

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has sent a cable of congratulations to King Frederik X of Denmark on the occasion of his accession to the throne. In his cable, His Majesty the Sultan expressed his sincere sentiments along with his best wishes of good health and happiness to King Frederik X. His Majesty also wished him success in leading the people of Denmark towards further progress and prosperity. His Majesty wished the bilateral relations further development and growth.



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OMAN READY FOR SAUDI CHALLENGE: IVANKOVIC



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WHEAT PRODUCTION IN OMAN SURGES BY 229 PER CENT



P19

A FRUGAL OPERA SUPERFAN'S SURPRISE GIFT: \$1.7 MILLION FOR THE ARTS



MUSCAT

386 JOB VACANCIES FOR NATIONALS

The Ministry of Labour announced the availability of 386 job vacancies in a number of government units, of these 100 are vacancies for people with disabilities. The job opportunities are distributed for holders of various degrees, including 191 for Bachelor's degree holders and above, 47 for Post General Education Diploma (Post GED) holders and 148 vacancies for holders of GED and below. The Ministry of Labour will open registration to compete for announced opportunities for a duration of two weeks from the announcement.

DETAILS ON P3

SANAA

US-OWNED SHIP HIT BY MISSILE OFF YEMEN



A missile struck a US-owned cargo ship off the coast of Yemen on Monday, a British security agency and maritime risk company said, a day after Ansar Allah fighters fired a cruise missile at an American destroyer. The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations security agency, run by Britain's Royal Navy, reported a "vessel hit from above by a missile" in the Gulf of Aden. It did not provide further details. According to Ambrey, a British maritime risk company, a fire broke out on board the Marshall Islands-flagged, US-owned bulk carrier, but it remains seaworthy and there were no injuries. United States Central Command identified the ship as the *M/V Gibraltar Eagle*. The incident will further heighten shipping and security fears for the volatile region where the Ansar Allah has for weeks fired drones and missiles towards vessels in the adjacent Red Sea. United States and United Kingdom forces responded last Friday with strikes against scores of targets in Yemen.

AL AQUR WALL A PRIDE OF NIZWA



When people of Nizwa pooled their efforts to restore the old wall around Al Shahba Fort, it not only became a symbol of pride of the Wilayat of Nizwa, but also a role model which inspires future generations to preserve the rich heritage of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate. The restored wall was opened on January 8 in the village of Al Aqur. Al Aqur Wall and Al Aqur Square is about 1,950 metres long, of which about 700 metres has been restored. The opening ceremony was attended by Eng Ibrahim bin Said al Kharousi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Heritage.

DETAILS ON

Tax sops for electric vehicle buyers

VINOD NAIR
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The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology (MoTCIT) has urged potential vehicle owners to take advantage of benefits offered by the government to encourage the use of electric vehicles (EVs). Some of the benefits offered by the government are 100 per cent exemption from customs tax for electric vehicles from customs, exemption from registration fees for electric vehicles at the Royal Oman Police (ROP), and a zero per cent value-added tax for vehicles and their spare parts. A wide network of electric charging stations has been developed in many cities and public locations, to facilitate the process of charging vehicles and alleviate concerns about their travel range.



A charging connector is pictured charging a vehicle.

The advantages to owners offered by electric vehicles are low emissions and low maintenance, providing additional savings. Working towards carbon neutrality by 2050, Oman is exerting concerted efforts to reduce pollution from the transport sector, which accounts for 18 per cent of the total greenhouse gas emissions in the Sultanate of Oman. According to the MoTCIT,

there are over 100 charging points across Oman, including in popular hotels and commercial centres, which are expected to go up gradually in the coming years to meet the increasing demand for EVs, which was estimated to be around 400 as of November 2023. The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) has issued Ministerial Resolution 615/2023, which makes it mandatory for all service stations to offer electric vehicle (EV) charging stations. The regulation complies with standards set by the Authority for Public Services Regulation (APSR), according to a Zawya report. According to Mordor Intelligence, the Middle East and Africa Automotive Electric Vehicle Market size is estimated to reach from \$3.33 billion in 2024 to \$9.42 billion by 2029.

Musandam to get better connectivity

HM DIRECTIVES TO IMPLEMENT PROJECTS

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, on Monday confirmed the immediate implementation of the projects that fall within the scope of its purview, the implementation of which was directed by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik during his visit to Musandam Governorate. Eng Said bin Hamoud al Maawali, Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, said in a statement: "The projects that His Majesty has directed to be implemented in the governorate have a social and economic impact on the people of the governorate. I am proud that the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology is part of this national movement in developing Musandam Governorate through a number of development and service projects." The minister valued the Royal attention accorded by His Majesty the Sultan to the projects related to the sectors of transport, communications and information technology most notably the Port of Khasab. This 159-hectares port receives great attention by His Majesty due to its strategic location adjoining the Strait of Hormuz and its role in spurring the trade movement and the logistic sector as well as the other sectors related to

Musandam Airport to be ready in 2028

The new Musandam Airport will be completed by the second half of 2028. It was revealed that all studies for the new Musandam Airport project have been completed and the appropriate site has been chosen for its construction. "The new airport will have a runway, taxiway, terminal, and service and hangar area suitable for handling Boeing 737s and Airbus 320 size aircraft," the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology said during a presentation. During his meeting with shaykhs and dignitaries and some members of the Council of Oman and the Municipal Council, businessmen from the Musandam Governorate, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik stressed linking the governorate with domestic and international flights.

DETAILS ON P5

navigation. He added: "Last year, the port witnessed increased operations by receiving more than 2,000 ships while passenger traffic through the port increased to 52,000 passengers up from the figure of 3,000 seen in 2022. Besides, the port received 48 cruise ships compared to just five a year earlier."

WHO seeks \$1.5 bn for urgent health aid in 2024

GENEVA: The UN health agency on Monday said it needed \$1.5 billion in 2024 for life-saving aid to tens of millions of people trapped in health emergencies, including in Ukraine and Gaza. The World Health Organization warned that nearly 300 million people across the globe were expected to require humanitarian assistance and protection this year. Among them, "an estimated 166 million people will need life-saving humanitarian health assistance," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a launch event in Geneva. He said his agency was aiming to reach around 87 million of those most in need, and would require \$1.5 billion to do so. "As 2024 starts, WHO is already responding to 41 health crises, including 15 of the highest-level emergencies," he said. Those caught up in such crises, he warned, are



A displaced Palestinian boy who was wounded in an Israeli strike, looks on in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, on Monday. — Reuters

facing a "traumatic start to a new year, and it comes on the back of 2023, which was itself a year of immense and mostly avoidable suffering". Listing a long line of conflicts, from Ukraine to Sudan to Gaza, he said that "shockingly, one child in every five globally either lived in or fled from a conflict zone in 2023". Tedros also highlighted the worsening climate crisis, with last year determined to have been the hottest in human history. This, he warned, had "grave implications for health", from "catastrophic hunger" sparked by drought in the Horn of Africa, to deadly disease outbreaks spurred on by changing climate patterns. Tedros stressed that "for those facing emergencies, disruptions to essential health services often mean the difference between life and death". — AFP

→ INSIDE



E-BIKES: CONVENIENT BUT POSE ROAD SAFETY RISK

SPOTLIGHT **SEE P4**



National Local Content Policy 2024-2030 paves roadmap for developing SMEs, job opportunities

MUSCAT: The Council of Ministers’ adoption of the National Local Content Policy (2024-2030) is considered a road map and a compass to provide more job opportunities for citizens, localising industries, developing and adopting entrepreneurs, encouraging small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and reducing foreign purchases, in order to ensure an increase in the country’s trade balance surpluses.

Commenting on this, Badr bin Salim al Maamari, Secretary General of the Secretariat General of the Tender Board, said: “The adoption of the national policy for local content is focused on achieving sustainability through achieving a balance between environmental, economic, and social requirements, as well as by empowering the private sector in its role in leading a competitive economy by enhancing local content”.

He added that, the national

policy for local content will contribute to enhancing economic competitiveness.

He stressed that developing local content with all its components at the level of the national economy aims to improve and follow up on government procurements, in order to achieve development and financial goals in accordance with national visions, strategies and plans.

Al Maamari clarified that, the National Policy for Local Content represents a national agenda in which all economic segments contribute to its development and empowerment. This can be through members of the society and the public and private sectors.

On his turn, Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), said: “The Cabinet’s adoption of the National Local Content Policy



National Policy for Local Content represents a national agenda in which all economic segments contribute to its development and empowerment. – ONA

(2024-2030) sets a comprehensive framework for achieving the objectives of the Local Content Policy. It will mainly contribute towards enhancing the participation of the private sector, particularly the small and medium enterprises in the major projects being implemented in the Sultanate of Oman and creating more business opportunities that support the sustainability and the growth of the private sector.

Al Rawas pointed out that local

content is required to enable national producers in producing goods and services, which can be an essential component of contracts and tenders. This also will contribute to boosting the productivity of the private sector and strengthening efforts to attract investment.

Meanwhile, Sultan bin Said al Khaduri, Head of the In-Country Value and Local Content Office at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, emphasised



that, adopting a national policy for local content will contribute to strengthening the manufacturing sector in the Sultanate of Oman and enabling it of achieving sustainable development and strengthening the national economy.

He pointed out that statistics issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) indicate that the contribution of the manufacturing sector in the Gross Domestic Products (GDP) at current

prices reached 8.1 per cent by the end of the third quarter of 2023, as well as contributing by 9.3 per cent in the GDP at constant price.

He emphasized that the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion has adopted policies and programmes to enhance local content so as to increase the contribution of the national workforce in the industrial sector, and to empower small and medium enterprises by enhancing the production of goods and providing services locally.

For his part, Al Hassan bin Ali al Farsi, a senior legal affairs researcher at the Secretariat General of the Tender Board, said: “The adoption of the national policy for local content (2024-2030) aims to create a national system for local content that would organise and follow up on local content in all sectors at the national level.

— ONA

CHAIRMAN OF DEFENCE STUDIES ACADEMY RECEIVES US OFFICIAL



MUSCAT: Maj Gen Hamid bin Ahmed Sakroon, Chairman of the Academy for Strategic and Defence Studies received in his office at Bait Al Falaj on Monday Doug Elmendorf, Dean of Harvard Kennedy School of Government in the United States of America (USA), and his accompanying delegation.

During the meeting, the

two sides discussed several academic and training matters of common interest.

The meeting was attended by Commodore Khalid bin Amer al Salti, Director of Studies and Academic Affairs and several senior officers at the Academy for Strategic and Defence Studies.

— ONA

■ ACTING RAO COMMANDER RECEIVES RMAS COMMANDANT



MUSCAT: Brigadier Said bin Mohammed al Shukaili, Acting Commander of the Royal Army of Oman (RAO) received in his office at Muaskar Al Murtafaa on Monday Maj Gen Zac Stenning, Commandant of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst (RMAS) of the United Kingdom (UK). — ONA

Oman, Saudi seek ways to support pilgrims

KABEER YOUSUF
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The Sultanate of Oman represented by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MoARA) and the Ministry of Haj and Umrah (MHU) of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are poised to enhance relations in terms of Haj and Umrah.

As a step towards achieving this, Oman will host Dr Tawfiq bin Fawzan al Rabiah, Minister of Haj and Umrah of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from January 16 to 17 where he will hold meetings with Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari, Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs and other ministerial representatives.

