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MUNTHERR
WINS SIXTH RACE
OF OCA LEAGUE



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OMAN'S ECONOMIC
DIVERSIFICATION
PICKING UP PACE: IMF



P20

THE MAGIC OF
OUD UNLEASHED
AT ROHM



MUSCAT

4% RISE IN VEHICLE
REGISTRATION

The total number of vehicles registered in the Sultanate of Oman increased by 4 per cent to stand at 1,667,393 by the end of December 2023 compared to 1,660,803 by the end of December 2022, according to the data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI). Private registration vehicles constituted 79.6 per cent of the total vehicles registered in Oman, to stand at 1,326,587. Vehicles with a capacity of 1500-3000 cc constituted 54 per cent to stand at 902,244. Most vehicles come in the colour 'white' (comprising 42.7 per cent) to stand at 712,073. Meanwhile, vehicles in the colour 'purple' registered the highest increase (21.6 per cent), followed by the colour 'grey' (10.9 per cent).

DETAILS ON P15

BUENOS AIRES

CHILE WILDFIRES
LEAVE 64 DEAD



At least 64 people have died from forest fires raging in Chile - an increase of 13 in the past day, President Gabriel Boric said on Sunday, adding that the death toll is likely to increase further. "We know that figure is going to grow, it's going to grow significantly," Boric said in a televised speech to the nation. Authorities warned of "complicated" conditions as they battled fires in the coastal tourist region of Valparaiso amid an intense summer heat wave, with temperatures soaring to 40 degrees Celsius over the weekend. Dense gray smoke blanketed the city of Vina del Mar on the country's central coast on Saturday, forcing residents to flee. Rosana Avendano, a 63-year-old kitchen assistant, was away from home when the fire began to sweep through the El Olivar neighbourhood, where she lives with her husband. "It was terrible because I couldn't get (to my house). The fire came here... we lost everything," Avendano said. "My husband was lying down and began to feel the heat of the fire coming and he ran away." DETAILS ON P7

OPINION

P9



Abdulaziz Al Jahdhami
Be undecieved
by your deeds

P16



Tariq Al Barwani
Simple yet effective
management guide

HM, KUWAIT EMIR TO OPEN DUQM REFINERY AND PETROCHEMICAL INDUSTRIES

Kuwait Emir begins state visit on Tuesday

MUSCAT: HH Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, will pay a state visit to the Sultanate of Oman from Tuesday.

This was stated in a statement issued by the Diwan of Royal Court on Sunday, reading as follows: "In embodiment of the advanced ties between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Kuwait, and in affirmation of cooperation between them in various spheres and levels, HH Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, will pay a two-day state visit to the Sultanate of Oman, starting from Tuesday. The visit will explore a range of fields and topics of mutual interest in a manner that contributes in achieving aspirations of the two countries towards a more prosperous future.

"The Emir of Kuwait will attend alongside His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik the opening of Duqm Refinery and Petrochemical Industries on Wednesday. The opening of the refinery culminates the advanced relations particularly those pertaining to fruitful economic cooperation between the two countries.

"May the Almighty Allah grant success to His Majesty the Sultan and the Emir of Kuwait for the good of their countries, peoples and the Arab and Islamic nations". — ONA



RELATIONS A ROLE MODEL FOR REGIONAL COUNTRIES

The relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Kuwait are a regional and international role model. This sincere brotherhood and cooperation have been strengthened to go beyond the traditional nature of their relations at various levels. These relations have reached high levels in the official and national aspects, based on the historical and social heritage that brings together the two

countries and common political positions.

The talks to be held at Al Alam Palace on Tuesday between His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and His Highness Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, will herald a new beginning for enhancing relations between the two brotherly countries for the benefit of their countries and peoples.

The state visit of HH Shaikh Mishal Al

Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah to the Sultanate of Oman carries several manifestations, as it is his second visit abroad since he assumed the reins of power in the State of Kuwait. The foremost of which is the firm desire of the leaderships of the two countries to accord a high patronage for the existing relations based on solid foundations and common values. These relations press ahead with confident strides that bring

goodness and development to the two countries.

Dr Saleh bin Amer al Kharousi, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the State of Kuwait, said that the visit represents an affirmation of the depth of the ties between the leaderships of the two countries and their peoples as well as the close cooperation between them in various fields. SEE ALSO P3 & 4

Oman says retaliatory attacks
on sites in Iraq, Syria pointless

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, asserted that the Sultanate of Oman is following with a great concern the continuing escalation in the region without any solution due to the ongoing brutal Israeli war on the Gaza Strip and the death and injury of tens of thousands of innocent civilians including children and women.

He said in a statement to Oman News Agency that the vision of the Sultanate of Oman is that the only solution to the conflict lies in addressing its causes and motives, starting with the recognition of the independent Palestinian state and the withdrawal of the Israeli occupation forces from all the occupied Palestinian territories.

Sayyid Badr pointed out that the Sultanate of Oman considers the retaliatory military attacks



A RAF Typhoon aircraft takes off to conduct further strikes in Yemen. — Reuters

launched by the United States on sites in Iraq and Syria pointless. He added that launching such military attacks on sites in the region will threaten its safety and stability and will complicate efforts to forge solutions to the challenges facing the region including issues of violence and extremism.

Meanwhile, Sayyid Badr made a phone call to Ayman Safadi, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister

of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of the Kingdom of Jordan.

During the conversation, the two ministers held consultations and exchange points of view on the course of efforts made to confront the dangerous escalation resulting from the continued brutal Israeli aggression against the Gaza Strip, stop this war, and launch a new horizon that leads to achieving a permanent solution for the issue. — ONA

RO 23.4m projects
launched in Salalah

SALALAH: In a high-level inauguration ceremony, three new plants kicked off operations at Salalah Free Zone (SFZ), adding RO 23.4 million in investments to the zone's portfolio of businesses.

The inauguration ceremony, held under the auspices of Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, was attended by Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidi, Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ), and a host of top government officials.

Salalah Free Zone – operated by Asyad Group – presented an overview of the three high-value ventures, the first being an RO 9.6 million food processing plant by the Special Integrated Food Company (SIFCO).

The second venture is phase one of Al Namariq Mining Company's quicklime plant, an

RO 10 million Omani-Iraqi joint investment. The third is an RO 3.8 million fabric and plastics manufacturing and packaging plant by Apex Transgulf Manufacturing (APEX) that aims to serve local and regional markets targeting various industries including healthcare, food and beverages.

Commenting on the latest investments, Dr Ali bin Mohammed Tabouk, CEO of Salalah Free Zone, stated: "These new additions hosted by our free zone reflect the critical role of SFZ in driving industrial progress and stimulating economic growth in Oman, and capitalising on logistical synergy with the Port of Salalah to enhance the value chain by linking it to the port's direct shipping line network and Asyad Group integrated logistics solutions."

DETAILS ON P13



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Symposium highlights challenges of family values

AFRAH AL BALUSHI &
AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 4

The Family and Value Building Symposium was launched on Sunday under the slogan 'Opportunities and Challenges'. It discussed the issue of contemporary changes surrounding the family and steps to instill good values in children.

The three-day event was organised by the Imam Jabir bin Zaid Waqf Foundation under the auspices of Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information.

A group of scholars and specialists presented papers to discuss the subject, find solutions and draw a road map.

Shaikh Aflah bin Ahmed al



The three-day event was organised by the Imam Jabir bin Zaid Waqf Foundation under the auspices of Dr Abdullah bin Nasser al Harrasi, Minister of Information.

Khalili delivered the opening speech on behalf of His Eminence Shaikh Ahmed bin Hamad al Khalili, the Grand Mufti of the Sultanate of Oman. "The name of the symposium came from the principle that the family is the first building block of society. The strength of society and its relationship with each other is determined on the strength of family. The individual must have a family, and a family must have

Waqf Foundation, said: "The world is an endless cycle of change in all aspects of life, a world in which the goals of competition and influence compete. The family is not far away from these tensions. It is no longer a secret that there is a persistent effort to break up the family and destroy its entity." Al Khalili also referred to the interest of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, in the family, and mentioned that His Majesty the Sultan has given the family special attention. HM the Sultan always gave priority to upbringing of children, and the need to to strengthen the value system in Omani society.

Dr Raya al Munthrya, Associate Professor of Sultan Qaboos University, said, "This seminar came to deliver a direct and implicit

message to society as a whole that the family is the foundation of construction and the basis for making positive changes. This seminar focuses our challenges on values and how we elevate humans intellectually by enhancing their values primarily." During the symposium, the Ministry of Social Development will hold a session entitled 'Disturbing ideas and their impact on young people: challenges and solutions', which will be held on February 6 for students aged 15 to 17 years.

In the first session of the day Shaikh Dr Kahlan bin Nabhan al Kharousi, Assistant to the Grand Mufti of Oman, discussed the importance of the family in the evolution of civilisation.

SPF conducts 'We Meet You' initiative

LAKSHMI KOTHANETH
@lakshmioman

Registration is now available for the Family Income Support benefit for cases previously registered with Social Security, and registration is done through the nearest service outlet in your governorate, stated the Social Protection Fund in its social media handle.

During the period from February 1 to 4, the Social Protection Fund organised the 'We Meet You' initiative in the Oman Mall commercial complex



in Muscat Governorate.

The Social Protection Fund is an integrated system for comprehensive national social protection for all members of society that keeps pace with the best international practices and experiences, and a unified retirement system that seeks

to ensure the sustainability of resources.

The public has been clearing their doubts as the second month has begun since the implementation of the fund. One of the questions was, "Are there conditions for the family benefit? If he is laid off from work and receives a job security salary and has a family, is he entitled to it, and how is it calculated?" The SPF also have been encouraging people to register via the Twitter handle to channel through Help and Support form for further assistance that

could help individuals who have had difficulties or issues with their requests.

"Please enter the challenge you are facing through the technical support system so that appropriate support will be provided," pointed out SPF.

The Help and Support is a form where the individual can fill out his/her civil number, expiry date of the ID card, e-mail address, mobile number and choose the benefits and provide details in the given digital space and click on send.

New school building opens its doors

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
@afrahalbalushia

Coinciding with the start of the second semester of the academic year 2023-2024, the new building of the Qalaat Al Fikr School for Basic Education for grades (1-4) opened its doors to students in Sahalnot.

Dr Mayzoon bint Bakhit al Shahriyah of the General Directorate of Education in Dhofar Governorate, and other officials attended the first day to check on the progress of work in the school.

Al Shahriyah said the school has the capacity for 840 boys and girls in 30 classrooms, activity halls, in addition to administrative facilities. The opening of new



premises is in line with Royal directives to establish new schools in various regions of Oman to gradually reduce evening schools.

It is worth noting a committee has been set up to follow up construction and maintenance of school buildings.

More buildings will be ready at the beginning of the next academic year 2024-2025. Maintenance is under way in other schools in the governorate.

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BURAIMI WINTER FESTIVAL ATTRACTS 159,000 VISITORS

BALQEES AL ORAIMI
MUSCAT, FEB 4

The Buraimi Winter Festival in the Wilayat of Al Buraimi attracted more than 159,000 visitors, according to the statistics issued by the Al Buraimi Governor's Office. The second phase of the festival will be launched in the Wilayat of Mahdha, followed by the Wilayat of Al Sinainah.

Salem bin Namshan al Kaabi, Director of the Events and Awareness Department at the Al Buraimi Governor's Office, said that the 10-day event witnessed heavy presence of visitors from inside and outside the Sultanate of Oman. There was a huge turnout even from the beginning due to the extensive coverage on traditional and social media.

159,013 visitors included Omanis, residents, and international tourists. The festival saw participation of 20 small and medium enterprises, nine communities, 35 productive families, 20 restaurant owners. Around 70 events were organised during the festival.

Al Kaabi said the festival included theatre, the heritage village, competitions, and accompanying activities.

He stressed that the event boosted tourism and the local economy, pointing to the high occupancy rate in hotels in the governorate and the increase in purchasing activity in its markets.



The festival included theatre, the heritage village, competitions, and accompanying activities.





Oman-Kuwait ties constitute role model for relations



THE OMANI-KUWAITI JOINT COMMITTEE CONTRIBUTED TO EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF BILATERAL TIES

KUWAITI DIRECT INVESTMENT IN OMAN BY THE END OF SEPTEMBER 2023, AMOUNTED TO RO 922.3 MILLION

THE VOLUME OF TRADE EXCHANGE BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES IN 2023 REACHED RO 790 MILLION AS OF NOV 2023

OMANI AND KUWAITI ECONOMIC FORUM TO BE HELD TO FURTHER BOOST TRADE

OMAN IN THE HEART OF KUWAIT SAW THE THE PARTICIPATION OF 80 OMANI ARTISTS

OMANI CULTURAL DAYS TO BE HELD IN KUWAIT UNDER THE AUSPICES OF MINISTRY OF CULTURE, SPORTS AND YOUTH

MUSCAT: The relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Kuwait are a regional and international role model. This sincere brotherhood and cooperation have been strengthened to go beyond the traditional nature of their relations at various levels. These relations have reached high levels in the official and national aspects, based on the historical and social heritage that brings together the two countries and common political positions.

The talks to be held at Al Alam Palace this Tuesday between His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and His Highness Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, will herald a new beginning for enhancing relations between the two brotherly countries for the benefit of their countries and peoples.

The state visit of His Highness Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmad Al Jaber

al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, to the Sultanate of Oman, carries several manifestations, as it is his second external visit since he assumed the reins of power in the State of Kuwait. The foremost of which is the firm desire of the leaderships of the two countries to accord a high patronage for the existing relations based on solid foundations and common values. These relations press ahead with confident strides that bring goodness and development to the two countries. Anyone who follows Omani-Kuwaiti relations can clearly perceive the diplomatic approach pursued by both sides to resolve crises and disputes as well as positions towards many regional and international issues through peaceful means, respecting the sovereignty and independence of states and adhering to the rules of law and international conventions, in addition to their support for the

endeavours of the GCC countries aiming to achieve stability and peace in the region and the world at large. The Omani-Kuwaiti Joint Committee contributed to expanding the scope of cooperation between the two countries in many fields of economy, trade, education, scientific research, youth, civil service, environment and other diverse development fields. The committee created trade and investment exchange represented by the signing of many agreements and memorandums of understanding in various spheres.

Dr Saleh bin Amer al Kharousi, Ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman to the State of Kuwait, asserted that the state visit to be made by His Highness Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait, to the Sultanate of Oman assumes a special importance as it is the second visit to be made by the Emir

outside Kuwait since he assumed the reins of power on 16 December, 2023.

The ambassador told Oman News Agency (ONA) that the visit represents an affirmation of the depth of the ties between the leaderships of the two countries and their peoples as well as the close cooperation between them in various fields. He pointed out that the two countries share commonalities and very great similarity in the foreign policy and diplomacy they pursue regarding most regional and international files and issues.

He added that the bilateral relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Kuwait extend to ancient historical roots, the most important of which is maritime communication through the ports of the two countries. Kuwaiti commercial ships used to take the Omani ports as a starting

point towards East Asia, East Africa and many other destinations, including through Strait of Bab Al Mandab. This communication allowed for the establishment of social relations between the Omani and Kuwaiti peoples still interact positively nowadays.

At the level of the political leaderships of the two countries, the ambassador stressed that there were close relations between the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said and after him His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik with the Emirs of the State of Kuwait since the era of the late Shaikh Sabah Al Salem Al Mubarak al Sabah and until His Highness Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmad al Sabah assumed the reins of power in Kuwait. Their meetings carried goodness for the benefit of the Omani and Kuwaiti peoples and strengthened the foundations of the GCC bloc.

Oman's ambassador to Kuwait

pointed out that there are other mechanisms concerned with direct bilateral relations, including meetings at the summit level, where the visit of His Highness the Emir of the State of Kuwait comes within this framework, and also the joint Omani-Kuwaiti Committee, which was established in 2003 and is held periodically, alternately, in the capitals of the two countries, the most recent of which was the ninth session held in Muscat last March.

The ambassador stated that during the past nine sessions of the committee, many projects and joint cooperation programmes were reached in the economic, cultural, artistic, scientific and sports sectors, in addition to the Duqm Refinery project and petrochemical industries. There are also investments in other economic fields, including investment in the real estate, industrial and mining sectors.

