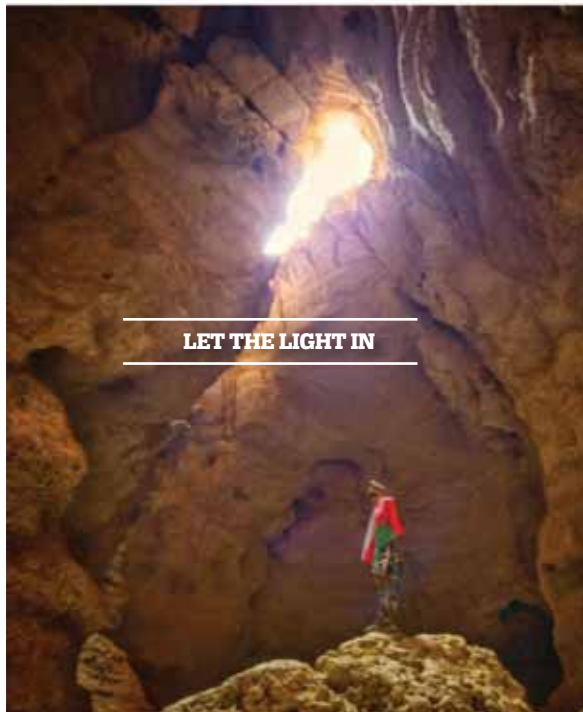
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AROUND THE WORLD

ART

Hidden Rembrandt sketch discovered in 'Operation Night Watch'



EXPERTS HAVE uncovered a previously hidden sketch beneath Rembrandt van Rijn's "The Night Watch," allowing art historians new insights into how the masterpiece was painted, according to Amsterdam's Rijks museum.

Museum director Taco Dibbitts hailed the discovery as a "breakthrough" on Wednesday, presenting the new research into the 1642 painting.

"We always suspected Rembrandt must have made a sketch on the canvas before embarking on this incredibly complex composition, but we didn't have the evidence," Dibbitts said in a statement.

Researchers at the Rijksmuseum have worked for the past two and a half years on "Operation Night Watch," using imaging techniques and computer technology to collect a



vast amount of data on the painting.

"This allows us to look over the artist's shoulder, as it were, and watch as he takes the first steps in the making of a masterpiece," the statement said.

Dibbitts added: "We are currently able to look beneath the surface of the paint better than ever before. ... We have discovered the genesis of 'The Night Watch.'"

New technologies allowed experts at the renowned Dutch museum to analyse "in minute detail" the materials used by the Dutch Golden Age painter.

The artist applied a brown "quarts" ground and used a beige paint with a high chalk content for his rough sketch, according to the research.

This is the first Rembrandt painting found to have been prepared using this type of paint. — **dpa**

LIFESTYLE

Miss India wins 70th Miss Universe

MISS INDIA HARNAAZ SANDHU was crowned Miss Universe in the Israeli city of Eilat early on Monday, with several contestants defying pressure to boycott in support of the Palestinians.

The 70th edition of the annual pageant, held in Israel for the first time, has also faced complications from the coronavirus pandemic.

Sandhu took the top prize in the Red Sea resort with Paraguay's Nadia Ferreira first runner-up and Miss South Africa Lalela Mswane taking the second runner-up spot.

South Africa's Ministry of Sports, Culture and Arts had urged its contestant to stay away from Eilat, citing "atrocities committed by Israel against Palestinians."

The call echoed Palestinian groups who pleaded with contestants to avoid the event.

The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel wrote: "We urge all participants to withdraw, to avoid complicity in Israel's apartheid regime and its violation of Palestinian human rights."

The 80 contestants also included Miss Morocco Kawtar Benhalima and Miss Bahrain Manar Nadeem Deyani, whose majority Muslim nations normalised ties with Israel last year.

In an interview with AFP in Jerusalem late last month, the outgoing Miss Universe Andrea Meza, of Mexico, said the pageant should steer clear of politics.

"Miss Universe isn't a political movement, nor a religious one. It's about women and what they can offer."