In view of the fruitful cooperation between, an exhibition of the Nasik pilgrimage programme will be held today (Tuesday) at the Kempinski Hotel.

Taking it further, a discussion session between the two ministerial delegations, headed by Dr Mohammed bin Said al Maamari and the Saudi delegation headed by Dr Tawfiq bin Fawzan al Rabiah, will be held.

Following, both sides will meet with the press immediately after the session on Wednesday.

As many as 33,356 people comprising 29,930 Omanis and 3,606 expatriates registered last year for holy Haj out of which 14,000



33,356 people comprising 29,930 Omanis and 3,606 expatriates registered last year for holy Haj

were able to perform the same as per the agreement with the Saudi Haj authorities.

Oman and Saudi Arabia have recently opened the first, 725 kilometre Oman-Saudi road that would contribute to the smooth movement of citizens of the two

countries, especially those who travel to Saudi for pilgrimage by road. The road runs from Al Batha road intersection near the capital, Riyadh, to the Empty Quarter crossing on the Saudi-Oman border.

The project to link the two

countries, implemented by the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, is considered to play a vital role in promoting trade exchange between the two countries, and facilitating the movement of pilgrims and tourists.

Bahla’s Jabreen Castle’s painted ceilings attract visitors

TEXT & PHOTOS BY
YAHYA AL SALMANI

Several entertainment and cultural activities were held in Jabreen Castle in the Wilayat of Bahla, Al Dakhiliyah Governorate recently. These include folk arts, horse shows, Omani costume shows by children, flying of birds, photography, laser and fire show, paragliding and theatre.

The aim of organising these events is to introduce the various types of traditional folklore that Al Dakhiliyah Governorate is famous for among younger generations.

Jabreen Castle sits in the middle of farms and the fort overlooks the surrounding fertile plain. The



French tourists watch an example of women's folklore

palace was built of gray sandstone covered with a thick layer of plaster.

What distinguishes this fort most is the many rooms with ceilings engraved with Arabic and Islamic calligraphy in beautiful colours. This reflects artistic creativity of Omani architecture. Jabreen Castle is famous for having the (Sun and Moon) rooms. There

are 14 windows in this room. Half of these windows are located at the top of the room.

The room was designed to allow moonlight to enter it, while the rest of the windows at the bottom were designed to control the sunlight during the day. The unique geometric design of this room helps improve air circulation.



The cold air enters from the lower windows and the hot air that rises to the top and exits from the upper windows. In ancient days, the imam would meet with important figures to discuss social issues.

Another distinctive room in this palace is the Imam’s protection room. In this room there are four secret trenches. The castle also

includes two towers to protect it against any external raids. There is also a special room for the Imam’s horses.

Jabreen Castle was built in 1670 by Imam Balarab bin Sultan bin Saif al Yaarubi, the third of the Yaaribah imams. The imam built it with his own money. Jabreen Castle served as a palace for the imam and was then used as the seat of government at that time. The castle consists of 5 floors and 55 rooms.

The castle includes two adjacent courtyards. The first section on the right side is 16 metres high, while the second section is 22 metres high. There is also a well in each courtyard that provides pure

water to the castle’s residents for drinking and cooking. The depths of these wells reach more than 20 metres. This castle also has a falaj that is used to irrigate the orchards surrounding this castle.

Jabreen Castle is included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The inclusion of this historical landmark will add important value to sustainable cultural and humanitarian tourism in the Sultanate of Oman. This will also contribute to attracting more tourists. The castle opens its doors daily to visitors from 7:30 am until 9 pm. The castle organises various events and activities, in addition to various exhibitions throughout the year.



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CONFERENCE REVIEWS DEVELOPMENTS IN EMERGENCY MEDICINE

MUSCAT: The 4th edition of an emergency medicine conference, organised by Sultan Qaboos University Hospital, kicked off on Monday. The two-day conference aims at reviewing the latest developments in emergency medicine (with emphasis

on emergency diseases) and enhancing the culture of research in the field of emergency medicine. The event constitutes a unique opportunity to elaborate on the latest technologies and innovations in the field of urgent healthcare.



The conference aims at reviewing latest developments in emergency medicine. – ONA

It demonstrates the extent to which emergency medicine played a vital role in serving society over the past few years. As many as 200 doctors and nurses from Oman and abroad are taking part in the conference, which seeks to enhance regional cooperation

in the field of emergency medicine. The conference provides a unique platform where healthcare professionals exchange knowledge and experiences in emergency medicine and critical care. — ONA

Ministry of Labour announces more than 300 job openings



The announcement is considered the first in 2024 for jobs in the State's Administrative Apparatus. – ONA

MUSCAT: The Ministry of Labour (MoL) announced the availability of 386 job vacancies in a number of government units, of these 100 are vacancies for people with disabilities. The jobs opportunities are distributed for holders of various degrees, including 191 for Bachelor's degree holders and above, 47 for Post General Education Diploma (Post GED) holders and 148 vacancies for holders of GED and below.

The Ministry of Labour will open registration to compete for announced opportunities for a duration of two weeks from the announcement. The announcement is considered the first in 2024 for jobs in the State's Administrative Apparatus. Announcements are made in accordance with devised plans and the actual needs of government units. — ONA

'Shaping the future of pharmaceutical services'

KABEER YOUSUF
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Dr Hilal bin Ali al Sabti, Minister of Health inaugurated the Oman International Pharmacy Congress and Exhibition (OIPCX), at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre on Sunday in the presence of a large gathering of medical, pharmaceutical and other healthcare professionals. Organised by the Ministry of Health (MoH) represented by the Directorate General of Medical Supplies, the theme of this year Congress is 'Shaping the Future of Pharmaceutical Services', which is guided by Oman Vision 2040, Health Vision 2050, the Sustainable Development Goals, the WHO Global action plan for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases and the Global NCD Compact to move towards universal health coverage.

The three-day conference and Exhibition is attracting more than 1,000 experts and specialists in pharmacy from across the world. "This year's (OIPCX) is different for its inclusive scientific programme that covers various areas of pharmacy ranging from pharmacy education, supply chains, pharmaceutical regulatory affairs, moving to patient-centred pharmaceutical care, noting that Universal Health Care is of great importance to all professions and decision-makers working in the health field in general and in pharmacy in particular," said Ibrahim



Dr Hilal al Sabti, Minister of Health, visits the expo, which was held on the sidelines of OIPCX in Muscat

al Rashdi, Director-General and Chairman of OIPCX, in his key address. Referring to the scientific programme, the Director-General noted that the role of clinical pharmacy skills in Primary Health Care will be underpinned through lectures and interactive sessions focusing on the role of the pharmacist in a multidisciplinary team. "This programme will contain training workshops in collaboration with the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) and Chartered Institute of Procurement & Supply (CIPS)," he said. Al Rashdi stated that in order to promote efforts in supply chains, the DGMS will contract with ASHP and CIPS to obtain professional certificates and establish an effective system for managing supply shortages. Biosimilar is one of the focus areas of the congress addressing the strategies for ensuring safe and effective usage of interchangeable biosimilar, added the

Director General of Medical Supplies. Due to its importance, medication safety has been reviewed with Gulf Drug Safety officials at a meeting held on Sunday discussing challenges that limit the implementation of drug safety programmes, and developing strategies to ensure patient safety in order to achieve the Ministry's vision and implementation of Oman Vision 2040, Al Rashdi highlighted. Dr Paul W Bush, Vice-President of Global Resources Development and Consulting American Society of Health-System Pharmacists, presented the Congress Keynote entitled "It Takes a Multidisciplinary Team to Manage Drug Shortages". Dr Al Sabti toured the exhibition being held on the sidelines of the conference. It showcased international manufacturers of medicines and medical devices, as well leading pharmacies in the Sultanate of Oman, in addition to the pharmaceutical industry sector.

ISG students shine at Cambridge exams

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 15

Indian School Ghubra International added yet another golden feather in their cap with 10 Outstanding Achievement Awards in the Cambridge AS and A Level June series Examinations. In the Cambridge IGCSE Examinations, Vaibhavi Ashok Shetty topped in Oman in Co-Ordinated Sciences (Double Award) and Business Studies, and was also awarded a Best Across Seven accolade. Sarah Mustafa bagged a High Achievement Award in

Foreign Language French. In the Cambridge International AS Level Exams, Simran Kawatra was ranked first in Oman in Chemistry and Mathematics, Chitrangada Siddharth Chaturvedi in Economics and Ishita Sujeet Shetty in Sociology. Chitrangada Siddharth Chaturvedi achieved the first place in Oman in the Best Across Four category while Simran Kawatra came first in Oman in the Best Across Three category. ISG Principal Papri Ghosh said that the awards recognised the talent,

dedication and commitment of both learners and staff. "Once again, the students of ISG-International have emerged with flying colours in the Cambridge examination series. The hard work and diligence of our students and their mentors have borne fruit thus cementing the place of our school as one of the most premier Cambridge institutions in the country," he said. Top performing learners will receive their Outstanding Cambridge Learner Awards at a school ceremony to be held later. Ahmad

Rayees, President, School Management Committee, said: "It is extremely rewarding to congratulate Cambridge learners and teachers at ISG-International who have worked so hard to achieve tremendous success in Cambridge IGCSE / AS Level examinations. The results are a reflection of the enormous talent in Oman, not only amongst learners but also within the teaching profession. Learners from ISG-International have a bright future ahead of them, and I wish them every success in their future."



Top performing learners will receive their Outstanding Cambridge Learner Awards

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E-BIKES: CONVENIENT BUT POSE ROAD SAFETY RISK

KABEER YOUSUF
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Electric bikes have replaced bicycles as a cheaper and greener mode of transport. But ROP has warned the users not to use them on main roads as they can choke traffic and cause accidents. Doctors caution that riding without a helmet risks head injury.

“Vehicles powered by motors are restricted to occupy main roads as they can cause accidents and traffic snarls. Accordingly, bikes with less than 70 cc are not allowed to ride on the roads,” the ROP spokesperson said.

“For me, electric bikes are convenient to travel from my residence to my workplace and back four times a day. It saves me my transport charges and gives freedom of travel,” an expat employee working for a shopping mall in Qurum said.

These bikes are mostly used by workers, salespeople and others for short trips thereby

saving money and time.

They are more efficient and less polluting than petrol scooters and have a higher energy conversion rate. They are economical as they can travel longer distances on a single charge than petrol scooters on a full tank. In terms of safety too, these small, noiseless two-wheelers are generally considered safer because they are more stable and easier to control, thanks to their powerful brakes.

SPEED LIMITS

However, they are not without any dangers. Speaking to the *Observer*, Dr Dilip Singhvi, specialist in internal medicine, said that it’s risky to drive such small scooties on the roads as here we have higher speed limits. “Also it’s all the more risky to drive without a helmet. The risk of head injury increases tremendously in case of a hit. Restricting them to inner roads would be more prudent,” Dr Dilip said.

E-scooters are available online at a price of

RO150-250. But their usage is limited in the country as they are capable of reaching speeds of over 30 mph and can be very dangerous in the hands of an inexperienced user. According to the ROP statistics, accidents involving e-scooters have resulted in fatalities in numerous countries.

The battery capacity of these scooters vary between 10 Wh and 100 Wh and a motor power output between 0.5 kW and 3 kW.

In light of these, e-scooters are not allowed on roads at all times. However, they can be used on pavements and sidewalks without causing inconvenience or risks to pedestrians.