— ONA





OMAN-KUWAIT ECONOMIC RELATIONS WITNESS REMARKABLE GROWTH



Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas



Shaikh Mubarak al Sabah

THE DUQM
REFINERY
PROJECT - A
JOINT VENTURE
BETWEEN OMAN
AND KUWAIT -
IS A SYMBOL OF
THE DEPTH OF
THE FRATERNAL
RELATIONS

TO INCREASE
TRADE
EXCHANGE
BETWEEN THE
TWO COUNTRIES
DURING THE
UPCOMING
PERIOD BY
HOLDING TRADE
EXHIBITIONS
FOR NATIONAL
PRODUCTS

KUWAITI
ACTION GROUP
HOLDINGS
INVESTED
IN SEVERAL
HOTELS
INCLUDING THE
HOLIDAY INN
MUSCAT, AND
THE IBIS HOTEL
MUSCAT

MUSCAT: Economic and trade relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Kuwait are witnessing remarkable growth and joint cooperation in various fields, thanks to the efforts made by the leaderships of the two countries to activate the agreements and memorandums of understanding signed between them.

The private sector in both countries seeks to take advantage of the investment opportunities available in lucrative sectors to expand and deepen areas of cooperation and mutual investment to achieve their common interests.

Statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) indicated that the volume of trade exchange between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Kuwait has been growing increasingly over the past five years, which stood at about RO 115.4 million in 2019, to reach RO 789.3 million by the end of November 2023.

Statistics showed that the volume of Kuwaiti private sector's investments in the Sultanate of Oman amounted to about RO 922.3 million by the end of the third quarter of 2023.

A number of Omani businessmen and their Kuwaiti counterparts confirmed that the Duqm Refinery Project - a joint investment project shared equally between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Kuwait - is one of

the manifestations of the depth of the fraternal relations that bring together the Omani and Kuwaiti peoples. The project is considered one of the largest energy projects in the region, which reflects diversified investment exchange between the two countries and opens the way for enhancing investments in different sectors.

Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI) said that the Duqm Refinery and Petrochemical Industries Project represents a qualitative leap towards the promising future aspires by the Wilayat of Al Duqm and the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD).

He added that this major project complements the Sultanate of Oman's approach to enhancing the added value of oil and gas by converting crude oil into fuel products and petrochemical materials, thus enhancing Omani exports and the balance of payments.

Al Rawas said in a statement to Oman News Agency (ONA) that the official operation of the project will reflect positively on the rest of the projects in the SEZAD in general and projects related to the logistics sector in particular. It will also increase the pace of work at the Port of Duqm through the export of refinery products in addition to other sectors related to services.

OCCI Chairman stressed that the private sector in both countries is looking forward to concluding more partnerships through small and medium enterprises (SMEs), as shared by the visions of both Oman and Kuwait.

He pointed out that the two sides seek to increase trade exchange between the two countries during the upcoming period by holding trade exhibitions for national products. He explained that the National Committee to promote the Omani product will organise during the coming period an exhibition of Omani products and an investment forum in the State of Kuwait aimed at increasing trade and investment exchange between the two countries.

For his part, Shaikh Mubarak bin Abdullah Al Mubarak al Sabah, Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors of Action Group Holdings, commended the fraternal, historical and economic relations between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Kuwait. He also praised the two countries' keenness to develop areas of cooperation and partnership under the royal patronage of the leaderships of the two countries, especially the opening of the joint investment project between them, the "Duqm Refinery", within the framework of the visit of His Highness Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait to the Sultanate of Oman.

Shaikh Mubarak al Sabah said in a statement to ONA that the business environment in the Sultanate of Oman is a safe, encouraging and attractive environment for investment. This was evident through the investment of the Kuwaiti Action Group Holdings in several projects in the Sultanate of Oman, especially in the tourism sector, represented by a group of hotels, including the Holiday Inn Muscat, the Ibis Hotel Muscat and the Mercure Hotel Sohar, in cooperation with Accor International and InterContinental International, in addition to many projects under study and implementation in various fields.

He said, "The amendments made by the Sultanate of Oman to the laws related to investment in the recent period and the provision of encouraging incentives will contribute to attracting investors from abroad". He aspired to provide more attractive incentives to investors.

He confirmed that the visit of His Highness Shaikh Mishal Al Ahmad Al Jaber al Sabah, Emir of the State of Kuwait to the Sultanate of Oman will enhance the establishment of joint ventures, build relations among businessmen in the two countries and activate the cooperation agreements and memorandums signed between them.

— ONA

THE VISIT
OF KUWAIT
EMIR WILL
ENHANCE THE
ESTABLISHMENT
OF JOINT
VENTURES, BUILD
RELATIONS
AMONG
BUSINESSMEN
AND
ACTIVATE THE
COOPERATION
AGREEMENTS

NATIONAL
COMMITTEE TO
PROMOTE THE
OMANI PRODUCT
IN AN EXHIBITION
OF OMANI
PRODUCTS

AN INVESTMENT
FORUM IN
KUWAIT AIMED
AT INCREASING
TRADE AND
INVESTMENT
EXCHANGE
BETWEEN THE
TWO COUNTRIES

OQ8 spearheads diversification with multifaceted projects

DUQM: OQ8, located in the Al Wusta Governorate, has been recognised as the largest investment project between the Sultanate of Oman and the State of Kuwait. This monumental project is a collaborative effort between OQ Group - a global integrated energy conglomerate - and Kuwait Petroleum International, marking it as one of the standout industrial ventures within the Special Economic Zone at Duqm (SEZAD) and a major stimulus for refinery-based projects.

The refinery, with an investment cost of approximately \$9 billion, has established itself as a key player in the global energy market, setting benchmarks with its provision of high-quality energy solutions that fuel the growth and development of both industrial sectors and daily energy consumption. As one of the most advanced and expansive refineries in the Middle East and North Africa, OQ8 relies on imported crude oil in its operations, setting it on a strategic path to



be recognised as a world class refining entity.

Its commitment to supplying superior petroleum products worldwide will significantly boost Oman's refining output, elevating its capacity to over 500,000 barrels per day.

Mulham bin Basheer al Jarf, Deputy President for Investment at Oman Investment Authority - Chairman of OQ Group Board of Directors stated that OQ8 is a testament to Oman's commitment to fostering strategic partnerships, particularly with fellow Gulf Cooperation Council nations. This collaboration with Kuwait

exemplifies large-scale ventures located in Al Duqm, a prime site adjacent to international maritime pathways.

Al Jarf further noted that OQ8's objective is to optimise natural resources and significantly enhance the value of crude oil. Constructed to meet the highest international standards and equipped with state-of-the-art technology, the project is a cornerstone of OQ Group's strategy aimed at enriching the Omani economy through diversified investments. Moreover, OQ8's synergy with nearby strategic projects establishes it as a pivotal



industrial centre, facilitating the growth of petrochemical and downstream industries within the region.

Ashraf bin Hamad al Maamari, Acting CEO of OQ Group, said: "OQ8 marks a pinnacle of achievement for the Omani-Kuwaiti alliance. This collaboration not only merges our economic interests but also celebrates the profound connection and shared legacy that Oman and Kuwait hold".

He highlighted that the project's success unlocks further opportunities for future cooperation among Gulf

Cooperation Council countries in developmental and economic initiatives, bolstering the stability of global energy supplies. Al Maamari emphasised that OQ8 and similar initiatives are ideally positioned to provide unique safety guarantees, capitalising on Oman's strategic location to provide streamlined crude storage and global export services.

Additionally, OQ Group's extensive 221km long gas pipeline, stretching from Fahud to SEZAD, is strategically designed to cater to both the present and future gas supply requirements of the region.

Hilal al Kharusi, CEO of

Commercial and Downstream at OQ Group and Chairman of OQ8 underscored the refinery's strategic significance in achieving the goals outlined in Oman Vision 2040, signifying a critical juncture for the advancement and enhancement of Oman's energy sector. The refinery elevates SEZAD to a crucial hub for economic and industrial initiatives, driving towards economic diversification, enticing investments, and bolstering infrastructure through the provision of comprehensive facilities and services.

Shafi bin Taleb al Ajmi, CEO of Kuwait Petroleum International (KPI) and Vice-Chairman of the OQ8 Board of Directors, highlighted that "The establishment of OQ8 in the Sultanate of Oman serves as a monumental milestone in the evolving economic relations between Oman and Kuwait and reflects the robust support and attention that both governments have afforded to the refinery."

— ONA



Over 100 educational institutions participate in GHEDEX

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

The 23rd Global Higher Education Exhibition (GHEDEX) was opened under the auspices of His Highness Sayyid Dr Kamil bin Fahd al Said on Sunday at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre. The event hosts more than 100 Omani and international universities, colleges, institutes, schools and educational institutions.

The two-day exhibition includes several events, including the schools exhibition and dialogues, in addition to the Youth Community Department in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth.

The Silah Initiative, one of the highlights that aims at helping the deaf group benefit from the exhibition's services and interact with its activities, was launched.

They were given guided tours with the participation of a number of sign language speakers, in addition to providing workshops for those wishing to learn the basics of sign language. This will also stimulate participating entities to develop strategies and visions to integrate the deaf community into the educational sector by providing study programmes and courses.

The organisers said



Dignitaries and officials at the opening of the 23rd Global Higher Education Exhibition (GHEDEX) on Sunday.

that the exhibition is an opportunity for many internationally accredited universities, colleges and academic institutions to enhance such forums and communication between academics, students and parents, and is considered an interactive platform for job seekers and employment and professional institutions.

“The exhibition is organised by the ‘Arab House for Data Analysis’ in cooperation with the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, and the Omani Authority for Academic Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Education,” he said.

GHEDEX is held under the patronage of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation (MoHERI), Ministry of Education (MoE), and the Ministry

of Labour (MoL). Besides Oman, universities and colleges from more than 16 countries including the UK, the US, and France, Malaysia, Japan and Lithuania are making their presence felt with a range of educational offers for the visitors.

Speaking to the *Observer*, Hamed al Tamami, Executive Board member of Ahmed bin Majid International School (ABM) said that the local demand for quality education has been on the rise and the success of the GHEDEX clearly indicates this.

“At ABM, we stand as pioneers in international education within the Sultanate of Oman, offering flagship programmes focused on leadership and exchange opportunities. Our commitment lies in not only delivering academic excellence but also in nurturing the rich tapestry of Omani values. We strive to produce the leaders of tomorrow, dedicated to

serving our nation with a harmonious blend of cultural heritage and global proficiency.”

Prof Ingrida Janulevičienė, Dean, International Relations and Study Center and Head of Outpatient Department of the Eye Clinic of the Lithuanian University of Health Sciences Hospital said that the University’s presence makes a big difference as students from Oman and elsewhere are still an untapped sector for overseas studies.

“We are keen to participate in the Ghedex for Lithuania is an ideal destination for studies including medical sciences and management studies among others. The cost-effective, international reputed curricula, vibrant weather and geopolitical scenario are some of the attractions of our country which we are pretty sure, has a take on the visitors in Oman,” she said.

GHEDEX has always been an annual opportunity for local universities and colleges, accredited international universities and academic institutes to interact, recruit and connect with students, parents, officials and other academic representatives from Oman.

GHEDEX also enjoys continuous success and growth in building Oman’s Human Capital Development.

Defence officials hold talks with French military official



Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi, SAF Chief holds talks with Admiral Nicolas Vaujour.

MUSCAT: Vice Admiral Abdullah bin Khamis al Raisi, Chief of Staff of the Sultan’s Armed Forces (SAF), received in his office at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Sunday Admiral Nicolas Vaujour, Chief of Staff of the French Navy and his accompanying delegation.

During the meeting, the two sides reviewed areas of cooperation and exchanged views on several matters of common concern.

The meeting was attended by Commodore Issa bin Salim al Owaisi, Assistant Chief of Staff for Administration and Supply, a number of senior COSAF officers and the

Military Attaché of the French Embassy at Muscat.

Maj Gen Hamid bin Ahmed Sakroon, Chairman of the Academy for Strategic and Defence Studies also received in his office at Bait Al Falaj Admiral Nicolas Vaujour. During the meeting, the two sides discussed several military topics of mutual interest.

The meeting was attended by Brigadier Nasser bin Abdullah al Qutabi, Head of the Centre for Strategic and Defence Studies at the Academy, Senior officers at the Academy and the Military Attaché of the French Embassy at Muscat.

— ONA

SALE OF VEHICLE/EQUIPMENT

Leading Construction Co. in Oman intends to dispose of their used vehicles and equipment, in ‘as is where is’ condition. The items identified are presently located at their Barka Khazaen and will be offered for inspection to the public on 11/2/2024, 12/2/2024 and 13/2/2024 between 08:00 am to 12:00 pm and 03:00 pm to 05:00 pm.

Last date for submission of closed tender is 13/2/2024 at 05:00 pm at our Khazaen office In Barka state.

Interested parties may contact at
Tel: (+968) 26983767 / 26983777 / 26983703, Mob: (+968) 91354151

VEHICLES & EQUIPMENT FOR SALE

Company Owned commercial vehicles and equipment available for sale in running condition.

■ CRANE 30 TON	3 Nos.
■ TRUCK 7 TON	2 Nos.
■ TANKER -DW BLUE 5000GL	1 Nos.
■ PRIME MOVER & TRAILER	2 Nos.
■ TANKER FUEL 650GL	1 No.

Sale is on “As is Where is” condition.

Interested parties may inspect the assets at Ghala yard from Monday, 5th February to Tuesday, 13th February between 8.30 am & 4.30 pm.

The offers shall be deposited in the tender box latest by 13.02.2024.

Successful bidder will be invited for immediate cash deposit & will be given 10 days time for moving out the units from our Ghala yard.

Contact: Biju 78597655.

Training on social innovation held



Oman Women’s Association organised training programme on innovative social work.

AFRAH AL BALUSHI
@afrahalbalushia

The Muscat branch of Oman Women’s Association organised a training programme on innovative social work in line with the goals of Oman Vision 2040.

The programme seeks to overturn the prevailing concepts of social work and replace them with new concepts characterised by innovation and creativity to contribute to resolve many problems that will benefit different segments of society.

Maryam bint Mohammed al Zadjaliyah, President of the Omani Women’s Association in Muscat, said, “The training seeks towards innovative, pioneering, and sustainable social work and social innovation initiatives. It

aims to acquire necessary skills and obtain the appropriate tools to make the idea of social innovation a reality.”The programme aims to provide the target group with concepts, theories, and solid applied foundations in the search for innovative solutions to pressing social issues and develop the vision, knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to confront challenges in social work.

Social innovation is an innovative idea that provides a distinctive service to society by using new ideas, technology, and concepts to solve social challenges and improve the quality of life of the individual and society. The diversity of social innovation lies in a wide range of fields, from health and education to sustainable development and technology.



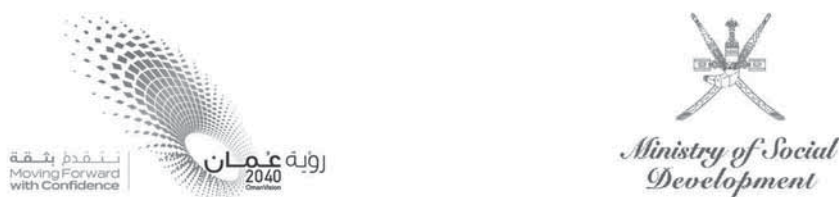
A unique investment opportunity in Rustaq, South Bathina Governorate

The National University of Science & Technology is a premier Higher Educational Institution in Oman, operating from six campuses located in Sohar, Rustaq and the Muscat Capital Region. The University is developing its Rustaq campus as a satellite center of the College of Medicine and possible future expansion. The land is located on the Bathina Expressway at Al Hazn.

The University invites proposals from potential investors for constructing and managing 150 -bed student accommodation in the university land on a BOT (Build, Operate & Transfer) model.

Interested persons/companies are invited to submit their proposals to the office of the DVC (A&FA) at cfo@nu.edu.om before **15th February 2024**.

For further details, please contact **Mr. Mujeeb, Director of Finance, National University**. (mujeeb@nu.edu.om; Mobile 99797065).