Muslim-majority Indonesia and Malaysia, nations that do not have diplomatic relations with Israel, have not sent contestants but both cited complications related to the pandemic, not Israel's rights record.

The United Arab Emirates, which also normalised ties with Israel last year and where Prime Minister Naftali Bennett made a historic visit on Sunday, has also not sent a candidate.

But the UAE said that was "due to time constraints," in selecting its national winner. — **AFP**



A WINDOW INTO CONTEMPORARY OMANI LITERATURE



Dr Khalid Mohammed al Balushi
khalidalbalushi@hotmail.com

Sweet Pain

The following are translations of poems by the Omani poet Hilal al Hajri (1968-) from his first collection titled: "Night Is Mine", (Muscat: 2006):

A SHORT STORY

Weary
His glasses reflect
All the world's agonies.
The cup is on his left
The newspaper
stretched out on his
thighs
Drowned
In worlds
His owl glasses can only
contain.
Tender, balmy bodies
Part us sometimes.
Has he no right to at
least dream of them?

A QUENCHED FIRE

Ah
How sweet is pain
Amidst the diseased
And disfigured crowds!
Such a delicious pain
That tickles my bones
like electric
And travels from soul to
eyes
Squeezing all moments
of alienation
And loss
With warm drops
From the glitter of daze
and innocence
In which my quenched
eyes drowned!

PROMISE

I will wake up
Just tonight
To follow
The path of my sly pain
I won't grieve
I won't weep
Indeed
I'll bite my despair
Till dreams spill from my
molars.

But before that
O oblivion
Hug me with no mercy!
O ever straying mind,
Embrace me
To make the whiteness
of my eyes
Vast enough for all the
world's discord!

TO MY FATHER

I wish I had anything
I could resort to from
fear
As you resort to your
dawn prayers.
O prayers, be gentle with
me
Proceed slowly
Come, my father,
Barter with me:
I'll give you everything:
Rebellion
Glory
Daydreams

Everything, everything
my father!
And may you give me
A tear
From those you shed
While kneeling in prayer
Late at night.

NIGHT IS MINE

No...
This night is mine
No one will share it
Save this injured eagle
Beating its ribs between
my lungs.

No...
This night is mine
With all its murmur and
moan
With all its prayer and
blasphemy

O injured night, come,
I have all it takes to shelter
you:
An exile
Impetuous
Transparent
Like the genesis of creation!

FAREWELL

I shall not be an easy and
free prey
Farewell
O lost Ark,
Farewell
O dumb Pilot,
Farewell
O pride of Motanabbi*
Farewell
O mutterings of Ibn Al
Roomi*
Farewell
O madness of Nietzsche
Farewell
O dreams of Guevara
Farewell O Mires
I'm leaving
I shall drown in the
desert
I shall clasp this sacred
silence
I shall sing for it
As platonic lovers sing
for their beloved till
death.

*Motanabbi (915-965) is a
widely read poet in the
Arab world, and perhaps
the most famous of all
the Arab poets (the
translator).

**Ibn Al Roomi (836-896)
is an Arab poet (the
translator).



Travel vlogger wonders why beautiful Sultanate of Oman remains a secret



BY YERU EBUEN

With nearly 10 million followers across his different social media channels, Wil Dasovich is one of the most prolific content creators on Youtube. Browsing through his channels, it is easy to see that not only does he share short snippets of his personal life, he also tackles important life issues, travel and gastronomy.

Attending a VidCon in Abu Dhabi, this half-Filipino, half-American influencer would however find himself captivated by the shores of the Sultanate of Oman and the nearly 'Martian' feel of some of the country's mountains.

His whirlwind 4-day trip would take him from the storied pathways of the Capital, to the exhilarating adventures of the mountains, the fun rides and activities of the desert and back again to the charming waters and sunset of Muscat. "I feel like the Sultanate of Oman is one of the most underrated travel destinations in the world. I noticed there are not a lot of travel vloggers who have covered this place which is a shame because it really offers raw beauty and amazing adventures," Wil said.