Countries across the world are supporting and promoting the use of e-bikes as alternatives to the traditional vehicles that use fossil fuel. Although these bikes are privately owned, many countries promote renting them to those who can’t afford it as part of the local government’s smart mobility initiatives to reduce carbon emissions.



MUSANDAM AIRPORT TO BE READY IN 2028

VINOD NAIR
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The new Musandam Airport will be completed by the second half of 2028. It was revealed that all studies of the new Musandam Airport project have been completed and the appropriate site has been chosen for its construction. “The new airport will have a runway, taxiway, terminal, and service and hangar area suitable for the handling of up to Boeing 737 and Airbus 320 size aircraft,” the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology

Musandam Airport project is expected to be a game changer for the governorate’s development and will have the capacity to handle 250,000 passengers per year

(MoTCIT) said during a presentation on Sunday. During his meeting with shaikhs and dignitaries and some members of the Council of Oman and the Municipal Council, businessmen from

the Musandam Governorate, His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik stressed linking the governorate with local and international flights. The Civil Aviation Authority said it appreciates the Royal support and will work to implement the directives in a way that enhances the various economic, tourism and logistical sectors. Musandam Airport project is expected to be a game changer for the governorate’s development and will have the capacity to handle 250,000 passengers per year.



It was revealed that all studies of the new Musandam Airport project have been completed

Wakan village attracts 32,000 visitors



NAKHAL: Wakan village in the Wilayat of Nakhal, the Al Batinah South Governorate, is witnessing a large turnout of visitors from the Sultanate of Oman and abroad during the winter season. During 2023, the number

of visitors to Wakan village exceeded 32,000 visitors from different nationalities, according to the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism. Dr Al Mutasim bin Nasser al Hilali, Director General of Heritage and Tourism

in the Al Batinah South Governorate said that the weather in Wakan is relatively cold, which is similar to the weather in some villages of the Wilayat of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar. — ONA



International conference on breast cancer held



Knowing recent advances in the Healthcare is very important not only for practicing doctors but also for general public

STAFF REPORTER
MUSCAT, JAN 15

Sparsh Hospital, Bengaluru, India, in association with Muscat Family Physicians’ Group and Global Treatment Service organised an International Medical Conference on Breast Cancer and Updates in Obstetrics and Gynaecology on January 12 in Muscat. In her opening speech Dr Aliya bint Yousuf bin Abdullah al Madhaniyah of Royal Hospital, welcomed and briefed the audience about the difficult and complicated cases they face in their department and how they handle them. Dr Prathima Reddy, director of Sparsh Hospital for Women and Children, spoke about the different kinds of cases her team treats. Dr Reddy also spoke about a rare case of Intravenous Leiomyomatosis which the team had managed successfully. She elaborated on how several complicated and life-threatening conditions in Obstetrics have been managed by her team. Dr Mansi Khanderia, lead

consultant, medical oncology, spoke on recent advances in the treatment of breast cancer, the commonest cancer in the world, with 1 in 8 women developing breast cancer. There is an alarming rise, a new case being diagnosed every 19 seconds across the world. Now with the availability of new systemic treatment options like hormone therapy, targeted therapy, immunotherapy besides chemotherapy the Breast Cancer patients in all stages of cancer are living longer with good quality of life. Biopsy and IHC tests to identify the type of breast cancer is critical before personalised treatment is planned for every patient before surgery. More and more breast cancers are being treated with systemic therapy prior to surgery (neo adjuvant therapy) which helps in conserving breasts during surgery. A wide range of treatment options were discussed. For the patients who were reluctant/unable to undertake Mammogram, a new AI based

thermographic test was discussed. Dr Mansi’s presentation ensured that all GPs, Gynaecologists, surgeons and oncologists are empowered with pertinent information in diagnosing and guiding women towards correct timely prevention, detection and treatment of breast cancer. The meeting was followed by an Interactive session. Dr Aliya, Dr Prathima and Dr Mansi answered all the queries raised by the attending doctors. Meeting was attended by 70+ eminent obstetricians and gynaecologists, breast cancer specialists, oncologists, family physicians, emergency specialists and anaesthetists in Sultanate of Oman. “Knowing recent advances in the Healthcare is very important not only for practicing doctors but also for general public. That exactly is the intention for arranging such International Medical Conferences” said Dr Sanjay Dalal, moderator, while concluding the meeting. He thanked the visiting team and all the doctors who attended the conference.



TENDER ANNOUNCEMENT

Nama Electricity Supply Company S.A.O.C invites interested companies to participate in the following tender

Tender No.	Description	Last Date of Buying	Date of Submission	Grade	Tender Price (OMR)
RFP No. 01/ Nama Supply/2024	Innovative Communication: Building a Five-Year corporate communication & Branding Strategy for Nama Electricity Supply Company	25/01/2024	04/02/2024	Specialist	26.250

The table below shows the instructions for participation: -					
Participation	- Companies registered with Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion and in I Supplier with Nama Groupe may obtain Tender documents. - The amount specified above is including 5% VAT. - Riyada card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from Tender fees. - The amount specified above is Non-Refundable payment (Terms and Condition apply) - To obtain the tender document and payment procedure, please contact us by email procurement@supply.nama.om - Tender purchase will be in working ours between 08:00 AM till 02:00 PM.				
Enquiries	- Any inquiry can be sent using the inquiry form found in the tender document to procurement@supply.nama.om five (5) days before the date of submission of the tender. - Any request for clarification received after the above-mentioned period will not be considered.				
Tender Submission	Please follow SUBMISSION OF TENDER mentioned in the Prime Document				
Guarantee	- The Tender should enclose a bank guarantee or a certified cheque issued by any bank in the Sultanate of Oman Unconditional and irrevocable and shall be disbursement as soon as it is submitted for the value of (1%) of the tender value valid for a period of not less than One hundred and twenty (120) days from the last date of tender submission and addressed to the CHAIRMAN OF PROCUREMNT COMMITTEE, Nama Electricity Supply Company S.A.O.C. - The bid bond should including 5% VAT. - The bid bond should be submitted as a separate envelope. - Any tender not accompanied by a Tender Bond shall be rejected.				
Terms and Conditions	- The Tender shall be valid for a period of not less than One hundred and twenty (120) days from the last date of tender submission including any extension thereof. - If the submission date extended, the bank guarantee or a certified cheque shall be extended in accordance with the bid extension date. - NESC is not bound to accept the lowest (or highest) Tenderer. - Preference of awarding the tender will be given to those bidders who achieved a high percentage of purchasing from Local Products and have a High-level percentage of Omanization. - NESC gives priority to award the projects to SMEs companies. - Failure to comply with the instructions in tender document may lead to disqualification.				
Incentives and exemptions	- Riyada card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from Tender fees - Riyada card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from bid bond requirements. - Riyada card holders from Small and Medium Enterprises, SME, are exempted from registration fees on business opportunities platform and supplier registration with Nama Group.				



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Gaza deaths top 24,100 as brutal war drags on



A picture shows a makeshift camp for displaced Palestinians west of Rafah who fled Israeli strikes. – AFP

GAZA: Health officials in Gaza reported on Monday more than 24,100 deaths in the war with Israel which has sent shockwaves across the region, as the fighting passed the grim 100-day milestone.

The health ministry in Gaza, reported more than 60 “martyrs” and dozens more wounded overnight, in what the strip’s media office described as “intense” Israeli bombardment across Gaza.

The government media office said two hospitals, a girls’ school and “dozens” of homes were hit overnight.

Hospitals in Gaza have been hit repeatedly since the war erupted, and the World Health Organization (WHO) says most of them are no longer functioning.

The Israeli military accuses Palestinian groups of operating out of civilian facilities or from tunnels under them, a charge they deny.

The latest strikes hit the southern cities of Khan Yunis

People in Gaza risk dying of hunger just miles from trucks filled with food. Every hour puts countless lives at risk

CINDY MCCAIN
WFP director

and Rafah, as well as areas around Gaza City, the media office said.

The army said its forces had struck “two loading weapons into a vehicle” in Khan Yunis, southern Gaza’s main city, and raided “a command centre” there and seized weapons.

The UN says more than three months of fighting have displaced roughly 85 percent of the territory’s population, crowded

into shelters and struggling to get food, water, fuel and medical care.

“There’s no food, no water, no heating. We are dying from the cold,” said Mohammad Kahil, displaced from northern Gaza to Rafah, on the southern border with Egypt.

Israel launched a relentless military campaign that has killed at least 24,100 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the territory’s health ministry.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has said people in Gaza were “living in hell”, echoing earlier UN warnings of a fast-approaching famine.

In a joint statement, the WHO, World Food Programme (WFP) and UNICEF said “a fundamental step change in the flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza is urgently needed”.

They called for “safer, faster” supply routes to be opened, warning that the current levels of aid “fall far short of what is needed to prevent a deadly combination of hunger, malnutrition and disease”.

The WFP said an aid convoy brought food to the territory’s north on Thursday, the first such delivery since a one-week truce ended on December 1.

Cindy McCain, the UN agency’s director, said: “People in Gaza risk dying of hunger just miles from trucks filled with food. Every hour puts countless lives at risk.”

Israel has faced international pressure over surging civilian casualties in Gaza, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is under intense domestic pressure to account for political and security failings surrounding the October 7 attacks.

On the war’s 100th day on Sunday, hundreds of Israelis gathered in Tel Aviv for events urging action to rescue the remaining captives. — AFP

China urges larger peace conference



Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi holds a press conference, in Cairo, Egypt January 14. – Reuters

BEIJING: China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi called for a larger, more authoritative Israeli-Palestinian peace conference and a timetable to implement a two-state solution as the Gaza conflict escalated and the Red Sea became a new flash point.

Speaking to reporters after talks with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry in Cairo, Wang said the international community should “listen” carefully to the legitimate concerns in the Middle East.

“China calls for the convening of a larger-scale, more authoritative and more effective international peace conference, the formulation of a specific timetable and road map for the implementation of the ‘two-state solution’, and support for the prompt resumption of Israel-Palestinian peace talks,” Wang said.

A Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said on Monday that the road map needed to be “binding”.

“As for the timing and venue of the conference and where it will be hosted, I think it needs to be determined by all parties through consultation,” Mao Ning said at a regular news conference in Beijing.

“China also welcomes the active role of the United Nations in this regard,” she said.

Last week, the United States and Britain launched strikes against targets in Yemen after a group attacked ships in the Red Sea. The Yemenis said their attacks are a show of support for Palestinians.

The Red Sea attacks have forced commercial ships to take a longer, costlier route around Africa, stoking concern about inflation and supply chain disruptions. They are also bringing the Gaza crisis much closer to China’s investments in the Suez Canal east of Cairo.

China avoids being a direct party in any military conflicts, but says it is keen to raise its “international influence, appeal and power” to shape events through diplomacy.

Last week, Wang said President Xi Jinping had “in-depth communication” with the leaders of Saudi Arabia and Iran to persuade the Middle East powers to let go of past grievances, and their restoration of ties in 2023 had set off a “wave of reconciliation” across the Middle East. — Reuters

Qatar pauses Red Sea tankers after Western strikes in Yemen

DOHA: Qatar’s state energy company, one of the world’s biggest liquefied natural gas exporters, has paused sending tankers through the Red Sea after US-led strikes in Yemen.

Attacks on Israeli-linked ships by the Yemenis, who say they are acting in solidarity with Palestinians, have disrupted global commerce and alarmed major Western powers in a spillover from Israel’s more than three-month war in Gaza.