Tender Announcement

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

Tender No.	Tender Subject	Grade	Last date for obtainment of Tender Document	Last date for Tender Submission	Tender Document Price (non-retundable)	
					Small and Medium Companies	Local Companies
41/2024	Supply and maintenance of electronic judicial devices for the court of juveniles	Companies specialized in the field of Information technology services Design, installation and maintenance of information programs and systems / equipping information data centers / installing alarm, security and safety systems registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board in the first degree, second, third, fourth	Saturday 24-2-2024 02:00 PM	Sunday 17-3-2024 10:00 AM	10 R.O	25 R.O
44/2024	Providing programmers to work on the joud platform					

❖ Specialized Companies, registered with the **Tender Board** may obtain the Tender documents at the Tender Board e-tendering digital portal link (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>) , On Monday 05/02 /2024.

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

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

www.mosd.gov.om

Gaza nears fifth month of Israel brutal war

GAZA: Israeli strikes across Gaza killed scores overnight and battles raged on Sunday in the besieged territory's south as Palestinian groups were reviewing a proposal for a halt in the nearly four-month-long war.

French Foreign Minister Stephane Sejourne was in Egypt and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken expected in the region in the coming days to push for a ceasefire and captives release.

The health ministry in the territory said at least 127 people were killed in Israeli strikes in the past 24 hours in the Gaza Strip, more than 90 of them overnight.

The government media office said a kindergarten where families were sheltering was hit in the southern border city of Rafah, which is teeming with Palestinians displaced by the war.

"There is no safe place in the Gaza Strip, from north to south," displaced man Mohammed Kloub said in Rafah, which according to UN figures now hosts more than half of Gaza's population.

Israel has warned its ground forces could advance on Rafah as part of its campaign to eliminate Palestinian groups.

A journalist reported strikes and tank fire on Khan Yunis, southern Gaza's main city, with some air raids also hitting nearby Rafah.

The army said on Sunday its troops raided "a compound used by the commander of Khan Yunis brigade" and seized weapons, also confirming air and naval strikes on the city.

It reported several people had been killed after attempting to attack Israeli troops.

With the war set to enter a fifth



Displaced Palestinians use a truck as a means of transportation in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. — AFP

month on Wednesday, international mediators were pressing to seal a proposed truce deal thrashed out in a Paris meeting of top US, Israeli, Egyptian and Qatari officials. Sejourne, at the start of his

first Middle East tour as foreign minister, said on social media that he told Egyptian President Abdel

Fattah al-Sissi of France's desire "for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza and restarting talks for a... two-state

THE HEALTH MINISTRY IN THE TERRITORY SAID AT LEAST 127 PEOPLE WERE KILLED IN ISRAELI STRIKES IN THE PAST 24 HOURS IN THE GAZA STRIP, MORE THAN 90 OF THEM OVERNIGHT

solution". A top Hamas official in Lebanon, Osama Hamdan, said on Saturday the group needed more time to "announce our position".

Hamdan added that Hamas wanted "to put an end as quickly as possible to the aggression that our people suffer".

A source has said the proposal involves an initial six-week pause that would see more aid delivered into Gaza and the phased release of Israeli captives in exchange for Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

Experts and rights groups said that Israeli forces have destroyed buildings near the border in an attempt to create a buffer zone inside the Palestinian territory.

Israel has not publicly confirmed the plan, which Nadia Hardman, an expert on refugees at Human Rights Watch, said "may amount to a war crime".

"We are seeing mounting evidence that Israel appears to be rendering large parts of Gaza unlivable," she said. — AFP



Yemeni tribesmen parade to show defiance after US and UK air strikes on positions near Sanaa, Yemen. — Reuters

US, UK strikes on Yemen to cause more 'turmoil'

GAZA: Palestinian movement group Hamas on Sunday condemned a wave of US and British strikes on Yemen, warning the attacks would bring "further turmoil" to the Middle East.

Hamas in a statement called the bombing "a blatant assault on the sovereignty of a sister Arab country, and an escalation that will drag the region into further turmoil".

The United States and Britain struck dozens of targets in Yemen late on Saturday, their third joint operation in response to repeated attacks on Red Sea shipping by the Yemenis. The air raids in Yemen came a day after a separate wave of unilateral American strikes against targets in Iraq and Syria in retaliation for the killing of three US soldiers in Jordan on January 28.

Anger over Israel's devastating campaign in Gaza — triggered

by an unprecedented attack on October 7 — has grown across the Middle East, stoking violence involving groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani earlier accused the United States and Britain of "fuelling chaos, disorder, insecurity and instability" by supporting Israel. He said the strikes on Yemen were "in clear contradiction with the repeated claims of Washington and London that they do not want the expansion of war and conflict in the region".

Yemeni groups said on Sunday US and British air strikes "will not deter us" and vowed a response after dozens of targets were hit in retaliation for the repeated Red Sea attacks.

The United States has also carried out a series of air raids against the Yemeni areas on its

own, but their attacks on the vital Red Sea trade route have persisted.

Saturday's strikes hit "36 targets across 13 locations", the United States, Britain and other countries that provided support for the operation said in a statement.

US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin said the strikes "are intended to further disrupt and degrade the capabilities of the Yemeni groups to conduct their reckless and destabilising attacks".

Neither Austin nor the joint statement identified the specific places that were hit, but Yemenis military spokesman Yahya Saree said the capital Sanaa and other areas were targeted.

Saree reported 48 air strikes, and said on social media platform X that "these attacks will not deter us from our... stance in support of the steadfast Palestinian people in Gaza". — AFP

Humanitarian issues to be a top Blinken priority

WASHINGTON: Humanitarian issues in Gaza will be a top priority for US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on his current trip to the region, White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said on Sunday.

Blinken was en route to the Middle East in a trip that will include stops in Israel, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the West Bank this week.

A top priority for Blinken on this trip will be to get humanitarian help for Gaza Palestinians who are in dire straits after months of military response from Israel to the deadly October 7 attacks.

"The needs of the Palestinian people are something that are going to be front and centre," Sullivan told the CBS programme "Face the Nation."

The United States believes it is vital to secure a deal to release the remaining captives Palestinian groups took during its attack, including American nationals and an accompanying humanitarian pause, Sullivan said.

"This is in the national security interest of the United States. We are going to press for it relentlessly," Sullivan said. "So this is a paramount priority for us."

The ball is in the court of Hamas when it comes to such a deal, Sullivan said, noting that the Israelis have put forth a proposal.

Last week, A string of countries including the United States, Germany and Britain have paused their funding to the aid agency in the wake of allegations that some



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken

UNRWA staff were involved in October 7 attacks in southern Israel.

Aid groups and other UN agencies have urged donors to keep supporting UNRWA, with the head of the World Health Organization (WHO) warning on Wednesday that defunding would have "catastrophic consequences" for the people of Gaza. Israeli authorities have long called for the agency to be dismantled, arguing

that its mission is obsolete and fosters anti-Israeli, something UNRWA has vigorously denied.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reiterated his call to terminate UNRWA's mandate and to replace it with other UN or non-UN aid agencies.

UNRWA, formally the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, was established in 1949 by the UN General Assembly after the war surrounding the founding of Israel as a Jewish state, when 700,000 Palestinians fled or were driven from their homes.

It employs 30,000 Palestinians to serve the civic and humanitarian needs of 5.9 million descendants of those refugees — in the Gaza Strip, in the West Bank and in vast camps in neighbouring Arab countries. — Reuters



A Pro-Palestinian supporter chants slogans in a loudspeaker as she takes part in a National March for Palestine in central London. — AFP



omanobserver.com/podcast

In brief

■ WINDHOEK



NAMIBIA'S PRESIDENT GEINGOB DIES IN HOSPITAL

Namibia's President Hage Geingob died early on Sunday in a hospital in Windhoek, his office said. He was 82.

Geingob, who was serving his second term as president and was his country's first prime minister after independence, revealed last month that he was being treated for cancer.

Most recently, he took a stand by supporting South Africa's complaint against Israel under the Genocide Convention.

President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa said: "Today, South Africa joins the people of our sister state Namibia in mourning the passing of a leader, patriot and friend of South Africa."

— AFP

■ SEOUL



RUSSIA'S DEPUTY FM VISITS SEOUL AFTER DIPLOMATIC ROW

Russia's deputy foreign minister Andrey Rudenko visited South Korea to discuss the Ukrainian war and bilateral ties, Seoul's foreign ministry said on Sunday, as the two countries trade increasingly heated rhetoric over the nuclear-armed North Korea.

Rudenko met his South Korean counterpart Chung Byung-won, Seoul's foreign ministry said in a statement.

His visit came the day after Moscow's foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that heightened tension on the Korean peninsula was "primarily due to the brazen policy of the United States and its allies, including the Republic of Korea and Japan". — AFP

■ PARIS



FRANCE CALLS FOR SENEGAL VOTE TO BE HELD SOON

Senegal should end "uncertainty" created by President Macky Sall's announcement that an election scheduled for February 25 would be postponed indefinitely, France said on Sunday, calling for a vote "as soon as possible".

"We call on authorities to end the uncertainty about the electoral calendar so the vote can be held as soon as possible, under the rules of Senegalese democracy," Paris' foreign ministry said.

The intervention from Paris came as opposition presidential candidates called for a Sunday afternoon demonstration in Dakar. — AFP

Zelenskiy visits front line as Russia says 28 killed



Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskiy visits a front line, in the Zaporizhzhia region, Ukraine. — Reuters

KYIV: President Volodymyr Zelenskiy visited Ukrainian troops on the southeastern front, his office said on Sunday as Russia said on Sunday that Ukraine killed at least 28 people, including nine women and a child, when its armed forces struck a bakery and restaurant in Russian-controlled eastern Ukraine with Western-supplied rockets

"It's an honour to be here today. To support the warriors and award them. They face a difficult and critical mission to repel the enemy and defend Ukraine," Zelenskiy said in a statement after visiting Zaporizhzhia region.

The presidential office said in the statement that Zelenskiy visited the Ukrainian military's forward positions near the village of Robotyne, which is located almost on the battle line.

The southeastern settlement of Robotyne had been liberated in late August in the counteroffensive against Russian forces.

Meanwhile, Russian-backed officials said that Ukraine

It's an honour to be here today. To support the warriors and award them. They face a difficult and critical mission to repel the enemy and defend Ukraine

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKIY
Ukrainian President

struck the bakery in the city of Lysychansk at about 1230 GMT on Saturday with US-supplied High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS).

Emergency workers worked through the night searching for survivors in the rubble of what remained of the shattered Adriatic

Restaurant on Moskovska Street, where Russian officials said a bakery had been set up for civilians.

"The armed forces of Ukraine opened fire on a bakery in Lysychansk," said Leonid Pasechnik, the Russian-installed head of the Luhansk region which is now controlled by Russian forces.

Pasechnik said the bakery was crowded with civilians when it was struck. Russia's emergency ministry said 10 people had been pulled from the rubble alive.

But the ministry said four more people were in an "extremely grave condition" and that it was still searching for people.

Ukrainehasnotyetcommented on the attack. Reuters was unable to immediately verify what weapons had been used in the attack. Russia's foreign ministry condemned the Ukrainian attack, saying the West should think about why its financial support to Kyiv was being used to kill civilians. — Reuters

Protesters rally in Texas against migrant crossings



Attendees listen to a speech at the Take Back Our Border Convoy rally at Cornerstone Childrens Ranch on February 3, near Quemado, Texas. — AFP

TEXAS: In trucks, vans and RVs, hundreds of people converged in southern Texas to rally against what they say is a migrant "invasion" and to demand tough new controls at the US border with Mexico.

Scrawled on the side of one of the vehicles reaching Quemado -- population 162 -- were the words "Join the God Fight."

The convoy gathered in the tiny town along the Rio Grande river, which forms the natural border between the United States and Mexico, as debate swirls again about how to address record high migrant crossings.

Hundreds of thousands of people from Central and South America, and beyond, have waded across the river in recent months in hopes of better lives in the United States.

But their huge numbers have become a galvanising issue, especially ahead of

the November presidential election, with Republicans in Congress blocking additional US aid to Ukraine and Israel over demands that President Joe Biden's administration does more to stop the flow.

In Quemado this weekend, conservative activists, including a group calling itself "We the People" -- the first words in the preamble to the US Constitution -- met to make their anger over immigration known, rallying under the slogan "Take our border back."

One of the event's organisers has called those massing here "God's Army," suggesting holy backing for their cause.

"Migration on the border is out of control," said 43-year-old Robyn Forzano, who was guarding the entrance to the Quemado ranch where protesters were meeting.

— AFP

Chile wildfires kill 64 in 'unprecedented catastrophe'



Aerial view of the forest fire that affects the hills of the city of Viña del Mar in the Las Pataguas sector, Chile. — AFP

VINA DEL MAR: Wildfires blazing across Chile have killed at least 64 people, leaving bodies in the street and homes gutted, with flames continuing to spread on Sunday and the toll expected to rise.

President Gabriel Boric has decreed a state of emergency in the central and southern parts of the country "due to catastrophe," as dry conditions and temperatures soaring to 40 degrees Celsius exacerbated the crisis.

Dense gray smoke blanketed the city of Vina del Mar of the Valparaiso tourist region, along central Chile's coastline, forcing residents to flee.

The death toll rose to 51 as firefighters battled to control the flames. The forensic medical service had previously reported 45 deaths, but "there are six more people who died in health care facilities," according to interior Under-Secretary Manuel Monsalve.

Boric said the number of victims would increase, pledging government support to help people get back on their feet.

Authorities imposed a curfew beginning at 9:00 pm on Saturday, to allow emergency supplies --

especially fuel -- into the affected areas.

New evacuation orders were issued, though it remained unclear exactly how many people had been told to leave.

Earlier on Saturday, Interior Minister Carolina Toha said there

had been 92 fires as of noon, with 43,000 hectares burned across the country. Firefighters were still battling 29 of the blazes by the afternoon, while 40 had been brought under control.

In the hillsides around the coastal city of Vina del Mar, entire

blocks of houses were burned out overnight, reporters saw on Saturday morning, as thousands of people who had previously evacuated returned to find their homes destroyed.

Some of the dead were seen lying on the road, covered by

sheets.

The area, about 1.5 hours northwest of the capital Santiago, is a popular tourist destination during the summer months. The coastal region is also important for the country's wine, agricultural and logging industries. — AFP

Redefining education in the age of AI



Sandhya Rao Mehta

The writer is Associate Professor, Dept of English Language and Literature Sultan Qaboos University

There is not a single moment that Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not being used today, often unknowingly. Be it while using maps to navigate, using digital payment services or the very strange way that our smartphone seems to know what we are talking about, AI is everywhere. This has huge implications on education, both for teachers and students, and even more importantly, for policy makers. If information is accessible within seconds upon asking any digital device, what exactly is the aim of teaching facts and data like specific dates in history? If entire essays can be written in less than one minute, what is the purpose of writing courses? Similar questions are being asked across all educational institutions worldwide. As an Unesco study asks, “How do we balance the need to equip young people for a human-machine society, without undermining the human mind as we outsource certain cognitive functions?” The answer to many of these questions is often to understand that changes in the way that knowledge is produced and circulated has always

been dynamic. If religious and spiritual texts were handed down orally over time, writing managed to document human innovation and history. This in turn was seen to be threatened by the invention of the printing press which could produce dozens of identical texts in the time that a single one could be handwritten. None of this meant that creativity or knowledge production ended. If anything, it got reinvented in forms that could not be imagined earlier. The novel is a good example. An extended fiction, it needed to be available in a form that was written, yet affordable to many who were literate. Technology is not something to be nervous about. Humanity has seen enough changes to know that each invention and discovery is just another step. The challenge at present, however, is that these changes seem to be outsourced to machines. In education, AI is potentially being used to generate and analyse data, write assignments and even entire projects. This can lead to limiting creative and critical thinking —

AI IN EDUCATION CAN LEAD TO LIMITING CREATIVE AND CRITICAL THINKING WHILE TEACHER FEDERATIONS HAVE WARNED POLICYMAKERS ABOUT THE DANGERS OF AI INTRUSION INTO LEARNING

indispensable soft skills central to education. A number of teacher federations around the world have warned policy makers about the dangers of AI intrusion in learning. As with any other invention, however, it helps to see AI as a tool — a tool which, in the hands of the user, can result in positive or negative impacts. Of course generative AI can be used to solve problems and write essays in an instant, but it can also provide students with additional, out of class help by giving more examples, sample questions and opportunities for self-testing. This makes education more equitable, providing students the chance to learn at their own speed, choose difficulty levels and remain motivated — it is like having a private tutor. Being aware of the dangers of Artificial Intelligence and its uses in education is very important. But it is equally important to understand its potential to make learning individual, targeted and unique. As in all other tools, how it is used remains in the hands of the consumer.