Accompanied by his mom, Charry Dasovich aka Mudra, the duo experienced not only the historical tour of Muscat but have seen both the luxury lifestyle courtesy of the country's top hotels like Shangri-La Barr Al Jissah, Alila Jabal Akhdhar and Desert Nights Camp and the raw authentic Middle Eastern feel of different souqs like Muttrah and Fanja souq and the simple yet well-preserved neighbourhoods of Birkat al Mouz and Bidiyah's Bedu Camp. "It takes time before a country becomes a part of my recommended places to be on someone's bucket list. I would have to travel the country extensively first but in my four days in the Sultanate of Oman, I can say that it is inching into that recommendation list," he said.

Before his the Sultanate of Oman trip, Wil was in Nepal exploring the famed

Himalayan mountains that had become a dream for a lot of mountaineers to conquer. That trip which will ultimately result in a two-part Youtube documentary raked in nearly 2 million views in just half a month. Asked by one of his fans during a meet and greet what's the most memorable adventure he has done in the Sultanate of Oman, Dasovich said that the Via Ferrata of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar has opened his eyes to the beauty of that kind of adventure. "In a short amount of time, not only have I scaled the heights of the Sultanate of Oman's mountains through the via Ferrata, but I also did a series of activities in the desert, from dunes bashing to sandboarding, from camel riding to quad biking. Who would have known that the Sultanate can be the home of these many adventures?" he said.

Dasovich came to the Sultanate of Oman thinking it's just going to be another country to tick on a list as somewhere you'd been to. He said that perhaps coming to the Sultanate of Oman without expectation was the reason why he thoroughly enjoyed his time here. "I think the reason why I love this place so much is because I didn't have expectations. I've never seen a travel blogger, someone big who featured this place that it's almost like a secret," he said. "I'd been to a lot of countries and I felt like this place is a lot like Mars. I've never seen a place like this. I've also never done via Ferrata and this is one adventure I would highly recommend to everyone because this is something very unique," he shared to his fans who attended his Meet Up. His travels were also infused by unique Omani perspective of his local guide Nasser al Jabri.

His mom, Charry, who accompanied him on this trip meanwhile explored a different side of the Sultanate of Oman. While his son was charmed by the different outdoor adventures, Charry's experience also revolved around the luxury side of the experience trying out the different spas in Muscat, the mountains and the desert.

"It was comforting to know that such pamper-

ing is accessible wherever you go. After a long day of going around, the spa offers that much-needed relaxation. Alila Spa, Mandara Spa in Desert Nights Camp and Chi, The Spa in Shangrila differ in quality but they are all great addition to a wholesome travel experience," she said. "This whole trip would not have been possible if not for the generosity of the community that welcomed us. One of our takeaways is that people in the Sultanate of Oman are generally nicer compared to other places. We had the chance to experience the Omani hospitality," the duo complimented.

A CULINARY REVELATION

Dasovich's visit to the Sultanate of Oman included going to wet markets in traditional souqs as well as exploring the Sultanate of Oman's culinary diversity. Upon his arrival, he was instantly introduced to a Turkish feast found in the street corners of Al Khuwair. This was followed by dining for lunch in an Omani restaurant which introduced him to shuwa, harees, and other local favourites. "I've tried different lamb dishes but I think I found the best ones in the Sultanate of Oman," he said. "I haven't eaten camel before as well so having a chance to eat a Filipino version of how it's cooked was interesting to me. The combination of fat content and meat reminded me of an ingredient often used in the Philippines," he said.

Dasovich said that he recorded tonnes of footage that he thinks will do justice to his whole experience in the Sultanate of Oman. With everything that he has experienced in a short amount of time, it's a well-rounded look at what people can expect when they travel to the Sultanate. "The Sultanate of Oman is a beautiful destination. This trip has been one of the most memorable and I'm definitely coming back," he said.

Dasovich said he will be working on a video for his experiences in the Sultanate of Oman. For details, he said people can check out his Youtube Channel: Wil Dasovich or monitor his Instagram @ **wil_dasovich** for updates