In the latest shift by a major firm, state-owned QatarEnergy has held at least four LNG tankers back from the Red Sea, a senior source said, adding that production continues.

The US military said late on Sunday that its fighter aircraft shot down an anti-ship cruise missile fired by the militants toward a US destroyer. No injuries or damage were reported, according to a military statement on X.

On Monday, carmaker Suzuki said production would halt at its Esztergom plant in Hungary from January 15-21 as the Red Sea situation had delayed the arrival of



Yemeni fighters and tribal supporters hold up their firearms during a protest against recent US-led strikes on Ansar Allah targets, near Sanaa. – Reuters

Japanese-made engines.

The Yemeni groups have vowed to keep targeting Israel-linked ships and to give a firm response to the attacks on them.

US ally Britain said it had no desire to be involved in a Red Sea conflict but was committed to protecting the right of free navigation. “Let’s wait and see what happens,” said Defence Secretary Grant Shapps of potential further strikes.

LSEG ship tracking data showed that Qatar’s *Al Ghariya*, *Al Huwaila* and *Al Nuaman* vessels had loaded LNG at Ras Laffan and were heading to the Suez Canal. The *Al*

Rekayyat, which was sailing back to Qatar, stopped along its route on January 13 in the Red Sea.

“It is a pause to get security advice, if passing (through the) Red Sea remains unsafe we will go

The US military said late on Sunday that its fighter aircraft shot down an anti-ship cruise missile fired by the militants toward a US destroyer

via the Cape,” the source said on Monday about QatarEnergy.

The longer route round Africa’s Cape of Good Hope can add about 9 days to the normally 18-day trip to Europe.

The chief negotiator for Yemen’s movement group said on Monday that the group’s position has not changed since US-led air strikes on Yemen and warned attacks on ships headed to Israel will continue.

“Attacks to prevent Israeli ships or those heading to the ports of the occupied Palestine will continue,” Mohammed Abdulsalam said. He added that the group’s demands are still for an end of the Israeli offensive in Gaza, and allowing humanitarian aid to the north and south of the strip. — Reuters



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In brief

■ BOGOTA



COLOMBIA FATAL LANDSLIDE DEATH TOLL RISES TO 36

The death toll from recent landslides in northwestern Colombia rose to 36, according to an official tally, as rescuers continued to look for at least seven people.

Earlier, officials had put the toll from landslides, which hit a road linking the cities of Medellin and Quibdo, at 23 dead.

“To all the families of the victims, my heartfelt condolences,” said President Gustavo Petro.

Pope Francis also offered prayers for the victims from the Vatican. Rescuers, using sniffer dogs and bulldozers, have been racing against the clock to find survivors. — Reuters

■ REYKJAVIK



ICELAND VOLCANO RECEDES AFTER ‘BLACK DAY’

A volcano that erupted in southwest Iceland for the second time in less than a month appeared to be significantly less active on Monday despite indications that magma is still flowing underground.

“A black day” read the front page headline of Icelandic daily Morgunblaðid across an image of bright-orange lava fountains and houses burning in the town of Grindavik, some 40 kilometres south-west of the capital Reykjavik.

Molten lava flows reached the outskirts of Grindavik around noon on Sunday, setting three houses alight.

— Reuters

■ ISLAMABAD



CAMPAIGNING STARTS IN PAKISTAN’S NATIONAL POLLS

The frontrunner party for Pakistan’s delayed elections began campaigning on Monday, after a weekend court decision effectively. On Monday, Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) party kicked off campaigning in the eastern city of Okara, where thousands of supporters thronged for speeches by senior leaders.

“Those who love this country can’t vote for anyone else but Nawaz Sharif,” said his daughter Maryam Nawaz Sharif, a vice-president of the PML-N party.

Originally due in November, the election commission delayed the vote in order to redraw constituencies after a new census. — AFP

UK’s biggest military deployment to Nato exercises in decades

LONDON: Britain will send 20,000 armed forces personnel to one of Nato’s largest exercises since the Cold War, Defence Secretary Grant Shapps announced on Monday, warning of increasing threats to the Western-led alliance.

The deployment, which Shapps characterised as the UK’s biggest to Nato in four decades, is aimed at “providing vital reassurance” over the “menace” posed by Russian President Vladimir Putin following his attack of Ukraine, Shapps said.

The British personnel — from the Royal Air Force, Royal Navy and Army — will deploy across Europe and beyond for the military alliance’s latest “Exercise Steadfast Defender”, alongside personnel from 31 other member countries and Sweden, which is a candidate to join the transatlantic alliance.

“Today’s Nato is bigger than ever but the challenges are bigger too,” Shapps said in a wide-ranging



Britain’s Defence Secretary Grant Shapps delivers a speech on defending the UK and its allies, at Lancaster House, in London. — AFP

speech in London, in which he warned “the international rules-based order” was facing rising dangers.

“And that’s why the UK has committed... the totality of our air, land and maritime assets to Nato”, he went on.

“In 2024 I am determined to do even more and that’s why I can announce today the UK will send in some 20,000 personnel to lead one of Nato’s largest deployments since the end of the Cold War.”

The UK contingent will include fighter jets and surveillance

The British personnel will deploy across Europe and beyond for the military alliance’s latest “Exercise Steadfast Defender

aircraft, the navy’s most advanced warships and submarines, and a full range of army capabilities, including special operations forces.

London will send a so-called Carrier Strike Group — which features its flagship aircraft carrier and F-35B fighter jets and helicopters — to the exercises in the North Atlantic, Norwegian Sea and Baltic Sea.

Meanwhile some 16,000 soldiers will be deployed across

eastern Europe from next month to June, taking with them tanks, artillery, helicopters and parachutes.

Shapps used his most high-profile speech since being appointed to the post in August to argue that the post-Cold War “peace dividend” has ended and Western allies must face down foes.

“It’s been replaced by a period of hard-headed realism,” he said, adding that Nato’s adversaries “are more connected with each other” than ever and Western allies “stand at a crossroads”.

“Our adversaries are busily rebuilding their barriers, old enemies are reanimated, battle lines are being redrawn, the tanks are literally on Ukraine’s lawn and the foundations of the world order are being shaken to their core.”

Shapps also addressed the joint UK-US strikes in Yemen last week. He said the strikes were intended “as a single action”. — AFP

Ukraine says it destroys Russian spy plane



Ukrainian servicemen prepare a M777 howitzer to fire towards Russian troops at a position near a front line, in Zaporizhzhia region, Ukraine. — Reuters

KYIV: Ukraine said on Monday it had destroyed a Russian Beriev A-50 spy plane and an Ilyushin IL-22 airborne command post in the Sea of Azov area, dealing a blow to Russian military operations in occupied southern Ukraine.

“Ukraine’s Air Force destroyed an enemy A-50 long-range radar detection aircraft and an enemy IL-22 air control centre,” army chief Valeriy Zaluzhnyi wrote on the Telegram messaging app.

“I am grateful to the Air Force for the perfectly planned and executed operation in the Azov Sea region!”

The Russian defence ministry did not immediately respond to a written request for comment.

The Ukrainian defence ministry valued the A-50 aircraft at \$330 million. Kyiv’s statements did not say how the planes had been destroyed.

The A-50, which first came into service near the end of the Soviet era, is a large Airborne Early

Warning and Control aircraft that can scan an area several hundred kilometres across for enemy aircraft, ships and missiles.

London-based think-tank IISS said in a 2021 report that Russia had nine A-50 aircraft in operation, including four modernised A-50U planes.

The Russian defence ministry said early last year that the modernised A-50U had been carrying out missions during the war in Ukraine.

The aircraft, which goes by the Nato reporting name of Mainstay, can detect more than 300 targets simultaneously, it said.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin on Monday said that talks in Davos on Kyiv’s peace proposals would achieve nothing as Russia was not participating in the discussions, and Moscow will continue its military operation in Ukraine until it achieves all its goals.

“This is simply talking for the sake of talking,” Kremlin

spokesman Dmitry Peskov said when asked about the discussions on Ukraine in Davos.

“This process cannot be aimed at achieving any specific results for the obvious reason — we are not participating. Without our participation, any discussions are devoid of any prospect of any results.”

Ukraine says it will not rest until every Russian soldier leaves its territory and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy has decreed that any talks with Russia are illegal.

Russia, which controls just under a fifth of Ukrainian territory, has dismissed Zelenskiy’s peace plan, known as his “peace formula”, as absurd as it aims to find peace without Russian participation.

Zelenskiy’s 10-point plan calls for the withdrawal of Russian troops, cessation of hostilities, and the restoration of Ukraine’s state borders with Russia. — Reuters

German farmers round off week of protests in Berlin

BERLIN: Thousands of angry farmers descended on Berlin with their tractors and loudly booed a government minister on Monday, rounding off a week of nationwide protests against plans to cut tax breaks for agriculture.

More than 5,000 tractors were already blocking the streets and honking their horns by mid-morning, a police spokeswoman said.

Finance Minister Christian Lindner put up a robust defence of the government’s plans at the protest, insisting they were about “how we can get out of a difficult situation together”.

But he was met with boos and whistles when he took to the podium, with protesters chanting “liar” and calling for the government to be ousted.

“For me, the government must resign. They are no longer capable of leading us,” Paul Brzezinski said, a dairy farmer based south-east of Berlin.

Farmers began a week of protests on January 8 over plans to axe certain subsidies for agriculture, after a court ruling forced the government to find savings in the 2024 budget.

The rallies prompted the government to partially walk

back on the cuts, promising to reinstate a discount on vehicle tax and to phase out a diesel subsidy over several years instead of immediately.

But farmers say the moves did not go far enough and are urging Berlin to completely reverse the plans.

“It’s not just about the most recent cuts. That was simply the straw that broke the camel’s back,” said Hendrik Pferdmenges, 45, a crop farmer from Hanover.

“We have lost too many subsidies in recent years, and there is so much regulation and bureaucracy that at some point we will no longer be able to cope,” he said.

The farmers’ demos have come at a time when approval ratings for Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s uneasy three-way coalition government are at an all-time low.

In a recent poll for the *Bild* daily, 64 per cent of Germans said they would like to see a change of government.

Workers from various sectors, from metallurgy and transport to education, have staged protests in recent weeks amid struggling economic growth and rising prices. — AFP



Tractors and trucks stand in front of Berlin’s landmark the Brandenburg gate during a protest of farmers and truck drivers, in Berlin. — AFP

Death start-ups vs life start-ups



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The writer is an entrepreneur and innovation adviser

Anyone interested in the entrepreneurship, small and medium enterprises and startups space has surely heard of *Start-up Nation*. This book by Dan Senor and Saul Singer, first published 2009, celebrated what it called “The Story of Israel’s Economic Miracle”.

On the bright side, for the past fifteen years, leaders around the world, most notably the French President Emmanuel Macron quoted *Start-up Nation* as the source of inspiration and ambition behind building their high-technology startups ecosystem. Moreover, Israeli companies ranked fourth in terms of the number of companies listed in the US’ stock market — NASDAQ. The number of Israeli companies listed in NASDAQ more than doubled, from around 63 in 2009 to 135 in 2023, behind only the US, Canada, and China.

No one would have ever guessed, that within this same timeframe, Israel will descend from the world’s celebrated start-up nation to be the 21st century’s genocide nation. A more important question for us as communities today is, how can we learn to nurture an inspiring entrepreneurial spirit, instead of nurturing a spirit of racism, hatred, death, starvation, and disease.