Britain’s readiness for war marred by recruitment issues

Britain is not ready to fight an all-out war unless the government addresses the Armed Forces’ capability and stockpile shortages and recruitment crisis, lawmakers in the country have warned. The Commons Defence Committee said the military is “consistently overstretched,” with the demands of operations personnel are deployed on leaving little time for training in war fighting. “The government risks being unable to build true war fighting and strategic readiness because of the sheer pace of operations, which could threaten the security of the UK,” the report said. The panel suggested the “unrelenting pressure” on personnel has exacerbated the crisis in the recruitment and retention of both regulars and reservists, with more people leaving the Armed Forces than joining. Efforts by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) to tackle the problem are not “being carried out at the required pace,” the report said. Lawmakers urged ministers to ensure that the forces are not deprived of the time, resources and training they need to fight and win a high-intensity prolonged war. Readiness “is essential to effective deterrence to our adversaries” at a time of heightened geopolitical instability, they said. The committee’s inquiry heard that the “hollowing out” of the armed forces since 2010 had undermined the UK’s war fighting resilience, and that their reduction in size meant they would exhaust their capabilities “after the first couple of months of the engagement” in a peer-on-peer war. It comes after Defence Secretary Grant Shapps last month said the world is “moving from a post-war to pre-war world” and Britain must ensure its “entire defence ecosystem is ready” to defend its homeland. He insisted the size of the army will not dip below 73,000 under the Conservatives, amid growing concerns about further cuts to troop numbers. Sir Jeremy Quin, who recently took over as Defence Committee chairman, said: “A steady, continuous drip of operations and ongoing commitments has meant the military is unable to devote sufficient training and resources to high-intensity war fighting. “While able to deploy at short notice and to fulfil commitments, our inquiry found that readiness for all-out, prolonged war has received insufficient attention and needs intense ongoing focus. “On top of this, the high tempo of operations and unrelenting pressure on our Services has led to a drop in retention, compounded by a period of low recruitment and difficulties introducing and maintaining capabilities, thereby creating a vicious cycle.” — dpa



Raymond Zhong

The writer focuses on climate and environmental issues for TNYT

Heat, wildfire smoke are even more harmful when combined, a study says

In California, days that experienced both extreme heat and wildfire smoke at the same time have seen disproportionate numbers of hospitalisations for heart and lung ailments, a new study found. The research highlights the public health dangers of distinct climate threats that can have a compound effect when they occur simultaneously. The research, published on Friday in the journal *Science Advances*, also found that this compounding effect was greater in communities with lower levels of income, education, health insurance coverage and tree cover. Background: Global warming is intensifying both threats. As humans warm the planet, both heat waves and wildfires are becoming more severe and longer-lasting in the American West. That also means they are more likely to overlap. Researchers have estimated that two-thirds of California’s land area experienced broiling heat and heavy wildfire smoke concurrently at some point during the state’s record fire year of 2020. Both hazards are harmful to health on their own: Heat stress increases cardiac strain, and inhaling wildfire smoke can aggravate lung conditions. The new study, led by researchers at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California, San Diego, looked at the health effects when the two threats appeared in tandem. On exceptionally hot and smoky days, staying indoors doesn’t always help, and certainly not for people who don’t have air conditioners and air purifiers, said Tarik Benmarhnia, an environmental public health researcher at Scripps and one of the study’s authors. “Air pollution doesn’t stay politely outside,” he said. “It gets inside, interacts with a lot of indoor air pollutants and can lead to a lot of issues.” The findings: Compounding harms, and unequal ones, too. The researchers took state data on



Heavy smoke from wildfires hangs over Lake Merritt in Oakland, California.

unscheduled hospitalisations between 2006 and 2019 and combined it with detailed readings of temperatures and wildfire smoke. They found that combined exposure to the two hazards had a bigger effect on hospitalisations than the sum of the

THE NEW STUDY, LED BY RESEARCHERS, LOOKS AT THE HEALTH EFFECTS WHEN THE THREATS OF HEAT AND WILDFIRE SMOKE APPEARED IN TANDEM

effects from each separately. In other words, the harm to health from concurrent heat and smoke was greater than the sum of its parts. California’s agricultural heartland, the Central Valley, and its wooded far north experienced more of these hot and smoky days than other regions during the study period, the researchers found.

They also found that the size of the compounding effect from heat and smoke varied across communities with different demographics. Areas with weaker socioeconomic indicators and higher proportions of nonwhite residents had it worse. What might be next: Joint warnings for heat and smoke. At the moment, heat advisories in California come from local offices of the National Weather Service, while hazardous air warnings are issued by local air quality management districts. The study’s findings suggest a joint heat and smoke warning would help keep more people safe, Benmarhnia said. To account for the extra danger on sweltering days, officials might also consider issuing air quality alerts even when pollution hasn’t reached the level that would trigger a warning on cooler days, he said. A spokesperson for California’s Air Resources Board said the agency was preparing new educational resources this year to help residents protect themselves from concurrent heat and smoke. “These types of joint events are just going to happen more and more,” Benmarhnia said. — *The New York Times*

Be undeceived by your deeds

How many times have you thought that life has never been fair to you? Perhaps, you have had this belief for certain reasons, some of which could be unreasonable. However, make sure it is not life, but people are not being fair to each other. It is not life that should be blamed for what happens to you, but yourself and others whom you interact with. This is because human beings are being injustice and disrespectful to one another. Therefore, they receive what they have been doing to others in return for their own deeds.

All what you need to remember is that life is just an echo and what you send out, comes back in one way or the other. What you plant, you harvest, what you give, you get and what you see in others, it exists in you. Hence, you should always give goodness, so you get back the same; otherwise, it is the vice versa. Whatever you perform in your daily life, whether good or bad, you must certainly bear the fruits of the same. Sooner or later, you will get it back.

This is the rule of life when it comes to dealing with other people around you. You should comply with the principle of treating people like how you would like to be treated by others. In fact, it is important for all to understand that we are the reason behind what happens to us. Let's think of when we go to work everyday; who decides on the type and colour of clothes to wear, which way to take, what drink to have?! It is our decision of course.

Similarly, every action we take is decided by us and hence the result will also be faced by us! Nobody shall say that I've not done injustice to anyone then why I am facing such an



Abdulaziz Al Jahdhami aljahdhami22@gmail.com

An author, columnist, creative writer, translator and a communications professional

ALWAYS REMEMBER, THE EVIL YOU DO REMAINS WITH YOU, WHILE THE GOOD YOU DO, COMES BACK TO YOU!

awful incident? Your deeds are just like a ball, once thrown will hit the wall and then comes back to you. It is just a matter of time for this ball to travel and comes back. Sometimes, it comes back immediately while sometimes it takes hours, months or even years.

This reminds us of an old story of that woman who used to bake bread and gives one to the hunchback man who passes by her house. As this went on over days, the woman got irritated of this man who did not show any kind of gratitude to her. All what he got to say after taking the bread was "The evil you do remains with you. The good you do, comes back to you!". This provoked the woman's curiosity.

Therefore, the woman decided to get rid of him and she added poison to the bread she prepared for him. Luckily, she changed her mind and did not give him that bread; rather she burned it. The hunchback man passed as usual picking up the bread. Suddenly, he got an exhausted and starving man asking for food and he gave him the bread. That man was the woman's son who came back to his mother on that day after years of disappearance.

The son thankfully told his mother about the hunchback man saving him with the bread, which he gave it to him. The mother was shocked to hear that as she was intending to poison the hunchback man and get rid of him. If she had given the poisoned bread to the hunchback, she could have gotten what she did as her son would eat that piece of bread. The revenge could have happened on her son immediately!

Always remember, the evil you do remains with you, while the good you do, comes back to you! Thus, keep doing the good deeds that bring back fruitful outcomes to you.

TURNING IN THE AIR!



Youths perform 'Gatka', an ancient form of Sikh martial arts during a procession to celebrate the birth anniversary of the Sikh warrior Shaheed Baba Deep Singh, in Amritsar, India, on Sunday. – AFP

Don't count on a soft landing for the global economy

A month into 2024, the consensus forecast for the global economy remains cautiously optimistic, with most central banks and analysts projecting either a soft landing or potentially no landing at all. Even my colleague Nouriel Roubini, famous for his bearish tilt, regards the worst-case scenarios as the least likely to materialise.

The CEOs and policymakers I spoke to during last month's World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos echoed this sentiment. The fact that the global economy did not slip into recession in 2023, despite the sharp rise in interest rates, left many experts upbeat about the outlook for 2024. When asked to explain their optimism, they either cited the US economy's better-than-expected performance or predicted that artificial intelligence would catalyse a much-hoped-for productivity surge. As one finance minister remarked, "If you are not naturally optimistic, you should not be a finance minister."

The world's economists appear to share this outlook. The WEF's Chief Economists Outlook for January 2024 found that while a majority of respondents foresaw a mild global downturn in 2024, most were not overly concerned and viewed the expected slowdown as a healthy correction to the inflationary pressures caused by excessive demand.

Even the disruption to global trade caused by Yemeni Ansar Allah attacks against commercial ships in the Red Sea and the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza have not dampened the jubilant mood of analysts and business



Kenneth Rogoff, Professor of Economics and Public Policy at Harvard University, was the chief economist of the International Monetary Fund from 2001 to 2003

DESPITE ANALYSTS' INCREASINGLY OPTIMISTIC FORECASTS FOR THE COMING YEAR, THE RISKS TO GLOBAL GROWTH ARE STILL TILTED TO THE DOWNSIDE

leaders. The US stock market is at record levels, and even the normally conservative International Monetary Fund revised its growth forecasts upward, with the latest World Economic Outlook describing the risks to global growth as "broadly balanced." This characterisation marks a significant departure from the cautious tone the IMF typically uses to discourage finance ministers from engaging in unsustainable spending sprees.

In a crucial election year in which voters in dozens of countries – representing half the world's population – will head to the polls, government spending is already expected to surge. In macroeconomics, this phenomenon is known as "political budget cycles": incumbent politicians want to stimulate the economy to improve their chances of being re-elected, so they increase public spending and run larger deficits.

Despite the relatively buoyant consensus, recent developments suggest that the risks to global growth are still tilted to the downside. For starters, I am deeply sceptical of the Chinese government's announcement that its economy grew by 5.2 per cent in 2023.

GDP growth figures have long been a politically charged issue in China, particularly over the past year, as President Xi Jinping consolidated his rule by sacking numerous top officials, including his defence and foreign ministers.

With the Chinese economy grappling with deflation, falling property prices, and weak demand, it is increasingly evident that its economic woes are far from over – and that Xi is determined to control the narrative.

The combination of a prolonged economic slowdown and a collapsing real-estate sector could bring China to the brink of a Japan-style "lost decade." The obvious Keynesian solution to the country's slow-moving trainwreck of collapsing real-estate ventures and local government debt is to initiate direct cash transfers to households. But, given that Chinese consumers are more inclined to save (in contrast to their spendthrift American counterparts), and that government debt is already rising rapidly, a debt-deflation spiral seems increasingly likely.

Meanwhile, despite dodging a recession in 2023, European

economic growth is widely expected to remain lackluster this year. Moreover, European countries' persistent unwillingness to invest in their own defence suggests that former US President Donald Trump's potential return to the White House in 2025 could necessitate a painful adjustment. Alarming, European leaders do not seem to be preparing for such a scenario, even as the war in Ukraine depletes their ammunition stockpiles faster than they can be replenished.

Europe is also grappling with the adverse economic effects of US President Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which uses tax incentives to lure European companies. While the IRA is ostensibly aimed at accelerating America's green-energy transition, it is essentially a protectionist trade policy. It may have provided the US economy with a short-term boost,

but its long-term consequences could mirror those of the 1930 Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, which triggered an international trade war and exacerbated the Great Depression.

Nevertheless, Biden's trade protectionism is mild compared to Trump's plan to impose a 10 per cent tariff on virtually all imported goods, a move that could wreak havoc on the global trading system. European countries are understandably rooting for Biden, who – unlike Trump – has repeatedly reaffirmed his commitment to reining in Russian expansionism.

Alarming, both Democrats and Republicans in the US seem uninterested in cutting government spending, let alone reducing the deficit. Regardless of which party controls Congress after November's election, a deficit-fuelled spending spree is all but certain. But if real interest rates remain elevated, as many expect, the government could be forced to choose between deeply unpopular fiscal tightening or pressuring the Federal Reserve to allow another bout of inflation.

Despite the widespread belief that the global economy is headed for a soft landing, recent trends offer little cause for optimism. As the world confronts yet another turbulent year, policymakers and analysts need to bear in mind that a soft landing means little if the runway is in an earthquake zone.

@Project Syndicate, 2024



The US stock market is at record levels.



AL WAHIBI KEEPS RED AHEAD OF FINAL RACE

ANUROOP
ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, FEB 4

Cycle KOM's Mohammed al Wahibi kept the leader's red jersey intact with a second-place finish in the penultimate sixth race of Oman Cycling Association (OCA) League 2023-24 won by Munther al Hasani of Salalah Club.

In the 96 km road race at Wakan on February 2, Munther came top with two hours 36 minutes and 18 seconds ahead of Mohammed (2:36:23) and Said al Rahbi of Oman Royal Army (2:36:28).

Al Wahibi's second place (+0:05) ahead of Said helped him maintain the overall lead with 465 points with only the last race remaining in the OCA League. Al Rahbi has 440 points while Munther has 365 points. Oman Royal Army rider Husam al Rawahi is fourth with 360 points and Salalah Club's Mazin al Riyami (358) stays in fifth position.

In the under-23 section, Al Wahibi and Al Hasani are in the top two while Oman Club's Islam Ayad (325) stays third. Al Etiffaq Club's Asad al Habsi (103) is fourth and Salalah Club's Amjad al Toqi (73) is in fifth spot.

In the 40 plus category, Cycle KOM's Daniel Baldwin (346) remains in front ahead of his team captain Paul Willcox (329) and teammate Gregory Pollard (119).

Bahla Club's Saud al Mandhari (77) and David Coeshall (21) are in fourth and fifth spots respectively.

SIMPLE PLAN

Cycle KOM captain Willcox said his team is happy to maintain the lead for Mohammed.

"Our goal was simple. Keep Mohammed in GC lead by ensuring he finished ahead of Said. We had a plan to attack with Greg and Hashim and let the break get away with

MUNTHER
WINS SIXTH RACE OF
OCA LEAGUE



OCA League
Race 6 podium

our two guys. This worked all though the group had Mazin (high up the GC) and also three Oman Army riders including Hosam.

The break stayed away so we had to pull it back," the British cyclist told Oman Observer.

"Yousif and Mohammad Lamki pulled us and the peloton on the flat to keep the break gap going, then Dan and I attacked on the rising hill to the finish (20km) which split the peloton and chasing group with us, Mohammed, Said and others caught in the break. Towards the end, Munther and Dan got away before the steep climb.

Then a battle on the final hill which Mohammed managed to getter the better of Said again. We came away with highest team points and slightly extended Mohammed's lead again, also maintaining the three jerseys," the veteran rider, who claimed the fifth race of Individual Time Trial for a fifth straight year, added.

After six races, Oman Royal Army are on top with 1,230 points followed by Cycle KOM (1,186) and Salalah Club (1,120). Oman Club (686) and Wave Riders (490) complete the top five.

The concluding race of the OCA League 2023-24 will be a road race at Knowledge Oasis on March 8.