Death start-ups

Intelligence can be used for either the benefit or destruction of humanity, and one of the optimal ways to benefit humanity is by divesting from death start-ups and any regime that incubates them directly or indirectly. Israel is the regime in the world depleting billions of aid and subsidy dollars from the US and European Union to produce death and suffering around the world. It has invested in countless projects that used Palestinians as test subjects for evil weapons. This includes but is not limited to, suicide drones developed by companies such as SpearUAV, that have contributed to the targeted and killed around 12,000 children.

Another death start-up Smartshooter facilitated the gunning down of targets of refugees waving white flags, fleeing to “safe areas”. In addition, around 500 rescue workers, medical professionals, and journalists were identified and targeted by death armoured vehicles and drones. These are only a few examples of how people choose the wrong side of history by succumbing to hatred and excessive materialism with no regard to the destruction it is causing the world.

Life start-ups

On the brighter side, there are start-ups that

THIS IS THE RIGHT TIME TO INVEST IN START-UP COMMUNITIES THAT BUILD LIVES AND DIVEST FROM COMMUNITIES THAT ARE CONSUMED BY HATRED AND MATERIALISM

have chosen the road less travelled by and chose to benefit the life of their founders and life of others.

The Connecting Gaza project by Mirna El Helbawi chose to link hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and other people under siege, instead of investing their intelligence in providing weapons to kill people, animals and plants.

One of the most respected start-up founders and role models around the world Paddy Cosgrave, the founder of Web Summit, chose to step down to make a point that we need to stand by our allies by being tough on them when they commit crimes until they find their way back to the right path. He could have stayed silent and kept making good money while his soul weathered. A third role model is Paul Biggar, who lent his voice to the thousands of people who are prosecuted in the tech industry for speaking up for freedom. He founded tech4palestine after being evilly forced to step down from the start-up he founded circleci.

Tough times show us people’s true character. It is easy to be attracted to power even when it’s evil, and tough to stand by those who are less fortunate. This is the right time to invest in start-up communities that build lives and divest from communities that are consumed by hatred and materialism.

Indian songbird fights return after cruelty ban overturned

ANUP SHARMA

Squawking and screeching, tiny songbirds flutter around a fighting ring in a centuries-old Indian tradition decried by some as cruel but returning after an eight-year ban was overturned.

The red-vented bulbuls are cheered on by a packed crowd, with chanting spectators encouraging them to peck each other with their hooked beaks to win their freedom.

Bird fights at the Haigriva Madhav temple in Hajo in northeast India’s Assam state returned on Monday, after a ban was scrapped because Hindu priests argued it was part of their tradition.

“We have seen the birds fight since our childhood... the ritual of bird fight is very close to the people,” said Kichin Das, one of three judges who decides the winner based on the moves of the birds.

Supporters say the battles began after an 18th-century king saw two birds fighting, and it became a popular pastime to mark the harvest festival in January.

“This is a game from the era of kings,” said bird fighter Biswajit Biswasi, 49. “Since childhood, I have learned how to catch these birds and how to train them.” Traditionally, captured wild birds were goaded to fight through hunger before being fed an intoxicating spice mix — reportedly including cannabis, pepper, cinnamon and cloves.

“It’s a short game,” said Babul Mazumdar, who has captured birds to fight for 30 years.

“Whichever bird overpowers the other in, say three to four moves, is declared the winner.” In the past, losing birds had their fine head crest clipped to stop them from being entered into another fight. New rules mean the birds are now just inked on their tail feathers.

— AFP

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Here comes Trump, the abominable snowman



Maureen Dowd

It’s the latest hot TV genre: a woman in a frigid outpost, bundled in puffy outerwear, trying to uncover truths buried in ice.

In the new season of HBO’s “True Detective,” Jodie Foster is a cop trudging through snow trying to solve a murder in a remote Alaska town, described as “the end of the world.” On FX’s “A Murder at the End of the World,” Emma Corrin is an amateur sleuth trudging through snow trying to solve a murder in an isolated retreat in Iceland.

And now I find myself in puffy outerwear, trudging through snow in glacial Iowa, trying to uncover truths buried in the ice.

I don’t have as much of a mystery to unravel as the TV detectives. The only thing the horde of reporters here is trying to figure out is if Donald Trump will win the caucuses on Monday with a plurality or if he can pull off a majority. No one is expecting a Jimmy Carter/Barack Obama-style upset.

A blizzard on Friday froze the action. Drivers skidded all over Des Moines, with cars abandoned on highways. Candidates cancelled events and scrambled to do telephone town halls. CNN’s Jeff Zeleny donned fleece earmuffs for live reports. Journalists planning to arrive this weekend faced cancelled flights. With Trump and the others scrapping in-person rallies, reporters were left jaw-jawing with one another in the lobbies of the Hotel Fort Des Moines and the downtown Marriott.

On Friday evening, Trump posted a video, accusingly telling Iowa, “You have the worst weather, I guess, in recorded history.” Maybe he should have gotten here earlier instead of haranguing the judge in his New York fraud trial on Thursday.

Candidates’ surrogates resorted to extreme measures. Kari Lake, stumping for Trump in a yellow sweater — a Hawkeye colour for her alma mater — joked that they would use “the ancient strategy” of the telephone to reach voters.

Campaign aides to Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley were desperately calculating if the weather could give them an advantage: Maybe some of Trump’s older voters in rural areas



Snow falls in downtown Des Moines during blizzard conditions that brought brutally cold temperatures and the threat of low voter turnout at events hosted by Republican presidential candidates across the state of Iowa. — The New York Times

who have to drive a long way to caucus would not show up on Monday, which could be the coldest day in caucus history, with wind chills potentially hitting 40 below.

But the Trump crew here — including Donald Trump Jr. and Jason Miller — roamed around looking sanguine. “We’re confident, not cocky,” Miller said.

EVERY TIME THERE’S A MOVEMENT, THERE’S A COUNTERMOVEMENT, WHERE PEOPLE FEEL THAT THEIR PLACE IN THE WORLD IS THREATENED AND THEY WANT TO TURN BACK THE CLOCK. TRUMP HAS PLAYED ON THAT RESENTMENT

Compared with the poor ground game Trump had in 2016, when he came in second to “Lyin’ Ted” Cruz, as he called him, MAGA world is a model of organisation. And that should frighten Democrats.

“If you didn’t know any better, you’d think that our grassroots guys had all been media trained,” Miller said. “Some of these people, because they watch everything the president

does, they know any question. It doesn’t matter about whether it be the economy, Biden, witch hunt, Austin.” As in Lloyd. And “the president” Miller refers to is Trump.

With a snow day here, I had time to contemplate the real mystery of Iowa: What has happened to America? In January 2008, the Democratic caucuses offered a thrilling contest. In overwhelmingly white Iowa, Obama showed that Americans could propel a Black candidate into the Oval Office. Race was, remarkably, not a big factor in the contest.

When I saw Obama at his first event in New Hampshire after his Iowa win, I was still stunned at the result. “Wow,” I said to him. “You really did it.” He looked solemn and a bit blank, recalling the scene in “The Candidate” when Robert Redford, the young, charismatic pol, pulls off an upset over his more seasoned, status quo opponent and murmurs, “What do we do now?” It felt then as if we were embracing modernity and inclusion, moving away from the image of John Wayne’s America.

How could we have gone from such a hopeful moment to such a discordant one? Of course, every time there’s a movement, there’s a countermovement, where people feel that their place in the world is threatened and they want to turn back the clock.

— The New York Times

Indian Americans rise in US politics!

Of the many attacks between this year's US presidential candidates, some of the harshest have pitted Vivek Ramaswamy against Nikki Haley.

Ramaswamy went so far as to hold up a sign at a debate calling the South Carolina former governor and UN ambassador corrupt over her corporate work — and she has hit back hard, calling him untrustworthy and berating him for mentioning her children.

Personal attacks are routine in US politics, and both Haley and Ramaswamy, a 38-year-old entrepreneur who has never held elected office, are facing uphill climbs to wrest the Republican nomination from former president Donald Trump. But the two have something in common — they are children of Indian immigrants. Also expected on this year's ballot is Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris, whose mother came from India and whose father was born in Jamaica.

Indian Americans are split on whether the Ramaswamy versus Haley feud channels larger community tensions, but what is uncontestable is that Indian Americans are more politically prominent than ever before — and increasingly wearing their identity proudly.

It is another sign of success for the community, whose average household income is the highest of any US ethnic group. Raj Goyle, a former state lawmaker in Kansas and co-founder of Indian American Impact, a South Asian American political group, said that ethnic groups in the United States historically have waited for a greater comfort level and critical mass before entering politics.

"Indian Americans actually have had a quicker journey than other immigrant communities in terms of political success," he said.

He noted that Indian Americans



Shaun Tandon is State Dept Correspondent at AFP

INDIAN AMERICANS ARE SPLIT ON WHETHER THE RAMASWAMY VERSUS HALEY FEUD CHANNELS LARGER COMMUNITY TENSIONS

are unusual as an immigrant group in that many arrived as educated professionals, highly regarded by other Americans.

"When the first wave of us were elected, we had to think about how voters would react to our ethnicity," Goyle said.

While racism still exists, "Now, I think there's a very good argument to make that it's a huge plus."

While few give Ramaswamy much chance of winning the presidency, his candidacy marks a watershed in his embrace of his religion.

Asked at a debate in Iowa about his religion, Ramaswamy said: "I am a Hindu. I won't fake my identity."

Ramaswamy, who has made his name as a Trump-style rabble-rouser denouncing "woke" politics, has cast his Hinduism as in line with conservative Christian beliefs. He also explained to voters in farm state Iowa, which holds the nation's first caucus, how he is a vegetarian due to his religion.

Meanwhile, a Trump campaign aide, Chris LaCivita, told voters to "beware" of Ramaswamy's diet, also calling him a "fraud."

Haley, born Nimarata Nikki Randhawa in South Carolina, has spoken of converting to Christianity, and took her husband's surname. A previous Indian American who nursed higher ambitions, former Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal, similarly described his embrace of Christianity.

Harris has spoken at length of her Black identity but has also identified with India, recording a video during the 2020 election showing her cooking a masala dosa, a staple food for Tamils like her mother.

Maina Chawla Singh, a scholar at American University who has studied Indian Americans in politics, said the candidates were all "navigating" how to wear their identity.

HARVEST FESTIVAL!



Devotees walk beside a priest (C) dressed as 'Dipankar Buddha' during a religious procession on the occasion of Maghe Sankranti festival in Bhaktapur on the outskirts of Kathmandu, Nepal, on Monday. — AFP

The global mental-health crisis demands new thinking

The world is in the grips of a mental-health crisis. From rising climate anxiety in rich countries like the United States to intense trauma in conflict zones like Ukraine and Gaza (especially among children), psychological suffering has become widespread, and traditional healthcare services cannot keep up. This leaves tens of millions of people at risk of serious pathologies and suicide.

As it stands, more than 25 per cent of the world's population reports feelings of social isolation and loneliness, and more than 150,000 people aged 15-29 die by suicide each year. Climate change threatens to increase these bleak figures. As the American Psychiatric Association reports, climate change can "lead to job loss, force people to move, and harm social cohesion and community resources, all of which have mental-health consequences." Moreover, contemplating climate change and its consequences for both "national security and individual well-being" can cause "significant distress."

No groups are spared. Young people fear for their future; older people grieve the destruction of the world of their childhoods; and activists and climate scientists suffer from emotional burnout and despair.