- OCA LEAGUE RACE 6 RESULTS**
- (Read as rank, rider, team, time)
- 1. Munther al Hasani (Salalah Club) 02:36:18
 - 2. Mohammed al Wahibi (Cycle KOM) 02:36:23
 - 3. Said al Rahbi (Oman Royal Army) 02:36:28
 - 4. Daniel Baldwin (Cycle KOM) 02:36:32
 - 5. Husam al Rawahi (Oman Royal Army) 02:37:03
 - 6. Abdulrahman al Yaqoobi (Salalah Club) 02:37:03
 - 7. Paul Willcox (Cycle KOM) 02:37:15
 - 8. Hatim al Booshri (Oman Royal Army) 02:37:24
 - 9. Jan-Jaap Gerards (Wave Riders) 02:37:35
 - 10. Islam Ayad (Oman Club) 02:37:38

PSG tightlipped over Mbappe switch to Real Madrid

PARIS: With just six months remaining on his contract at Paris Saint-Germain Kylian Mbappe's much vaunted move to Real Madrid continues to dominate French football news.

The transfer window closed last week with Mbappe insisting he is yet to decide where he will play after this current deal with PSG concludes at the end of June, when he becomes a free agent.

On Saturday both ESPN and the 'Parisien' daily newspaper reported, without naming their source, that the superstar striker would leave France and join the world's biggest club Real Madrid.

A source at the French club

said on Sunday, however, there had been no change in the longstanding deadlock.

He has "not informed the club of any decision", said the source, despite there being an agreement that the PSG president Nasser al-Khelaifi will be first to know when his decision is made.

Mbappe last spoke on the issue in cryptic terms in early January.

"I haven't made my decision, I haven't made my choice. But we have an agreement with the president (Al-Khelaifi) which means that all parties are protected," the 25-year-old told French television.



Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Kylian Mbappe.—AFP

The France captain who is expected to head the Olympic team at the 2024 Paris Games added he would inform Khelaifi first and announce the news himself once any decision had been made.

PSG coach Luis Enrique,

a former Real player, said on Thursday, ahead of a game where Mbappe scored his 20th league goal of the season, that the player had revealed nothing to him personally.

What does appear certain is that Mbappe has signed no deal as yet but is, in fact, locked in negotiations with Madrid over the size of his salary, an issue where the Qatar-backed PSG could easily match Real.

Mbappe is paid some 70 million euros (75.6 million dollars) a year already and as a free agent will be able to negotiate a blockbuster signing on fee on top of any salary increase.

PSG themselves appear to be pulling out all the stops to cling on to Mbappe'a sublime skills after allowing Lionel Messi and Neymar to leave the capital.

Neither Messi nor Neymar have been missed as new arrivals such as Randal Kolo Muani and Marco Asnesio have struck up an understanding with Mbappe.

If the 2018 World Cup winner and 2022 World Cup top scorer does join Madrid in July, he would join English sensation the 20-year-old Jude Bellingham and Brazilian strikers Rodrygo and Vinicius, one of whom would have to make way for the Frenchman. — AFP

O’Keefe, Mantz win US marathon trials to qualify for Paris Olympics

MIAMI: Fiona O’Keefe, making her marathon debut, won the US Olympic Marathon Trials women’s title on Saturday to qualify for the Paris Olympics while Conner Mantz took the men’s crown.

O’Keefe, who qualified based upon a half-marathon showing, completed the 26.2-mile layout in Orlando, Florida, in two hours, 22 minutes and 10 seconds — the fastest time in US women’s Olympic trials history.

That was enough to defeat runner-up Emily Sisson, the former US marathon record-holder, by 32 seconds with Dakotah Lindworm taking the third and final women’s berth in Paris in 2:25:31.

“We showed up in a little bit of tough conditions so I think we’re going to be ready to rock and roll in Paris,” O’Keefe said.

Sisson, twice a top-10 finisher at 10,000 metres at the world championships, finished 10th in the 10,000m at the Tokyo Olympics but is happy not to have Covid pandemic restrictions this time around.

“I feel so emotional,” she said. “I had my family and friends out here watching me and I made my second Olympic team and they get to come with me this time. Over the moon. I’m elated.”

On the men’s side, Mantz won the US men’s marathon trials in 2:09:05 with pal and training partner Clayton Young second by one second to also book a Paris Olympic spot.

Leonard Korir was third in 2:09:57 but must wait until May to learn if international rankings will give the United States a third berth in the Paris Olympic men’s marathon.— AFP



Fiona O’Keefe celebrates after winning the women’s race.—USA TODAY Sports

OBA celebrates triumphs in Basketball Trios Championship



Dr Ali al Yaaribi, Vice President of the Oman Basketball Association with youth winners

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 4

The Oman Basketball Association (OBA) honoured the winners of the Under-23 Youth Basketball Trios Championship and the Open Girls’ Championship.

The championship was organised by OBA represented by the Basketball Trios Committee at Al Qurum Beach, with participants of 17 teams from various communities across Oman. The tournament witnessed strong competition in their various qualifiers, with fair competition

among the participating teams. The teams were divided into groups and played in a league system from the first round, one team from each group qualified for the finals, which were held in a knockout system. The winners then competed to determine the first and second place, while the losers played for third place.

After the conclusion of the youth under-23 Basketball Trios competitions, Eng Khalfan bin Saleh al Naabi, President of the Oman Basketball Association, honours youth team 3 championship title and gold

medals, team 0 secured silver medals and team 2 received bronze medals.

While Dr Ali bin Salam al Yaaribi, Vice President of the Oman Basketball Association, crowned girl teams as follows, Zenith team won the championship cup and the gold medals, while Sun team secured the silver medals and Stars team received the bronze medals.

After the award ceremony, Eng Khalfan al Naabi, emphasised the importance of the championship to enhance players’ skills and promoting the game. The tournament witnessed high

technical levels and strong competition among the players, including those from national teams, as well as resident players in Oman.

Al Naabi reaffirmed the association commitment to continue organising basketball trios’ tournaments across all age groups to nurture talent and improve their levels, aiming to build strong teams capable of competing in future tournaments. Finally, he congratulated the winning teams of the Youth and Girls’ Basketball Trios Championship.

Oman takes part in general meet of ABF in Riyadh



Khalid al Suleimani (L), represented Oman Racket Sports Committee in General Meeting of ABF

SPORTS REPORTER
MUSCAT, FEB 4

Khalid al Suleimani, member of Oman Racket Sports Committee (ORSC), took part in the Annual General Meeting of Arab Badminton Federation (ABF) for 2024 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The meeting was chaired by Dr. Sawzan Taqwi, President of Arab Badminton Federation in presence of chairman and representatives of the national Arabian federations. As many as 17 countries attended in the meeting namely: Saudi Arabia,

Egypt, Oman, Syria, Comoros, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Djibouti, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya.

The meeting was organised as sideline of the Arabian Badminton Tournament which took place in Riyadh, during January 29 to February 2. During the AGM meeting, the members discussed various topics related to development of badminton in the region. Also, the general budget of the federation and the final closing report were reviewed and approved by the members. Later,

some of the Arabian countries submitted their request for hosting the forthcoming editions of the Arab Badminton Championship to the officials in Arab Federation for further study and approval.

Al Suleimani said: “I am pleased in representing ORSC in this crucial Arabian meeting to discuss the several ways on the development of Badminton. On behalf of ORSC, I would like to thank all the efforts made by Arabian Federation in organising several events, programmes and activities of Badminton sport in order to

take this sport into high level.”

“The future vision of ORSC is to focus in increasing number of courses and events that relate to human resources development in badminton sport through holding series of seminars and workshops that will ensure the improvement of the sport in Oman. ORSC in direct coordination with Arab Badminton Federation will organise series of coaching and umpiring seminars and courses in order to continue in developing the technical levels of the domestic umpires, coaches and athletes,” he said.

India defeats Pakistan in Davis Cup play-off

ISLAMABAD: India eased past Pakistan 4-0 in their World Group I play-off tie on Sunday, as they proved superior in both doubles and singles on Islamabad’s grass courts. A dominant India never looked back after winning both singles matches on Saturday, taking their overall record in the Davis Cup against Pakistan to 8-0.

The Indian pair of Saketh Myneni and Yuki Bhambri were too good for the Pakistani duo of Aqeel Khan and Muzammil Murtaza, winning 6-2, 7-6. Veteran Pakistani player Aisam-ul-Haq Qureshi could not take the court due to a hamstring injury sustained on Saturday, hurting Pakistan’s

chances in the doubles. Indian Niki Poonacha took his match against a youthful Muhammad Shoaib 6-3, 6-4, winning in 64 minutes. The twelve winning nations from the World Group I play-offs will play a World Group I tie in September while the same number of losing nations will contest a World Group II tie, also in September. Davis Cup results World Group I play-off India beat Pakistan 4-0 Doubles: Saketh Myneni and Yuki Bhambri (India) beat Aqeel Khan and Muzammil Murtaza (PAK) 6-2, 7-6 Niki Poonacha (India) beat Muhammad Shoaib (Pakistan) 6-3, 6-4 — AFP



India team celebrates after defeating Pakistan team.— AFP



Semi-finals primed to be sizzlers

**QATAR
VS
IRAN**



**KOREA
VS
JORDAN**

JORDAN WILL MEET KOREA REPUBLIC IN THE FIRST SEMI-FINAL ON TUESDAY WHILE IRAN WILL PLAY DEFENDING CHAMPIONS QATAR ON WEDNESDAY





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Oman’s economic diversification picking up pace: IMF



OPAZ-administered Special Economic Zones have been positioned as enablers of economic diversification.

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, FEB 4

Oman’s long-standing drive to diversify its predominantly hydrocarbon-dependent national economy has gained strong impetus in recent years on the back of a combination of landmark legislative actions, policy interventions, reinforced organisational mandates and enhanced investment regimes, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The UN global financial agency said in its newly published report, focusing on its 2023 Article IV Consultation with the Sultanate of Oman, that economic diversification efforts have “accelerated” in recent years.

“Realising the urgent need for Oman to diversify its sources of income as the energy transition unfolds, several policy actions have taken place since 2019 to expand non-hydrocarbon activities and develop hydrocarbon downstream activities,” the Fund stated.

The diversification strategy, it said, picked up pace in 2019 with the rollout of a number of groundbreaking laws to strengthen the overall regulatory framework, the report noted. Notable are the Commercial Companies Law (CCL), Privatisation Law, Public-Private Partnership Law, Foreign Capital Investment Law (FCIL), and Bankruptcy Law, that were issued in 2019, in addition to the Security Law in 2022, the Social Protection Law and Labour Law in 2023.

The Foreign Capital Investment Law (FCIL), in particular, authorises full ownership of non-citizen and single-shareholder companies across most sectors.

Complementing these legislative underpinnings are actions by regulatory bodies, notably the Capital Market Authority (CMA), requiring shareholders and board directors, for example, to enhance transparency and improve corporate governance.

Following in its footsteps, Oman Investment Authority introduced its Rawabet reform programme to improve performance, governance, and management in state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

The Fund highlighted in particular the role of the Oman Investment Authority (OIA) in fuelling economic diversification.

“OIA’s role in the diversification agenda is to attract FDI and joint ventures through regional and international partners, improve the performance and governance of SOEs to lift their contribution to growth and facilitate strategic investments, and support the development of SMEs and the venture capital ecosystem in Oman,” it stated.

Entrusted with the country’s national and international assets, OIA has since been structured into three sub-funds: the Future Generation Fund (FGF) - the international investment arm of the country; The National Development Fund (NDF), which manages domestic investment; and the newly established Oman Future Fund (OFF), focused on brownfield and greenfield projects, targeting SME participation.

Also playing a pivotal role is the Ministry of Finance, which is overseeing the implementation of the National Program for Fiscal Sustainability and Financial Sector Development (Estidamah).

Launched in January 2023, Estidamah aims to entrench fiscal sustainability, as well as develop financial technology, and the legal and judicial system of the financial sector.

Part of its remit is to develop human capital in the sector to improve its role in supporting funding opportunities for economic diversification, particularly for SMEs.

Equally important is the role assigned to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), according to the IMF.

TURN TO PAGE 15

3 projects worth RO 23.4 million launched in Salalah Free Zone

BUSINESS REPORTER
SALALAH, FEB 4

In a high-level inauguration ceremony, three new plants kicked off operations at Salalah Free Zone (SFZ), adding RO 23.4 million in investments to the zone’s portfolio of businesses.

The inauguration ceremony, held under the auspices of Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, was attended by Dr Ali bin Masoud al Sunaidi, Chairman of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) and a host of top government officials.

Salalah Free Zone – operated by Asyad Group – presented an overview of the three high-value ventures, the first being an RO 9.6 million food processing plant by the Special Integrated Food Company (SIFCO).

The second venture is phase one of Al Namariq Mining Company’s quicklime plant, an RO 10 million Omani-Iraqi joint investment.

The third is an RO 3.8 million fabric and plastics manufacturing and packaging plant by Apex Transgulf Manufacturing (APEX) that aims to serve local and regional markets targeting various industries including healthcare,



Dr Mahad bin Said Baowain, Minister of Labour, joined by dignitaries from OPAZ and Asyad Group, attend the launch on Sunday.

food and beverages.

Commenting on the latest investment in Salalah Free Zone, Dr Ali bin Mohammed Tabouk, CEO of Salalah Free Zone, stated: “these new additions hosted by our free zone reflect the critical role of SFZ in driving industrial progress and stimulating economic growth in Oman, and capitalising on logistical synergy with the Port of Salalah to enhance the value chain by linking it to the port’s direct shipping line network and

Asyad Group integrated logistics solutions.

We are proud of the strategic transnational partnerships that we unveiled today with market players from Yemen, Iraq and Pakistan which will bolster the manufacturing and value-added capabilities in the Sultanate of Oman.”

“All three plants are equipped with the latest production technology and hardware that allow them to optimise their

production capacities and product quality, while capitalising on the unique competitive advantages offered by SFZ,” Tabouk added.

“Such new ventures enable sustainable development in Oman by enhancing the country’s industrial infrastructure, increasing exports, and boosting trade. We look forward to supporting our partners’ growth and contribution to Oman’s economy,”

New campaign to spur development of Sultan Haitham City

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, FEB 4

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MoHUP) officially unveiled on Sunday, February 4, 2024, its “Determination to Implement” campaign for Sultan Haitham City, marking a significant step forward in the development of this ambitious project.

The campaign launch, attended by media representatives, included a comprehensive visual presentation showcasing the city’s master plan and construction progress, followed by a field visit to the site.

This strategic initiative aims to highlight the achievements made thus far and foster close collaboration between stakeholders to ensure the project’s timely completion.

Located in Muscat Governorate, Sultan Haitham City is envisioned as a modern and sustainable urban centre catering to diverse community needs



The campaign launch included a comprehensive visual presentation showcasing the city’s master plan and construction progress.

and contributing to economic diversification.

“Determination to Implement” campaign underscores the government’s commitment to realising Sultan Haitham City’s potential. This project is poised to be a cornerstone of Oman’s urban development, attracting investment, creating jobs, and fostering a vibrant new community for its residents.

Adhering to global standards, the city’s infrastructure is designed

for flexibility and adaptability to accommodate future population growth, efficient operation of facilities, and ease of access.

Preliminary works underway Sultan Haitham City is being developed on an area of more than 14 million m2, with sustainable urban planning based on exploiting green spaces that take up an area of approximately 3 million square meters, to accommodate 100,000 people, with an average of diverse 20,000

housing units and full-service facilities.

The first phase development of Sultan Haitham City commenced recently with local contractor Strabag Oman LCC having been signed up to prepare the road infrastructure, the valley (wadi) stream, and the area surrounding the central park. Several other contracts have also been signed in recent weeks and months.

They include a partnership and cooperation agreement to implement the works related to the water supply project in the city.

Earlier in June 2023, a total of 21 development and partnership agreements were signed for the first phase with a number of government institutions and the private sector, including areas of partnership, government cooperation, real estate development, finance, services and infrastructure. The value of these agreements exceed RO 1 billion.

TURN TO P15

Bank Muscat inaugurates mega branch in Suhar

MUSCAT: In line with the bank's vision "To serve you better, everyday" and commitment to providing the best services and facilities to all segments of customers, Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the Sultanate of Oman, celebrated the inauguration of Suhar mega branch in Al Batinah North Governorate.

The new branch is inclusive of exceptional features and a full suite of banking services and facilities catered to meet the needs of Bank Muscat's individual and corporate customers.

The new branch was inaugurated under the auspices of Mohammed bin Sulaiman al Kindi, Governor of Al Batinah North, and in the presence of Shaikh Waleed bin Khamis al Hashar, the CEO of Bank Muscat, and a number of executives and officials from the public and private sectors.

During the inauguration ceremony, all attendees were taken through an introductory tour during which, they were introduced to the range of banking service and facilities provided to customers at the branch.



The new branch was inaugurated under the auspices of Mohammed bin Sulaiman al Kindi, Governor of Al Batinah North, and in the presence of Shaikh Waleed bin Khamis al Hashar, the CEO of Bank Muscat.

They were also introduced to the sections and modern features of the new branch which reflect the bank's dedication to keeping pace with the current and future

developments in the Sultanate of Oman's banking sector.

The Suhar mega branch represents a typical example underscoring the bank's

commitment to implementing strategic plans set to enhance financial inclusion and extend the bank's network of branches, aiming to fortify customers'

banking experience and contribute to the prosperity of the economic landscape in the country.

Considering that the bank's branches represent the main point

of contact with customers from across the Sultanate of Oman, Bank Muscat ensured that the new branch is equipped with qualified and experienced staff serving customers.

The new branch is built in a distinctive and spacious area alongside the main street in Suhar, and it features modern designs, safety standards, and infrastructure aiming to better serve its customers from individuals (enabled for disabled customers as well) and corporates.

The mega branch provides a comprehensive suite of services and products provided through desks customised to serve customers applying for home financing "Baituna" and "Sayyarati" financing, and other desks for "Najahi" Business Banking, "Asalah" Priority Banking, and Private Banking & Wealth Management customers.

Speaking on the inauguration of the new branch, Abdulnasir al Raisi, General Manager, Personal Banking, Bank Muscat, said: "Sohar mega branch is a typical and unprecedented example of the strategic steps taken by the bank to enhance its branch network across the country."

TAC successfully holds Mazda service drive 2024

MUSCAT: The Mazda Service Drive 2024, was recently held at the Towell Auto Center LLC Service Centres at Al Hail and Ghala, Muscat. This initiative exemplifies the successful combination of Towell Auto Centre's regional proficiency with Mazda's established global quality benchmarks.

The Mazda Service Drive 2024 has become a landmark event in Oman's automotive service industry, showcasing not only Mazda's dedication to vehicle care and customer satisfaction but also highlighting TAC's pivotal role in bringing these world-class services to the Sultanate of Oman.

Riyadh Ali Sultan, General Manager of Towell Auto Centre, stated, "We are proud to host the Mazda Service Drive 2024, an event that not only showcases our dedication to service quality but also our enduring partnership with Mazda."

At Towell Auto Centre, we strive to provide an unmatched experience for our customers, ensuring that every Mazda vehicle, be it new or old, receives



The event was held at TAC service centres at Al Hail and Ghala.

the highest level of care and attention."

Following Riyadh Ali Sultan's insights, the event featured Osada and Sakuma, distinguished engineers from Mazda's Hiroshima, Japan headquarters.

Their expertise was a major highlight, bringing an unparalleled level of proficiency to the service drive. Osada commented, "Our goal is to ensure that every Mazda, from the compact Mazda 2 to the

spacious Mazda CX-90, receives the utmost care.

We believe in a service that goes beyond technical excellence; it's about creating a lasting relationship with each customer."

Likewise, Sakuma added, "It's not just about servicing vehicles; it's about educating owners."

We aim to empower Mazda users with knowledge about their cars, fostering a deeper understanding and connection with their vehicles."

The response from the Mazda community in Oman was overwhelmingly positive. The event also offered exclusive benefits to car owners, like complimentary engine oil coupons and free car washes, further enhancing the customer experience and demonstrating Mazda's appreciation for its customers.

A key feature of the Mazda Service Drive 2024 was its emphasis on customer education.

NBO Muzn unveils corporate term Wakala finance

MUSCAT: In a strategic move to empower businesses, the National Bank of Oman's (NBO) Muzn Islamic Bank introduces Corporate Term Wakala Finance, a cutting-edge financial solution tailored to meet the diverse needs of the corporate sector.

As businesses navigate the complexities of today's economic landscape, the demand for flexible and reliable financial tools has never been more critical. The Corporate Term Wakala Finance emerges as a beacon, offering a comprehensive solution to address a spectrum of corporate financial requirements.

Corporate Term Wakala Finance operates on the Wakala model, combining transparency and compliance with Sharia principles. The process involves the appointment of the bank customer as an agent to manage the bank's investment in customer's operating business on behalf of the bank. This innovative structure provides businesses with the financial agility needed to navigate cash flow challenges, invest in strategic projects and optimise working capital.

Specifically designed as a short-term working capital solution for the corporate sector, the product fulfils the need for cash requirements, purchase of raw materials, bill discounting, invoice discounting, contractor financing, and more.

Salima al Marzooqi, Chief Islamic Banking Officer at NBO, said, "In today's dynamic business environment, Corporate Term



Salima al Marzooqi, Chief Islamic Banking Officer at NBO.

Wakala Finance transcends conventional financing; it stands as a strategic financial tool meticulously crafted for the evolving needs of businesses.

Whether manoeuvring through short-term working capital challenges or spearheading strategic investments, Corporate Term Wakala Finance is purposefully designed to elevate financial flexibility, offering robust support for the growth ambitions of our valued corporate clients. We are not merely providing a financial product; we are fostering a partnership that empowers businesses to thrive in a rapidly changing market."

Tailored for both existing and new-to-bank customers, government entities, corporate entities and SMEs, Corporate Term Wakala Finance stands as a testament to NBO's commitment to delivering forward-thinking and Sharia-compliant financial solutions.

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Experience distinctive luxury with the Lincoln range

MUSCAT: Lincoln Oman has recently unveiled a campaign where Lincoln luxury enthusiasts can own their favourite Lincoln vehicle and get exclusive benefits. The benefits include service 5 years / 100,000 kms and 1 year registration. (Conditions apply. For details visit a Lincoln showroom Al Wattayah.)

Lincoln has an impressive array of vehicles in the range, including the Aviator, Corsair, Nautilus and Navigator.

The Aviator is one of Lincoln's popular models that is engineered to offer heightened experiences. The Aviator is equipped with a standard twin-turbocharged

3.0-litre V6 engine that is paired with a 10-speed SelectShift automatic transmission. This helps the Aviator dish out an impressive 400 horsepower and 563 Nm of torque for effortless acceleration.

The Lincoln Corsair exudes class with its distinct design and luxurious interior details.

The two-row Lincoln Corsair SUV combines refined power and a wealth of purposeful technologies. Staying true to its Quiet Flight DNA, Corsair is engineered to deliver an effortless drive experience and sensation of gliding over the road.

Delivering a luxurious driver environment with SUV flexibility,



the Nautilus offers a stunning exterior design with a new Lincoln signature grille, new tail lamps, and applique light bar, spoiler and upper rear fascia.

Complementing the new design features and affording the

Nautilus a more luxurious stance, is an all new wheel lineup featuring the standard 18" premium painted aluminium, 20" bright machined aluminium with premium painted pockets available for the Reserve trim.

The Lincoln Nautilus is equipped with a turbocharged engine line-up. A 2.7-litre twin-turbo V6 engine boasts an AWD drivetrain with adaptive suspension and all-wheel drive disconnect. It delivers 335 hp and 515 Nm of torque and includes standard Auto Start-stop capability, plus a new eight-speed automatic transmission with SelectShift capability.

The Navigator combines modern luxury with advanced technology. Navigator's lighter, high-strength aluminium-alloy body helps create a more refined ride.

The Navigator is equipped with

a clean and uncluttered interior layout, with a simple, soothing ambience. At night, interior ambient lights sequentially illuminate each of the SUV's three rows.

Customers wishing to own their dream Lincoln with exclusive benefits are encouraged to visit their nearest Lincoln showroom.

In Oman, Lincoln vehicles are brought to you by Arabian Car Marketing Co LLC. Please log on to www.lincolnoman.com, or www.facebook.com/lincolnoman or www.instagram.com/lincoln_oman for the latest news, test drive requests and the latest press releases.



Oman's economic diversification picking up pace: IMF

FROM PAGE 13

Following its restructuring in 2020, the Ministry currently incorporates investment promotion into its mandate.

"The restructuring aims to enable MoCIIP to support business formation and private sector development, in addition to attracting foreign investment to Oman's targeted sectors.

MoCIIP is the implementing government entity of the National Programme for Investment and Export Development (Nazdaher) and has recently launched Invest Oman and the Investment Services Centre to help streamline procedures and promote investment opportunities," the report explained.

Likewise, the Fund acknowledges the role of the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones (OPAZ) which, through recent policy initiatives, has repositioned SEZs as key enablers of economic diversification and development.

Rounding off the list is the role of Hydrom, which is mandated to facilitate green hydrogen investment in Oman by outlining and allocating government-owned lands, in addition to structuring large scale projects and overseeing their execution.

PDO sets new records in sustainable operations and value creation in 2023

JOMAR MENDOZA

MUSCAT, FEB 4

Oman's largest producer of oil and gas, Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), has achieved a remarkable year in 2023, showcasing exceptional accomplishment in its pursuit of building a sustainable low-carbon future to maximise value for Oman.

With a strong focus on safety, operational performance, and value creation, PDO has set new records and surpassed targets across various key metrics.

In terms of safety, PDO achieved a significant milestone by recording zero-fatalities in work-related incidents, making it the safest year since 2011. This accomplishment reflects PDO's unwavering commitment to ensuring the well-being and protection of its workforce.

Furthermore, the company achieved a noteworthy 50% reduction in lost time incidents compared to 2022, demonstrating its continuous efforts to enhance workplace safety.

PDO also recorded an impressive 66% reduction in process safety incidents compared to the previous year, marking the best performance in its history.

On the operational front, PDO generated remarkable liquid revenue in 2023, surpassing expectations with a staggering \$22.6 billion, a 65% increase from



PDO recruited 648 Omanis, including mature professionals, graduates, and talents from the Top Omanisation Programme (TOP), representing a notable 35% increase compared to the previous year.

the planned revenue of \$13.7 billion.

This substantial growth can be attributed to the company's efficient production and exploration activities, as well as favourable market conditions.

Despite global challenges, PDO managed to achieve a slight increase of 0.5% in hydrocarbon production, reaching 1.084 million barrels of oil equivalent per day (boe/day), against a planned target of 1.79 million boe/day.

Additionally, PDO successfully contained its expenditure in 2023, with actual spending of \$7,117

million, down by 0.6% compared to the planned expenditure of \$7,163 million.

PDO's commitment to environmental sustainability is evident in its efforts to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. In 2023, the company achieved a reduction of 1% in GHG emissions, with actual emissions amounting to 10.4 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent against a planned target of 10.5 million tonnes.

These efforts align with PDO's objective of mitigating its environmental impact and playing

a proactive role in combatting climate change.

Value creation remained a key focus for PDO in 2023, as evidenced by the discovery of 19 new oil and gas reserves, surpassing the previous year's performance by 10 additional discoveries.

The company also drilled 884 new oil and gas wells, marking a significant 24% increase compared to 2022. PDO also made notable contributions to Oman's economy by allocating \$0.9 billion to Small and Medium Enterprises

(SMEs) and Local Community Contractors (LCCs). This expenditure accounted for 18% of the total supply chain spend, demonstrating PDO's dedication to supporting local businesses and fostering economic development.

Another significant achievement was PDO's commitment to Omanisation, with a 1% increase in the employment of Omani nationals compared to 2022, reaching an impressive 91% Omanisation rate.

The company recruited 648 Omanis, including mature professionals, graduates, and talents from the Top Omanisation Programme (TOP), representing a notable 35% increase compared to the previous year.

Finally, PDO achieved a commendable 40% in-country retained value, amounting to a total value of \$1.8 billion. This represents a 2% increase compared to 2022 and highlights PDO's commitment to maximising local content and driving economic growth within Oman.

PDO's achievements in 2023 speak volumes about its commitment to safety, operational excellence, and value creation. With remarkable records in safety performance, revenue generation, hydrocarbon production, and value-added contributions to the economy, PDO has demonstrated its role as a leading player in the sustainable development of Oman's oil and gas sector.

Vehicle registrations in Oman rise by 4 per cent to 1.6 million

MUSCAT: The number of registered vehicles in the Sultanate of Oman increased by 4 per cent at the end of December 2023 to reach 1,667,393 vehicles compared to 1,660,803 vehicles at the end of December 2022.

The private licence accounted for 79.6 per cent, with 326,587 vehicles, while 54 per cent of the vehicles had an engine capacity between 1,500 and 3,000 cubic centimetres, with a number of 902,244 vehicles, according to statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information.

Statistics showed that the majority of vehicles were in white in colour, with 712,730 vehicles or 42.7 per cent. The highest percentage of increase in vehicles in terms of colours was in purple with 21.6 per cent, then gray with 10.9 per cent.

Vehicles with a commercial licence accounted for 14.7 per cent, with 244,486 vehicles, while the number of rental vehicles reached



The private licence accounted for 79.6 per cent with 1,326,587 vehicles.

33,861 vehicles, or 2 per cent. The number of taxi vehicles reached 27,881 or 1.7 per cent. In terms of vehicle weights, the number of vehicles weighing less than 3 tonnes reached 1,510,013 vehicles, representing 90.6 per cent of the total vehicles registered in the Sultanate of Oman. — ONA

New campaign to spur development of Sultan Haitham City

FROM PAGE 13

CIVIC LANDMARKS

The first phase (2024-2030) will start in the city on an area of about 6 million square metres, to accommodate more than 39,000 people in more than 7 thousand housing units on building area of more than 3 million square metres.

This phase takes account of the construction of many basic facilities and centres including:

- The Central Park and the wadi on an area of more than 1 million square metres,
- National Centre for Women and Children's Health,
- Reference hospital on an area exceeding 666,000 m² which accommodates 1,200 beds,
- College of Advanced Technology which seats 1,500 students and covers an area of more than 14,000 square metres,
- Youth Centre on an area of 20,000 square metres,
- Rehabilitation Centre on

an area of more than 10,000 square metres,

- Cultural Centre on an area of more than 4,000 square metres,
- School Complexes that seats 6,900 students on an area of more than 135 square metres,
- Four Health Centres on an area of more than 63,000 square metres,

- Mosque on an area of more than 65,000 square metres, in addition to
- Oman Medical Specialty Board, the Higher Institute of Health Specialties, and Oman College of Health Sciences.

The Ministry is working with its partners to sign a number of agreements in this aspect during the coming period, in preparation for the implementation of construction works for main roads, infrastructure, service buildings, the central park and residential neighbourhoods, including water, sanitation, electricity, broadband, roads and green spaces services, according to the city's executive

plan.

Four residential neighbourhoods (6, 9, 10 and 8) are being implemented in the first phase with real estate developers, along with parts of other two neighbourhoods (12 & 13).

AFFORDABLE

NEIGHBOURHOODS

Importantly, the Ministry sought to make the housing units of the city's neighbourhoods affordable to everyone by signing partnership and development agreements for the first phase of the city with 8 banks that offer a 3.5 per cent discounted rate financing programmes.

The financing ceiling with the Oman Housing Bank was raised to RO 80,000, and 5 per cent of the units were allocated to the residential housing assistance programme for those eligible for government residential land grants at a government-subsidised price. Non-Omanis and investors can also own property in the city according to the terms and conditions.

Omran launches new initiative to empower Omani youth

MUSCAT: Oman Tourism Development Company (Omran Group), in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour, and its subsidiaries, Visit Oman and Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC), proudly announced the launch of Masarat 2.0.

This ground-breaking initiative, falling under the umbrella of the #IAmTourism strategy, marking a significant stride towards Oman's Vision 2040 for youth empowerment.

Masarat 2.0, an expansion of the successful inaugural Masarat programme launched last year. Marking a significant

step forward, the programme boasts an expanded network of participating entities, solidifying the group's unwavering commitment to fostering young talent and equipping them with the skills they need to thrive in the tourism industry.