Dixon Chibanda, a professor of psychiatry and global mental health at the University of Zimbabwe and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, is Founder of the Friendship Bench and the recipient of the 2023 McNulty Prize

EVEN RICH-COUNTRY PSYCHIATRIC SYSTEMS LACK THE CAPACITY TO OFFER TRADITIONAL MENTAL-HEALTH SERVICES AS WIDELY AS NEEDED

And this is to say nothing of the post-traumatic stress and depression experienced by those already affected by climate-related disasters, particularly in vulnerable developing economies.

Traditionally, a psychiatric patient would engage in one-on-one therapy with a trained doctor. But even rich-country health systems lack the capacity to offer such services as widely as is needed: in the US, more than 150 million people live in areas with too few mental-health professionals. Within a few years, the country could be short by as many as 31,100 psychiatrists.

The situation is even worse in poor and conflict-affected countries, where traditional psychiatric interventions are often very difficult to access, if they are available at all. Consider my home country, Zimbabwe: despite being a country of 16 million, it has just 13 psychiatrists and 20 clinical psychologists.

The consequences of this shortfall became starkly apparent in 2019, when Cyclone Idai tore through parts of Zimbabwe. The storm's powerful winds and heavy rains — and the massive flooding and landslides they triggered

— led to hundreds of deaths, displaced about 60,000 people, and demolished 50,000 homes. It also decimated unharvested crops, destroyed seed stocks, and killed livestock, leaving people without food or livelihoods. All of this contributed to mental-health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder.

Barely a year later, things got much worse: the Covid-19 pandemic forced nationwide lockdowns that further undermined people's socioeconomic well-being. The resulting mental-health problems were well beyond the healthcare system's capacity to handle.

But that did not mean

Zimbabwe had no options. The Friendship Bench project, which I founded, trains community volunteers without any prior medical or mental-health training to provide talk therapy from wooden park benches in all ten provinces of the country. We have so far trained more than 2,000 of these "grandmothers" to provide counselling to their local communities.

The programme works. In 2016, a randomised clinical trial found that patients with common mental disorders and indicators of depression who received Friendship Bench counselling had a significant decrease in symptoms. Communities with

access to Friendship Bench services also experienced improvements in other areas, from HIV outcomes to maternal and child health. Even the grandmothers delivering the therapy report that they have benefited from a stronger sense of belonging and resilience.

Others in lower-resource countries have also been pioneering new, scalable models for delivering high-quality, low-cost psychiatric care to communities where it was not previously available. One trailblazer is Sangath, an NGO headquartered in the Indian state of Goa that trains ordinary people to deliver psychosocial treatments, particularly in areas with little access to mental-health services. Clinical trials have consistently shown that these "lay counsellors" are effective in addressing a wide range of mental-health conditions, from depression and anxiety to alcohol-use disorders.

Similarly, StrongMinds trains "mental-health facilitators" to provide free group therapy to low-income women and adolescents with depression in Uganda and Zambia.

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More than 25 per cent of the world's population reports feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

sport

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Over 100 athletes to take part in 9th Oman Desert Marathon

ANUROOP ATHIPARAMBATH
MUSCAT, JAN 15

Over 100 international athletes will participate in the ninth edition of Oman Desert Marathon from January 20 to 23, according to the organisers.

International runners from Japan, Georgia, Switzerland, Italy, France, Spain, Denmark, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Ukraine and Morocco will be joined by a good number of Omani runners in the adventurous desert marathon at the golden sands of Bidiyah.

Launched in 2013, the Oman Desert Marathon is a self-sufficient 165 km race with four stages, including a night stage, across the spectacular Omani landscape and its varieties, from the Oasis Al Wasil, crossing the desert to Al Jawharat Resort.

The race is divided into four stages: 42 km on day one, 52 km on day two, 47 km on day three (night stage) and 22 km on the fourth and final day.



Like in the eighth edition, the Oman Desert Marathon will continue to be recognised by the International Trail Running Association (ITRA) so that the athletes will get international ranking points for their participation.

The race ensures the participant a unique opportunity to get acquaintance with the desert of the Sultanate of Oman, providing the opportunity for the runners to enjoy high and flat areas, including the night stage, during which the athletes will enjoy the magic of the desert illuminated by the stars.

Besides the classic 165 km race which attracts runners from all around the world, there are local races of shorter distances, such as 42 KM, 21 km, 10 km, 5 km and 2 km on the same day.

INSPIRING RUNNER

This year the race will have the particularity of an inspiring runner, a Spanish paralympic athlete born with hemiparesis, a cerebral paralysis that affected the development of the right side of his body. Pol Makuri will run the Omani Desert carrying all the food, sleeping bag and daily gear together with his team member, Albert Jorquera, a Spanish Journalist who specialises in Trail and Ultratrail. They will embark on it as a team, a unique journey to discover the most remote, untouched sands of the Omani Desert.

Pol and Albert like all the other runners will do in total 165 km in 4 days (one marathon per day) in very extreme conditions, only being provided water and shelter by the organisation.

Oman Desert Marathon for the first time will have 14 participants from Special Olympic Oman. A hearing-impaired athlete will run the 42 km and 13 kids with intellectual disabilities will run 2 km with their parents or teachers.

The race is being sponsored by a host of entities including the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism, Bidiyah Resort, OTSO Sport, Asaffa Chicken, Mwasalat, Lulu Hypermarket and Oman Airports.



New Zealand and Chile players fight for the ball during the FIH Olympic Qualifier at Hockey Oman Stadium in Al Amerat.

Germany thrash Canada, NZ beat Chile as Olympic Qualifier begins

ADIL AL BALUSHI
MUSCAT, JAN 15

World champions Germany thrashed their rivals Canada 9-0 in the opener of FIH Hockey Olympic Qualifier hosted in Muscat and began on Monday at the state-of-the-art hockey stadium in Al Amerat city. In the eight teams qualifying event, New Zealand snatched a 3-1 win against Chile in another Pool A match.

In the first match of the Hockey Olympic Qualifier event, it was a one-sided match as the world champions, coached by Andre Henning, dominated the proceedings against Canada.

Peillat Gonzalo opened the scoring and took his team in the lead early in the second minute from a penalty corner. Few minutes later, Ruhr Christopher doubled the lead from a penalty corner to make it at 2-0. Hartkopf Raphael slammed a field goal twice within four minutes as he scored in the 12th and 16th minutes. Germany led 3-0 after the first quarter.

The German players continued the goalscoring spree as Christopher struck in the

34th minute before and Gonzalo struck two minutes later to make it 6-0. Then, Miltkau Marco registered a brilliant field goal to make it 7-0 before Wellen Niklas netted another field goal. Grambusch Tom netted the concluding goal in the 58th minute as Germany drubbed Canada with a 9-0 win. During all the quarters of the match, Canada players could not get a chance to penetrate the strong defence of the opponents as they failed to register a single goal in the game.

With the big win, Germany are on top of the Pool A with three points while New Zealand are second with the same credit but with less goal difference.

New Zealand claim win

New Zealand claimed three crucial points from their first match in Pool A after defeating Chile 3-1 in a tough game.

Smith Jake netted a brace with a field goal in the 6th minute and seven minutes later Boyde Scott doubled the lead with another field goal.

The first quarter ended at 2-0 while in the following both teams failed to register any

goals until Lane Sam increased the lead to 3-0 in the third quarter with a field goal. The only goal for Chile was scored by Becerra Franco in the fourth quarter.

A total of 12 matches will be played at the newly built stadium until January 21 and it will be followed by FIH Hockey5s World Cup from January 24 to 31. Pool A comprises Great Britain, Malaysia, Pakistan and China while Pool B features Germany, New Zealand, Canada and Chile teams. The playing format in the Hockey Olympic Qualifier will be based on a league system from one round as the first and second ranked teams in each pool will advance to the semifinals and the top three teams will secure tickets to Olympic Games.

The third and fourth ranked teams in the pool play classification matches (5th to 8th positions). The group matches started on Monday and will run until Thursday. On Saturday, the semifinal and classification matches will take place while on the following day, the final and the bronze-medal match to decide the three top winners will be staged.



Football fever grips Oman ahead of opener

SHADDAD AL MUSALMY
@shadadm

From giant projector screens at cafes to television sets at homes, Asian Cup fever has gripped the nation as the much-awaited match between Oman and Saudi Arabia kicks off on Tuesday evening.

Cafes throughout the city have demarcated areas where matches will be shown live on giant screens as football fans enjoy the thrills and spills of the matches during the next few weeks.

In Muscat, most football lovers prefer to watch big tournament matches like the Fifa World Cup, Uefa Championship League, or Euro Championship in groups and now Asian Cup, with cafes filled during football season.

Even though football fans in

the Sultanate of Oman have to spend a good amount to watch the games on TV from the comfort of their homes, the enthusiasm refuses to subside. “I don’t mind paying to enjoy the matches. This is a one-time thing in years,” Sabri Abdullah, a football fan, said.

Fans said the Asian Cup is something not to be missed since Oman is taking part. “I am so excited and I have reserved one room at home for the purpose because I expect to watch the matches with my friends at home,” Mohammed al Balushi, a Suhar-based football fan, said.

Meanwhile, across the country, both young and old are gearing up to celebrate the spirit of football. While some prefer to watch at home, many prefer to watch the matches at cafes in big groups. “I will be watching the

matches with my friends in one of the coffee shops where they have put up big screens. The match is more fun when you are in a big group,” Taha Mohammed, another football fan said.

But for some, they prefer to be home with family. “I have invested in big screen TV for the purpose. I try to make such events a family affair and I never like the idea of going out in public places to watch the matches,” Hassan al Numani, a resident of Al Amerat, said.

This is the first encounter between Oman and the Saudi team in the Asian Cup, and the fifth appearance of the Oman team in the Asian Cup, as it has never achieved any victory in each of the previous four opening matches after drawing one match and losing in the other three matches.



Vinicius hat-trick lands Super Cup for Real Madrid



Real Madrid captain Nacho Fernandez holds the trophy as he celebrates with his teammates after winning the Spanish Super Cup final against Barcelona at Al-Awwal Park Stadium in Riyadh. – AFP

RIYADH: Vinicius Junior struck a first-half hat-trick to fire Real Madrid to Spanish Super Cup glory in a thumping 4-1 win over rivals Barcelona on Sunday in Saudi Arabia.

Robert Lewandowski scored for Barcelona, who had defender Ronald Araujo sent off in the second half on what coach Xavi Hernandez described as the team's "worst" night.

Rodrygo rounded off Real Madrid's rout as they won the competition for the 13th time, avenging last year's final defeat by record 14-time winners Barcelona.

"(Vinicius) needed two or three games to get back to his best level, and he's back to it," said Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti.

The Italian has now gone level with Zinedine Zidane on 11 trophies won at the helm of Los Blancos, behind only Miguel Munoz on 14.

"I'm happy, but now we've got

to go for the 12th," Ancelotti told Real Madrid TV.

Spanish champions Barcelona were hoping a victory could kick-start their season, as it did last year, but were left soundly beaten, after Vinicius netted two early goals.

"(I'm) disappointed, sad ... this is football and today we have to deal with the bitter side of the game," Xavi told Movistar.

"We had a lot of hope and excitement going into the final and we've had our worst game of all of them."

Xavi turned to a four-man midfield to try and keep the ball to reduce Madrid's opportunities to counter attack with flying wingers Vinicius and Rodrygo — it didn't work.