Said al Manji, head of initiatives and projects section at Ministry of Labour emphasised, "The Masarat 2.0 programme is a prime example of effective public-private partnerships. It aligns seamlessly with the Ministry's goals to create sustainable employment opportunities for Omani youth, thereby contributing to our nation's long-term economic



Masarat 2.0 is not just an employment initiative, but a commitment to the professional growth and development of Omani youth.

prosperity."

Wiam al Marhoubi, Human Capital Generalist at Omran Group, commented, "Through Masarat 2.0, we are not just offering

jobs; we are crafting careers. We are equipping our talented youth with the necessary skills to excel and lead in the tourism sector, as well as broadening its horizons.

Eng Said al Shanfari, CEO of OCEC, remarked, "Integrating fresh perspectives and innovative ideas from the youth is vital for our growth. Masarat 2.0 provides us with an opportunity to bring in fresh talent who will drive the future of the MICE industry in Oman."

Shabib al Maamari, Managing Director of Visit Oman, added, "Our participation in Masarat 2.0 reflects our commitment to the future of tourism in Oman. By fostering fresh talent, we ensure the continued growth and prosperity of the tourism sector with a new generation of skilled professionals."

The programme offers a comprehensive onboarding experience, providing graduates with essential training and hands-on experience in their respective fields. Masarat 2.0 is not just an employment initiative, but a commitment to the professional growth and development of Omani youth, aligning with the nation's strategic vision.

Omran Group, in conjunction with the Ministry of Labour, Visit Oman, and OCEC, stands united in the mission to harness the potential of Omani graduates, significantly contributing to the socio-economic development of the country.

Simple yet effective performance management guide for managers

You, being a supervisor, team leader or a manager that is responsible to oversee a group of people as employees, receive an invite from the HR (Human Resource) Department requesting you to attend a committee specifically created for a compliant logged against you. Complaint for the performance evaluation and rating you shared to an employee (unfairly that is). What went wrong, how shall you avoid and what can you do in future to ensure you are protected and is on the safe side of the fence?

My article this week is on a simple yet effective performance management guide that every manager should follow in order to create a productive system to manage employee performance. First and foremost, as a manager, why should you create a performance system for your respective reporting employees? Well without one, you have no



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

framework (or structure) in place to evaluate the performance and assess the achievements of your employees. Secondly, you create a gap or a room of uncertainty between yourself and the employee(s) i.e. what needs to be done and how will performance be measured. Thirdly, you do not have a formal document (as a system) in place to protect yourself as a manager, or present the same before a committee to defend yourself against the complaint I mentioned at the beginning of my article. Such a document will help you and the organisation you represent adhere to legal and regulatory requirements that is related to the employment practices and the necessary evaluation required as a whole. Now that you realise the importance of having one in place — how do you go about creating and adhering to one as a manager? First, clearly, and in advance,

MANY MANAGERS ENTER INTO UNNECESSARY CONFLICTS AND RESENTMENT WITH THEIR EMPLOYEE(S) DUE TO NOT HAVING CLEAR GUIDELINES SET AT THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR

define your team's, section's, department's or organisational goals and expectations clearly. Make sure that all your direct reporting employees and their subordinates understand what is expected of them. Spend quality time preparing and doing this activity as this will set the tone for everything else that follows. An agreed set of tasks needs to be documented as an outcome of this first step. Secondly, ensure you set a fixed (weekly, bi-weekly, monthly) meeting intervals where you meet to discuss and review what has been agreed from the first step. Open feedback along with allowing two-way communication (for agreement, disagreement and/or enhancements in an open dialogue as encouragement) needs to take place. The periodic meeting should serve as an on-going feedback throughout the year to keep employees in question informed about their performance, areas of improvement and developments if any. Keep documenting and maintaining every record of the meeting for the necessary follow-ups. This step helps ensure no surprises occur at the end of the year, so as it helps the manager in question keep record of his/her responsibility towards an employee and the organisation as a whole. Lastly, as a manager, ensure you provide the necessary resources (be it training, work environment, and tools) that your respective employee(s) need to ensure they can accomplish the task and goals agreed. Be accessible, be approachable and be available to offer timely support to your teams. The last thing you want is to be seen as an unsupportive manager. Many managers enter into unnecessary conflicts and resentment with their employee(s) due to not having clear guidelines set at the beginning of the year. Reasons employees raise complaints on their managers include clear communication, unfair treatment, lack of recognition, favouritism, and inadequate feedback. Such issues can be easily, positively and indeed legally overcome by the manager being proactive in following the steps outlined in my article today. Not only will you be safeguarded by the organisation but you will also create an effective and healthy work environment for your employees to succeed. As I had noted in my previous articles, happy employees, create happy customers as well.

US LNG export pause leaves EU industry at odds over energy security

Europe will have enough gas supply for the next 10 years and thereafter despite a move by the US administration to pause approvals on new liquefied natural gas (LNG) plants, EU energy officials and analysts said, dismissing industry's warnings. Gas companies — and lobby groups who learned of the move ahead of the decision and unsuccessfully opposed it according to documents seen by Reuters — warned it would compromise global energy security and efforts to reduce carbon dioxide emissions. The US has become the biggest exporter of LNG to Europe, as EU countries have raced to replace Russian fuel following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Over 60 per cent of US LNG exports went to Europe in the last two years. US President Joe Biden last week paused approvals for applications to export from new LNG projects to review the climate change and economic impact of such projects. A European Commission spokesperson said the US decision "will not have any short-to-medium term impacts" on the EU's security of gas supply. Europe has survived two winters without Russian pipeline gas, helped by lower heating demand due to mild weather and as high energy prices forced some industries to shut. Even with new projects paused, the US is set to expand its LNG capacity. "There's a number of US projects that are already under construction or that already have approval," said Jacob Mandel, Senior Associate at Aurora Energy Research. US LNG capacity will almost double to about 24.5 billion cubic feet per day (bcfd) by the



MARWA RASHAD
The author is a Reuters' senior energy correspondent



KATE ABNETT
The author is a Reuter's European climate change and energy correspondent



A child plays at Surfside Beach as France-flagged vessel *LNG Adventure* departs from Freeport, Texas, bound for the Panama Canal, in Freeport, Texas. — Reuters

end of 2028 if all of the approved projects are built. Longer term, the European Union's gas consumption is expected to fall as the bloc shifts away from fossil fuels to meet climate change goals, so the region may not need the additional US LNG — although strong demand growth elsewhere in the world means that LNG is likely to find a market. "The EU will become a declining gas consuming region, the signals are downward," said Anne-Sophie Corbeau, a researcher at Columbia University's Center on Global Energy Policy. "Between growing biomethane, Norwegian gas, some African gas, Azeri gas and declining production, we might just see eventually a progressive decline of our LNG demand, especially post 2030, and this is precisely for that period that the Biden decision would matter," she said. A 'WORRYING' SIGNAL Germany's gas importers SEFE and Uniper, Japan's top LNG buyer JERA and lobby groups have warned that the US decision might compromise energy security worldwide. SEFE and JERA plan to buy gas from Venture Global LNG's Calcasieu Pass 2 plant, one of the

projects affected by the pause. Please click here for a factbox on projects and gas deals that could be affected by the US decision. "The planned review could have negative consequences for Germany's and Europe's energy security in the future, for example in the form of price increases due to volume shortages on the market," said Germany's largest gas trader, Uniper. US energy firms in regions like the Permian might have to burn excess natural gas when producing oil if they have no outlet to sell it, thus adding to global warming, said a senior source at a major US energy company. "The decision ... could affect the trajectory and pace of the sector's growth and have potential to tighten the market in the long run," said Giles Farrer, head of gas and LNG asset research at Wood Mackenzie. The International Gas Union, which has over 150 members, said the US decision "is highly worrying...(and) will harm global energy security and emission reduction". US industry group LNG Allies urged Washington to allow the market to decide which new LNG projects should be built. "Most energy outlooks expect global growth in LNG demand to continue well into the 2030s. If US supply doesn't rise to meet that demand, will countries needing natural gas turn back to Russia? Or to coal?" a memorandum from LNG Allies said. — Reuters



Australia to set fuel standards post-debates

SYDNEY: Australia unveiled plans on Sunday to set mandatory fuel efficiency standards, matching long-existing rules in other advanced economies in a bid to get high-polluting gas guzzlers off the road.

Climate Change Minister Chris Bowen said a "New Vehicle Efficiency Standard" would be introduced by 2025, ending decades of foot-dragging and debate about the policy.

"The United States has had a similar policy in place for fifty years," Bowen said. "Australia still stands alongside Russia as one of the only advanced economies without the Standard."

"This is costing families and businesses thousands of dollars at the petrol pump," he said.

Australia currently has no mandatory fuel efficiency standards for new vehicles.

In a 2022 study, the Australia Institute think tank suggested that the lack of an efficiency standard was costing the country billions of dollars on fuel, and meant vehicles were 30 per cent more polluting than vehicles in the United States.

Advocates have blamed climate-sceptic governments, as well as lobbying from oil refiners and car dealerships for repeatedly scuppering reforms.

"By giving Australians better



Electric cars at charging ports are seen in Sydney. – Reuters

choice of cleaner, cheaper-to-run cars, a strong fuel efficiency standard will cut household costs and clean up our air," said Amanda McKenzie, chief executive of the Australian environmental lobby group the Climate Council.

They hope the new fuel standard will make petrol vehicles more efficient but also catalyse slow sales of electric vehicles.

According to International Energy Agency data, 33,000 electric vehicles were sold in Australia in 2022.

That compares to 73,000 in the Netherlands, which has about eight million fewer people.

— AFP

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I, **MOHAMMED MUSTAFA** holder of Indian passport No. M6996100 S/o SRI AKETI SURYA RAO having permanent residence in Flat No 602, 6th Floor, Supreme Limra, S. No. 15/16, Inam Nagar, Near Bilal Masjid, Kondhwa Budruk, Pune - 411048, Maharashtra, India and presently residing in Building No. N311, Flat No. 23, 2nd Floor, Opposite Madrasa Al Habsi, Near Baldiya Roundabout, Seeb Sharradi, Muscat, Sultanate of Oman intend to change my name from **MOHAMMED MUSTAFA** to **MOHAMMED MUSTAFA SURYA RAO AKETI** for all practical purposes.

Any objection towards my name change may please be communicated to Embassy of India, Muscat, Diplomat Quarters, Al Khuwair, P. Box 1727, PC 112, Ruwi, Sultanate of Oman.

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TRAVEL

A participant wearing a carnival costume parades across St. Mark Square during Venice's carnival, with the Basilica in the background in Venice. — AFP



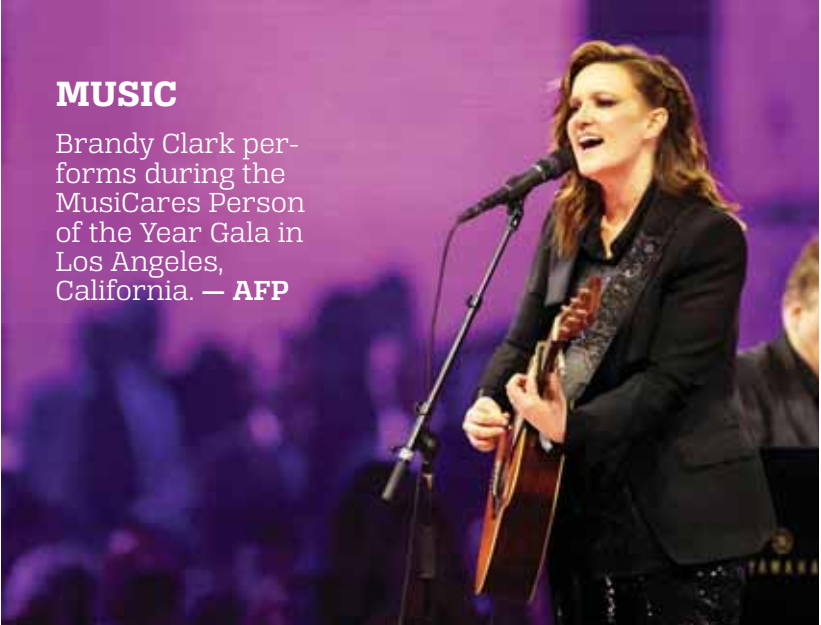
ENTERTAINMENT

Afan Shaher, 27 years old, one of the founders of "Dory", the first Mawlawiyah Women Troupe reacts during her performance concert at Bayt Al Sinnari in Cairo, Egypt. — AFP



CULTURE

A reveller takes part in the "Ceu a Terra" street carnival "bloco" group parade at the Santa Teresa neighbourhood in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. — AFP



MUSIC

Brandy Clark performs during the MusiCares Person of the Year Gala in Los Angeles, California. — AFP



ART

A worker adjusts Austrian painter Gustav Klimt's "Portrait of Fraulein Lieser", lost for almost 100 years, in Kinsky auction house in Vienna, Austria. — AFP

art & life

MONDAY | FEBRUARY 5, 2024 | RAJAB 24, 1445 AH | OMAN OBSERVER | www.omanobserver.om | features@omanobserver.om



The magic of oud unleashed at ROHM

Trio Joubran, Palestinian oud virtuosos, delivered an electrifying Arab Jazz Rock performance at the Royal Opera House Muscat. The concert showcased mesmerising solos, including a mournful dirge and a rhapsodic duet, blending diverse influences... **P20**



Dr Zainab Al Ajmi

The Progression of Teacher Training in Finland

cess of Finland's education system is attributed to several factors, with the most crucial being the quality of teacher preparation and training. Finland's educational success has evolved over several decades through a series of reforms in response to changing economic needs.

One significant reform involved enhancing the quality of teaching by transitioning teacher training from teacher colleges (known as seminaries) to universities in the 1970s, making it more rigorous. Today, Finland's high level of education and competence is largely rooted in top-tier teacher training.

Admission to teacher education programmes is challenging, particularly for primary teacher education, with a mere 11 per cent acceptance rate in 2016. For kindergarten teacher education and vocational teacher education, the admission rates were 16% and 41 %, respectively. Admission depends not only on academic achievements but also on applicants' interest and passion to become a teacher. In Finland, kindergarten teachers are required to hold a bachelor's degree. Teachers in basic edu-

cation (i.e., primary and lower secondary education) and general upper secondary education must have both a bachelor's and master's degree, requiring approximately five years to complete the studies and become a qualified teacher. Finland boasts nine universities offering teacher education, and applicants are evaluated based on their upper secondary school record, extra-curricular activities, and performance in the matriculation examination taken at the end of upper secondary school. Additionally, applicants must take the entrance examination known as (VAKAVA10), a multiple-choice assessment used to evaluate academic study skills needed in educational science. Successful candidates undergo an interview and aptitude test, ensuring a clear aptitude for teaching and strong academic performance. At the primary level (grades 1-6), students are taught by class teachers who major in educational science provided by faculties of education, along with the choice of two or three other subjects (e.g., mathematics, history, music, etc.). Subject teachers, responsible for lower secondary level (grades 7-9) and general

upper secondary level (grades 10-12), must complete a five-year education in the specialised subject they intend to teach. To maintain the strength and international acclaim of teacher education, the Ministry of Education and Culture established a teacher Forum in 2016 to support the reform of pre-service and in-service training of teachers. The Ministry also published a list of six strategic guidelines for the development of teacher education and training, emphasising the new objective that "teachers should be future-oriented and able to create new pedagogical innovations (Legislative Council Library (n.d.). Fact Sheet: Teacher training in Finland. Retrieved from: <https://www.legco.gov.hk/en/index.html>, issue no FSC19/18-19).

In conclusion, despite Finland's acclaimed education system and comprehensive teacher training, societal development and the challenges ahead have generated challenges within the educational sector. However, with a well-trained educational staff, one might assume that Finland will remain at the forefront of developed countries in education.

Dr Zainab al Ajmi is very passionate about the growth of the education system in Oman and wants the country to produce globally competitive workforce. Her column tackles movements and developments within the education sector.

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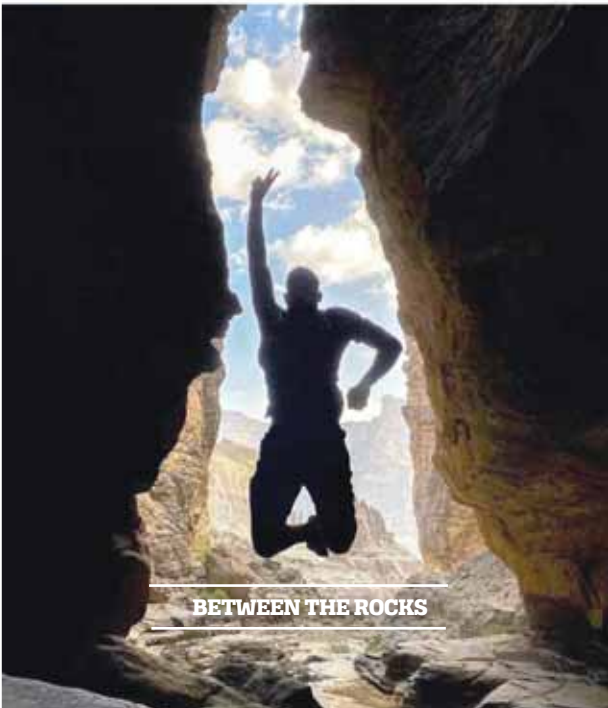


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Iran's long-lasting love for gemstones

AT A PROMINENT SHRINE in southern Tehran, Qasem Ashgari was buying yet another gemstone ring in the hope it would help his prayers to be answered promptly.

Asghari, in his 30s, who was

scholars and senior officials are often seen publicly sporting similar rings.

Many in the country attribute high religious significance to gemstones, which they view as a way to ensure divine protection,

collection of rings bearing agate, turquoise, topaz, lapis lazuli, emeralds and other stones.

"I get a good feeling from these stones," said the 50-year-old teacher after picking a turquoise set comprising a ring, earrings, and a bracelet.

Samimi says his sales were mostly from agate and turquoise, the most revered stones, especially among Iran's religious community.

Turquoise has been mined in the country since the times of ancient Persia, with Iran home to one of the oldest such mines in the world.

Its bluish-green colour has inspired artists over the years and features prominently in Persian monuments and artefacts as well as Islamic architecture.

The turquoise from the eastern city of Neyshabur "is the most expensive", said Samimi. "The smoother and bluer the turquoise is, the higher its price is."

said Samimi.

Agate, especially from Yemen, is also popular "because it is recommended by imams" who often claim it can boost livelihoods, said Rashidi.

'CULTURAL HERITAGE'

Iran's senior officials including Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have often been spotted wearing rings with agate or turquoise stones and the supreme leader has been known to gift them as tokens of his appreciation.

Samimi says demand for gemstones has remained relatively steady despite Iran's severe economic challenges.

Inflation in the country has in recent years hovered near 50 per cent while the rial has sharply declined against the dollar.

"The stones market has become much better" over the years, he said, adding that there



already wearing several bands on each hand, had a specific ring in mind: a silver one, adorned with yellow agate and engraved with religious scripts.

"The reward of one prayer is multiplied... if done with an agate ring," he said while strolling through the meandering alleys of the market near the shrine of Shah Abdolazim.

Asghari's appreciation for gemstones is shared by many in Iran, where prominent male

ward off evil, and prevent poverty. Common beliefs associated with gemstones are largely what motivates people to buy them, said Hassan Samimi, a lapidary at the market.

"It is very rare to find someone who wears a ring just for its beauty," said Samimi, 52, in his workshop where he carves large uncut gemstones for rings, necklaces, prayer beads and other items.

Inside, one customer, Maryam, browsed through a



ATTRACTS WEALTH

Hamid Rashidi, another craftsman, says the stone is generally affordable but depending on the quality a piece could sell for as much as four billion rials (\$6,000-7,000).

Many Iranians believe it attracts wealth to the bearer and sometimes cite the religious saying "the hand that wears turquoise... will never see poverty".

It is also believed "to enhance eyesight and calm the nerves",

had been a significant increase in the number of craftsmen in the market compared with nearly three decades ago.

Its continued success, however, may hang on evolving tastes. Samimi admitted that agate and turquoise are not popular among younger generations.

"Young people mostly buy rubies and emeralds and birthstones," he said.

"For them, they are more fashionable." — AFP

MUSIC



Music from Africa rising on global charts, with help from TikTok

WHEN THE BIGGEST names in music gather on Sunday for the industry's top honours at the Grammy Awards, they will hand out a new trophy for best African music performance.

The prize reflects the growing popularity of Afrobeats, and other music from the continent, which is gaining a global audience with help from social media platforms such as short-form video app TikTok.

Afrobeats originated in West Africa, primarily Ghana and Nigeria, though the term is often used as a catch-all for various music styles coming from Africa. It features percussion rhythms mixed with various genres from rap to jazz, R&B and others.

Modern Afrobeats "has a feel-good groove to it," said Heran Mamo, R&B and hip-hop reporter at *Billboard* magazine, which created a US Afrobeats chart in 2022. "It's bound to reach a wider audience because it already contains a little bit of everything for everyone."

On Spotify, Afrobeats music was streamed 13.5 billion times in 2022, up from 2 billion in 2017.

In another milestone, Nigerian singer Burna Boy became the first African artist to sell out a US stadium when he played New York's Citi Field last summer.

Musicians in the running for the new Grammy on Sunday include Tyla, a 22-year-old South African singer. She hit the top 10 on *Billboard*'s Hot 100 chart with the danceable "Water," an example of a genre known as amapiano, a jazz- and piano-infused sound.

A TikTok executive in South Africa had noticed Tyla gaining attention in her local market back in 2020, and reached out to her with tips on how to maximise her presence on the app.

"Water" was released in July 2023, after Tyla signed with Sony Music Entertainment's Epic Records.

By September, TikTok users were replicating Tyla's dance moves in the #WaterChallenge. To date, 1.5 million videos have been created using the song, and the #WaterChallenge hashtag has been viewed 1.8 billion times, according to TikTok.

"I think that TikTok has played the role of incubator, but also the distributor to the billion-plus global users and it's just really landed," said Ole Obermann, global head of music at TikTok.

Tyla's success illustrates the power of TikTok and YouTube to help artists find fan bases around the world, a role once reserved for music labels.

"The proliferation of streaming along with new social media platforms (e.g. TikTok) has accelerated artist discovery, and have provided new mediums for artists to grow their fan bases globally," Bank of America Securities analyst Jessica Reif Cohen said in a research note predicting media trends for 2024.

TikTok remains controversial in the United States because of its ownership by Chinese company ByteDance, which critics view as a security risk. The Biden administration has banned the app on US government devices. TikTok officials say they have rigorous safeguards in place and they reject allegations of spying on user data.

The app also is in a dispute with Universal Music Group over how much it pays for use of songs from Taylor Swift, Billie Eilish and others. Music from many Universal artists was unavailable on TikTok as of Friday.

For US teenagers, TikTok ranks as the second-most common music discovery source behind YouTube, according to a recent MIDIA Research survey that showed 45% of 16- to 19-year-olds found new music through the platform.

Other Afrobeats artists who found audiences on TikTok include Nigerian rapper Rema. He collaborated with Selena Gomez for a remix of his song "Calm Down," which hit No. 3 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 last June.

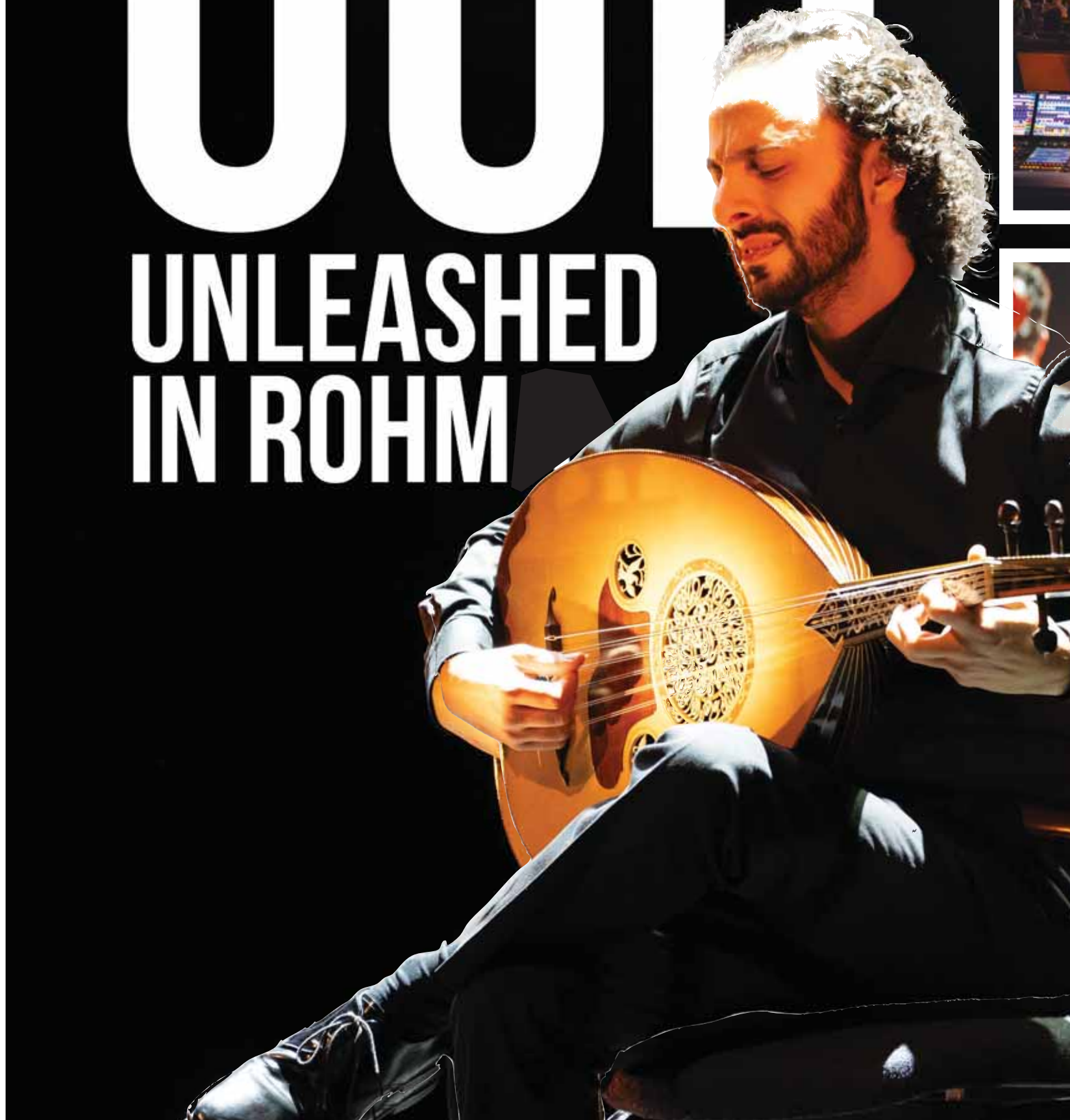
TikTok is helping to forge new connections between US and African artists. Obermann said he played a short clip of a song called "Ojapiano" from Nigerian musician KCee for Ryan Tedder, a songwriter and lead singer for the band OneRepublic.

Tedder liked the sound so much that he immediately reached out to KCee, who jumped on a plane from Lagos to Los Angeles two days later so the pair could make a remix of the song.

Obermann hopes the soon-to-be-released remix will give new life to "Ojapiano," a combination of amapiano and a South African flute called oja, and keep fuelling the Afrobeats craze.

"This is going to be a big, growing genre," Obermann said. — **REUTERS**

THE MAGIC OF OUD UNLEASHED IN ROHM



BY GEORGINA BENISON
PHOTOS BY KHALID AL BUSAIDI

This was Arab Jazz Rock at its most contemporary, most compelling, and forward-looking. This was where Arabic Oud tradition meets western influences with technology, and the result was hypnotic fusion at its best.

Trio Joubran from Palestine performed at the Royal Opera House of Musical Arts for two sold-out performances last weekend. Brothers from a family of oud makers and players of exceptional mastery and skill, they are in great demand worldwide, and their collaboration with like-minded, innovative musicians has helped broaden and develop their popular acclaim on the international stage.

Trio Joubran was, in fact, a Quintet. They were joined on Friday night by the extraordinary Palestinian percussionist, Youssef Hbeisch, who underpinned and enhanced many of the pieces in their programme with intricate, complex rhythms. On cello and synthesiser was the multi-talented Valentin Mussou, a recorded artist, and jazz musician in his own right. Another important collaborator of the evening was the Palestinian-born poet, Mahmoud Darwish, whose words permeated their compositions and were a constant presence throughout the programme.

The performance opened with the pre-recorded words of Darwish narrated, possibly in his own voice, projected onto a darkened stage over a drone. The electronic music designed by Mussou accompanied his "Palestinian Project" (first released in 2018 in collaboration with Pink Floyd drummer, Roger Waters), now taken for those suffering in the current crisis but written over 40 years ago. Hbeisch's entry with subtle percus-

sion effects introduced the Joubran brothers' oud ensemble. Mussou played pizzicato Cello patterns as the ouds passed motives between themselves. Characteristic interplay of improvisational solos resolving into unison repetitions of themes was a regular feature of their ensemble style. They were clearly enjoying the fraternal interaction!

The "Long March" — slow, solo oud with percussion — was backlit on a dark stage, creating atmospheric silhouettes of the musicians behind. Gradually syncopated rhythms backed some improvised dialogue between oud and bowed cello in hypnotic, meditative Arabic jazz inspired by Darwish. Samir, the oldest brother, thanked the audience for coming and the Opera House for inviting them to perform their creations.

The next piece — "Masar with Darwish" — was a mournful dirge in 3-time. The unison melody over cello bass built up in repetitions, not unlike an Arabic "Bolero"; insistent and passionate while pre-recorded words were again projected behind.

"More than Once" was a dark solo oud composition over keyboard bass and irregular rhythms from Hbeisch. There was a solo on Cajon which built up crescendos in frenzy and tension until it burst — into applause then silence. Adnan Joubran took the next solo, reaching a rising chromatic climax, then silence. How does this work so well? Their use of insistent repetitions on percussion underlying the melodic lines — often three times like an Indian Tihai — gives a natural sense of tension and excitement.

"The Trees We Wear" with oud duet between Adnan and Wissam was funereal. Slowly it unfolded with Cello doubling the melody, evolving into a Tango with the most beautiful minor theme, Piazzolla-like. The style was rhapsodic, loosely improvised,

always falling in plaintive sequence until a surprising Greek dance rhythm crept in towards the end!

"Mawtini" was the most classically Arabic musical language but underpinned by a driving bass percussion. Live song was performed by Samir in a very slow 4-time. The music was accessible to all; the audience was a mix of all backgrounds, nationalities, and cultures. Western elements and constantly repeated phrases over ostinatos bridge gaps and bring the listener to the heart of the pathos and message. It concluded with Wissam's solo over passacaglia-like phrases in the bass.

"Hanging Moon" after Darwish was performed by Samir and Adnan while Wissam kept a 2-note drone going all through, in front of projected moon and stars. It was incredibly effective and atmospheric in darkness, with cello joining for a while in a brilliant solo using fast arpeggio shapes met by spontaneous applause. The ouds

The music was accessible to all; the audience was a mix of all backgrounds, nationalities, and cultures. Western elements and constantly repeated phrases over ostinatos bridge gaps and bring the listener to the heart of the pathos and message.

returned with the original material over the 2-note drone, gradually dying away: perfection!

Of course, the Finale had to be a contrasting upbeat number with moving lights and a keyboard providing Hammond organ chords. The interplay between the three ouds was so compelling because they are such skilled musicians. It built up to a Joubran tutti climax then stopped

abruptly. A popular percussion solo ensued over synthesizer effects, the final oud statement of the tune in unison — and a standing ovation!

It was fitting that the prepared encore was a popular Egyptian song by Abdul Halim Hafiz — which everyone knew and sang together beautifully. It was a fantastic conclusion to a stunning concert — which lasted just 75 minutes.