Spain international Pedri started in place of winger Raphinha, who suffered a hamstring injury in the semifinal win over Osasuna.

Ancelotti brought in midfielder



Real Madrid's Brazilian forward Vinicius Junior celebrates after scoring his second goal.

Toni Kroos, who like in the thrilling semifinal derby win over Atletico Madrid, was jeered by spectators at the Al Awwal Park stadium in Riyadh, for criticising players moving to the Saudi league from Europe.

One of the first was Cristiano Ronaldo and Vinicius' celebration brought him to mind after opening the scoring in the seventh minute.

The Brazilian, recently back after injury, was sent through by

a perfect pass by Jude Bellingham and he slickly rounded Inaki Pena before slotting home.

Vinicius imitated Ronaldo's classic jump and spin celebration in homage to Madrid's all-time top goalscorer. Three minutes later, Vinicius pounced again, this time set up by Rodrygo who exploited Barcelona's high line and cut the ball across for his compatriot to slide in.

'RESET'

Xavi's side scrambled furiously for a response and Ferran Torres hit the crossbar before Andriy Lunin tipped Lewandowski's follow up over.

The Ukrainian goalkeeper could do nothing, however, to keep Lewandowski's vicious volley out in the 33rd minute, hammered in hard and low from the edge of the box. However instead of fighting back, Araujo swiftly gifted Vinicius a chance to complete his hat-trick from the

penalty spot by tugging back the forward in the box.

Vinicius drilled his penalty into the bottom left corner for his first Clasico hat-trick to double his goal tally against Barcelona -- he had previously scored only three in 15 games.

Xavi rolled the dice in the second half with an attacking triple substitution but Madrid soon had their fourth.

Araujo completed a dismal night by earning a red card as he hacked Vinicius in frustration.

Rodrygo was in the right place at the right time to convert after Jules Kounde blocked a Vinicius cut-back searching for Bellingham.

Kounde cleared a low effort from England international Bellingham off the line as Madrid sought another to rub salt in their rivals' wounds late on.

"We need to reset ourselves and fight for the three trophies we have left," added Xavi. — AFP

AL MUTHLA GOLDEN, PEACE PLAYERS, FAGOR FCC POST WINS

MUSCAT: Al Muthla Golden CT beat Aflag Group CT in the C Division League 2023-24 powered by Credit Oman at the Municipality Grounds in Al Amerat.

Al Muthla Golden CT posted a total of 193 courtesy Ali Asgar Saifee's 85. Bilal Suleiman picked 2 wickets each. In reply, Junaid Iqbal's 97 was in vain as Aflag fell short by 10 runs in the chase. Shyam Lekshman scalped 4 wickets.

In the E Division League 2023-24 powered by Credit Oman, Peace Players dominated Blue Caps Cricket at the Municipality Grounds in Al Amerat.

Muhammed Rashid's brilliant century scoring 111 and Tejesh Shetty's 59 helped Peace Players post a mammoth target of 248. Shifin Shajahan picked 2 wickets. In reply, Shifin Shajahan scored 46 but Blue Caps were restricted to a mere 131 courtesy 3 wickets each from Muhammed Abrar and Arslan Zaheer.

In the G Division League 2023-24, Fagor FCC beat OCT Al Amerat by 44 runs at the Municipality Grounds.

BRIEF SCORES

Fagor FCC 165-5 in 20 overs (Josephin Joseph 57 (50b); Abdullah Mohd al Balushi 3-50) beat OCT Al Amerat 121-7 in 20 overs (Abdullah Mohd al Balushi 54 (53b); Fasil V 3-18) by 44 runs. Al Muthla Golden CT 193-5 in 20 overs (Ali Asgar Saifee 85 (65b); Bilal Suleiman 2-34) beat Aflag Group CT 183-6 in 20 overs (Junaid Iqbal 97 (47b); Shyam Lekshman 4-24) by 10 runs. Peace Players 247-5 in 20 overs (Muhammed Rashid 111 (53b); Shifin Shajahan 2-37) beat Blue Caps Cricket 131-8 in 20 overs (Shifin Shajahan 46 (40b); Arslan Zaheer 3-16) by 116 runs.



Muhammed Rashid of Peace Players

Security and Safety Services bag Al Rusayl Industrial City Cup

MUSCAT: Security and Safety Services clinched the 2023 Al Rusayl Industrial City Football Cup, defeating United Engineering Services 2-0 in the final that was held under the auspices of Eng Dawood bin Salim al Haddabi, CEO of Madayn.

The tournament, which kicked off three weeks ago at the Oman Cement Company's field, witnessed spirited competition among 15 companies and factories. This event serves as a strategic initiative, promoting social cohesion and enhancing communication networks within the industrial community.



Osaka crashes out as Medvedev, Gauff power on

MELBOURNE: Two-time Australian Open champion Naomi Osaka's Grand Slam comeback ended abruptly on Monday, crashing out to Caroline Garcia, but US Open winner Coco Gauff and men's third seed Daniil Medvedev surged on in Melbourne.

On a baking-hot day at Melbourne Park, men's seventh seed Stefanos Tsitsipas and women's sixth seed Ons Jabeur also tasted first-round victory.

But Wimbledon champion Marketa Vondrousova and veteran Andy Murray made early exits.

Japanese star Osaka, 26, stepped away from the sport in September 2022, citing mental health concerns.

After giving birth to a baby girl in July, she decided to return for the new season and was back at the scene of her title-winning exploits in 2019 and 2021.

But she was unable to rediscover her championship-winning form against 16th-seeded Frenchwoman Garcia after just two competitive games in



Coco Gauff of the US in action during her first round match against Slovakia's Anna Karolina Schmiedlova. — Reuters

Brisbane since returning.

"She's been through a lot but I'm just very glad to see her back and I hope she can enjoy the tennis now and have fun out there. She's a great girl," said Garcia.

"I mean, six months after giving birth she is playing quite amazing already, so we have to watch out."

Medvedev battled tough conditions on Margaret Court Arena against French qualifier Terence Atmane, who smashed his racquet, served underarm and retired in tears after suffering bad cramping that forced him off court

while losing 5-7, 6-2, 6-4, 1-0.

"When I started to feel tough physically he started cramping, so it was brutal conditions," said Russia's Medvedev, a finalist in 2021 and 2022.

"I was getting tired but many times in these situations the other guy is getting tired too and it's about who manages it better." The Russian will face Finland's unseeded Emil Ruusuvuori in the next round.

Tsitsipas, who lost last year's final to Novak Djokovic, was stunned by Belgian lucky loser



France's Caroline Garcia in action during her first round match against Japan's Naomi Osaka. — Reuters

Zizou Bergs in the first set, but woke up to seize complete control and win 5-7, 6-1, 6-1, 6-3.

But the tournament is over for five-time finalist Murray, possibly for the last time.

The 36-year-old British player crashed out to Argentine 30th seed Tomas Martin Etcheverry in three sets, admitting that "not much went right".

"It's a definite possibility that will be the last time I play here," he said.

Women's fourth seed Gauff said ahead of the opening Grand

Slam of the year that she wanted to win "multiple" major titles after her breakthrough at the US Open in 2023.

The 19-year-old put the plan into motion with a 6-3, 6-0 rout of Slovakia's 68th-ranked Anna Karolina Schmiedlova on centre court. "I was a little bit nervous coming in today. Probably could tell. I was able to just calm down and then play good, not my best, but good tennis," said Gauff, who successfully defended her Auckland title in the lead-up.

— AFP



Oman ready for Saudi challenge: Ivankovic

WALEED AL JAHWARI
DOHA, JAN 15

The Oman national football team ended the last training session ahead of a strong Group F match against Saudi Arabia at Khalifa International Stadium in Qatar capital of Doha, for the opening round of Asian Cup Qatar 2023.

Oman are 74th in Fifa ranking while Saudis are 56th. In Asian level, Oman are 10th while Saudis are fifth. The Red Warriors will enter the championship with high morale after undergoing successful internal preparation camp in Muscat and external preparation camp in UAE, which concluded with two wins, 2-0 against China and 1-0 against the UAE.

The match will also be a face off between Oman's Croatian coach Branko Ivankovic and Saudi Arabia's Italian coach Roberto Mancini. Ivankovic, 69, who led Oman in 39 matches, achieved 20 victories, draw in 7 matches, and lost in 12 matches. Under him Oman scored 55 goals and received 40 goals.

Branko explained in the press conference, "We are very excited for tomorrow's match, and we are proud that we are here among the best Asian teams." He added, "the tournament will be one of the strongest tournaments in the history of Asian nations, in my view, because of the development of teams in all regions of Asia in the last 10 years, and we participate



Oman head coach Branko Ivankovic

with high ambitions. Our group is difficult, not easy, and we expect to go beyond the group stage".

"Regardless of the strong opponent that we will face on Tuesday, over the past period we have played strong matches with strong teams and we have done well. We have sufficient information about the Saudi national team, they have a new, international coach whose capabilities are known, and we are not afraid of the Saudi national team," he said.

HAREB PROMISES TOP PERFORMANCE

Oman captain Hareb al Saadi said the team is ready to meet Saudi Arabia. "We are very excited about the beginning and are looking forward to making Omani people happy, and we promise fans with a worthy performance."

"We had played two matches with Saudi in the World Cup qualifiers in Muscat and Jeddah. We are not afraid of any team, but we respect the opponents."

Saudi coach Roberto Mancini

said: "We are well prepared and the Oman team is very strong and the first match is always difficult, and we will do our best to win, and each match has its own circumstances".

"Oman is not an easy team at all, but rather difficult and includes good players in the midfield and attack, we expect a tough match," he added.

Ivankovic likely will follow the usual 4-4-2 style of play, relying on Ibrahim al Mukhaini in goalkeeping. The four defenders consisted of Khaled al Breiki, Ahmed al Khamisi, Arshad al Alawi and Ahmed al Kaabi. The midfield will consist of Harib al Saadi, Abdullah Fawaz, Jamil al Yahmadi and Salah al Yahyaei. The front-line will most likely rely on Mohsen al Ghassani and Issam al Subhi.

Oman, who started their Asian Cup campaign in 2004 in China, made it to the last 16 round for the first time in UAE 2019. Oman played 13 matches in their four appearances, won three, drew three and lost seven matches. They scored 10 goals and conceded 17 goals. They were eliminated from the group stage in three editions while qualified for the second round in the UAE edition.

The Saudi team participated in 10 previous editions, they played 48 matches with 21 wins, 13 draws and 14 losses. They scored 69 goals, conceded 48 goals and were crowned champion three times in 1984, 1988 and 1996.

Lee upstages misfiring Son as South Korea win opener

DOHA: Lee Kang-in said he was "learning a lot" after upstaging Son Heung-min with two goals for South Korea in a 3-1 win over Bahrain on Monday to launch their Asian Cup campaign.

The Paris Saint-Germain attacking midfielder hit a second-half brace in Doha as South Korea made a solid start in their bid to lift the title for the first time since 1960.

Tottenham Hotspur talisman Son was guilty of two glaring misses and suffered the indignity of a late yellow card for diving in the Bahrain box.

Instead it was Lee who took centre stage, digging Jurgen Klinsmann's side out of trouble after Bahrain cancelled out Hwang In-beom's opener early in the second half.



South Korea's Lee Kang-in celebrates after scoring their third goal with Hwang In-beom and Cho Gue-sung. – Reuters

Lee has impressed since joining PSG from Mallorca last summer and said it was "a privilege" to play with his star team-mates for club and country.

"I'm learning a lot, but it's not just about football — I'm learning a lot off the field as well," said the 22-year-old. "I try to learn as much as possible and develop into a better person and a better football player."

Lee was a peripheral figure under previous South Korea coach Paulo Bento but Klinsmann has made him central to his plans since taking over last year. The German, a World Cup winner as a player, said Lee had provided a touch of class in an otherwise "scrappy" game that

saw five South Korean players booked.

"He scored two goals in the opening game and he deserves to be man of the match, he had a very good performance," said Klinsmann. "It was a tricky game. That had a lot to do with the referee giving too many yellow cards early."

SON FLUFFS LINES

Bayern Munich defender Kim Min-jae and Son were among those booked, with the Spurs forward enduring a frustrating time in front of goal.

He missed two gilt-edged chances in the second half and said the team "had to do better".

The Koreans laboured early in the match but Hwang In-beom

broke the deadlock with just over five minutes of the first half remaining. Bahrain came out for the second half in search of an equaliser and they got one in the 51st minute.

South Korea goalkeeper Kim Seung-gyu parried the ball and Abdullah Al-Hashash was there to slam home the rebound.

Lee restored South Korea's lead five minutes later, collecting a pass outside the box and lashing home with his left foot. He bagged his second in the 69th minute, dancing through the Bahrain defence before coolly slotting the ball home.

In a later Group D match, Iraq beat Indonesia 3-1 to start their campaign on a winning note.

— AFP



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New multinational joint venture to manufacture satellites in Oman

HIBBA AL KINDI
MUSCAT, JAN 15

ETCO Space, the company behind the successful launch of Oman's first satellite last November — has announced the launch of a new company to support satellite manufacturing and space launch services in the Sultanate of Oman.

The announcement was made at the 1st Middle East Space Conference held in Muscat last week.

According to a press statement issued by ETCO Space on Monday, the new company, "Spazers", will also build and operate ground stations in Oman and the Middle East.

The company is a result of a joint effort between ETCO Space, Polish satellite manufacturer SatRev and Polish tech company Tuatara — the same group of companies behind the launch of "Aman-1".

Last November, ETCO Space successfully launched satellite "Aman-1" on board of SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket after a failed attempt in January of 2023.

According to a company official, data collected from the



Representatives of ETCO Space, SatRev and Tuatara at the JV agreement signing.

nanosatellite will be utilised in various sectors including oil and gas, urban planning and environmental monitoring.

The Sultanate of Oman has recently placed a strong emphasis on the space industry as part of a broader plan of enhancing its digital economy.

Last year, the Ministry of

THE NEW COMPANY, "SPAZERS", WILL ALSO BUILD AND OPERATE GROUND STATIONS IN OMAN AND THE MIDDLE EAST.

Transport, Communications and Information Technology unveiled the national executive

space programme in efforts of positioning Oman as a regional space hub.

Experts predict that the Middle East is projected to become a global hotspot for space activities over the next few years as the space market is expected to grow to a \$57 billion worth industry in 2030.

Wheat production in Oman surges by 229%



MUSCAT: Wheat production in the Sultanate of Oman surged by 229 per cent during agricultural season 2022/2023 to a total of 7,119 tonnes, compared to 2,169 tonnes during agricultural season 2021/2022.

Statistics issued by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources show wheat was grown on a total area of 6,359 acres of land during agricultural season 2022/2023, an increase of 160 per cent over the previous season.

The number of wheat farmers also grew by 24 per cent, the ministry reported.

According to the report, Dhofar Governorate took the lead in wheat production with 5,940 tonnes or 83% of the total volume of production followed by Al Dakhiliyah Governorate

(801 tonnes), Al Dhahirah Governorate (249 tonnes), Al Buraimi Governorate (38 tonnes), Al Batinah North Governorate (35 tonnes), Al Sharqiyah North Governorate (33 tonnes), Al Batinah South Governorate (16 tonnes), Musandam Governorate (2.4 tonnes), Al Sharqiyah South Governorate (2.3 tonnes) and Muscat Governorate (0.7 tonnes).

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources signed a memorandum of cooperation with the Oman Flour Mills to enhance the purchase of locally produced wheat from Omani farmers during the harvest season. The company received 5,000 tonnes of wheat during 2022/2023 farming season. — ONA

JW Marriott Muscat inauguration marks completion of Madinat Al Irfan East Phase I

MUSCAT: Oman Tourism Development Company (Omran Group) yesterday celebrated the completion of Phase I of Madinat Al Irfan East through the official inauguration of JW Marriott Hotel Muscat.

This event marks the introduction of the globally acclaimed JW Marriott brand to Oman, signifying a momentous stride in positioning Oman as a leading global tourism destination.

The inauguration ceremony was held under the auspices of Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism, along with esteemed dignitaries, Omran Group officials, and key figures in Oman's tourism industry.

JW Marriott Hotel Muscat, a 5-star facility with an investment of approximately RO 47 million, encompasses 304 rooms and suites.

As part of the Marriott Bonvoy international hotel chain, it is the first JW Marriott branded hotel in Oman. Strategically located in the heart of Madinat Al Irfan East and directly linked



The inauguration ceremony was held under the auspices of Salim bin Mohammed al Mahrouqi, Minister of Heritage and Tourism.

to the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre (OCEC), the hotel is poised to offer exceptional experiences to its guests, significantly contributing to Oman's tourism sector.

Salim al Mahrouqi remarked on the completion of Phase I of Madinat Al Irfan East, stating that it represents a pivotal stage in the urban development of the city, creating a vibrant tourist destination that celebrates Omani identity.

With comprehensive facilities like the OCEC, designed to global architectural and environmental standards,

this development aligns meticulously with Oman Vision 2040's objectives to promote sustainable tourism development, economic diversification, and preservation of natural resources.

On his turn, Dr Hashil Obaid al Mahrouqi, Chief Executive Officer of Omran Group, remarked, "This project is a direct reflection of our vision to advance the tourism sector by utilising our rich historical and cultural heritage to enhance the Sultanate of Oman's position in the global tourism market.

It plays a crucial role in



contributing to economic development and is designed to provide distinctive and unparalleled tourism experiences that appeal to citizens, residents, and international tourists.

Our commitment at the Group is to develop premier tourism assets that support and strengthen the incentive tourism, business, and conference sectors. We are also dedicated to elevating the local market and the hospitality and tourism sectors. Our efforts are geared towards enhancing the destination's capacity to host major conferences, events, and functions.

Furthermore, we are focused on augmenting the local value by creating opportunities for local enterprises, small and medium-sized businesses, and generating approximately 300 direct job opportunities."



جهاز الضرائب
TAX AUTHORITY

Announcement



The Tax Authority would like to draw the attention of taxpayers who are subject to VAT & Excise Tax to submit their returns for the fourth quarter of 2023, according to the forms prepared for this purpose through Tax Authority's Portal www.taxoman.gov.om not later than Jan 30, 2024

We hope everyone will abide and commit to the deadline of sumbitting.

Make moments exciting with Kia Sorento SUV

MUSCAT: The perfect companion for routine or unplanned journeys, the powerful, capable and spacious Kia Sorento SUV give you the advantage of making moments exciting on every drive.

The Sorento's stylish design is complemented by its eye-catching alloy wheels, LED headlamps, LED daytime running lights, LED front and rear fog lamps, LED rear combination lamps and remote engine start.

Contributing to making drives relaxing is the interior features that include power windows, Bluetooth, 60:40 split rear seats, smart phone wireless charger, Android auto and car play, 8" audio display, audio remote



control, fabric seats, dual full automatic A/C, 3rd row AC vents and more. Powering the Sorento is a 2.5L engine with 177 HP and 23.7 kg.m. torque.

The engine is paired to a 6-speed automatic transmission. Adding to driving delights is the drive mode select offering the driver choices to enjoy exciting driving experiences on varied terrains.

A range of advanced safety features in the Sorento increase the joy on every journey. They include Anti-lock Braking System (ABS), Electronic Stability Program (ESP), Vehicle Stability Management (VSM), Tyre Pressure Monitoring System (TPMS), Driver and Front Passenger Airbags, Blind Spot Collision Avoidance Assist (BCA), Lane Keeping Assist (LKA), Forward Collision Avoidance Assist (FCA) and Lane Following Assist (LFA).

Reliable International Automotive (RIA), the distributor for Kia in Oman provides a rewarding ownership experience for customers.

Excellent product attributes and unmatched facilities easily ensure their absolute satisfaction, every mile of the way.

No wonder then that Reliable International Automotive has been ranked amongst the top Kia distributors worldwide and has been honoured with prestigious accolades including the 'Good Partnership award, 'Family Like Care' Service award, and 'Kia 'Distributor of Distinction' award.

Bank Muscat LuLu Titanium Mastercard credit card gains esteemed recognition

MUSCAT: In recognition of its leadership in innovation and distinctive products offerings, Bank Muscat, the leading financial services provider in Oman, has received the award of the Largest Co-Branded Credit Card in Oman, at the Mastercard MENA East Business Forum, held in Dubai, UAE recently.

The event was attended by a large number of leaders and officials representing regional banking and financial institutions. This award, presented by Mastercard, is a testament to the substantial growth and positive performance of the Bank Muscat LuLu Titanium Mastercard credit card, the only exclusive co-branded Mastercard credit card in Oman.

Speaking on the occasion, Abdullah bin Tamman al Maashani, General Manager — Products, Bank Muscat, said: "These continuous commendations and awards are always a matter of pride and delight as they reflect Bank Muscat's leadership in innovating banking solutions that suit the



This award is a testament to the substantial growth and positive performance of the Bank Muscat LuLu Titanium Mastercard credit card.

lifestyle of customers and meet their aspirations. The bank's products are always sought for at the local and international level.

This makes us strive to provide unmatched banking experience when designing banking products to include all segments of society and meet their continuous and growing needs. I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to our valued customers for their trust in the services and products offered by the bank."

Gina Petersen-Skyrme, Vice President and Country Business Development Lead, UAE & Oman, Mastercard, said: "Mastercard and Bank Muscat share a commitment to placing customers at the heart of everything we do.

The strong performance of our co-branded credit card is a clear proof of the success of our common strategy of providing superior lifestyle benefits, exciting deals, priceless experiences and a rewarding banking journey."

Commenting on the accolade, Ananth A V — Director, Lulu Group International, Oman, India

congratulated the BankMuscat Retail Cards Team.

"This Mastercard product and the offerings are so well conceived, it is proving to be such a big draw amongst the customers. While the Lulu Card is the most preferred card in the Bank Muscat portfolio, he wished the team even more success in the days to come and hoped that the card would give the customers adequate reasons to use it prudently", he added.

The Bank Muscat LuLu Titanium Mastercard credit card is designed with benefits that deliver real value in everyday life. Cardholders can earn 2% of their purchase value at LuLu Hypermarket, in addition to 0.5% of purchase value at other local and international merchants, as LuLu reward points. Complementing customers' travel-oriented lifestyles, the card provides complimentary access to over 10 airport lounges* in the UAE, KSA, Jordan, Kuwait and Egypt as well as free travel insurance. It also offers financial flexibility through access to a wide network of easy payment plan merchants

Ooredoo's Qadaa programme turns members into leaders



Qadaa 2.0 was launched during a signing ceremony with BBusiness.

MUSCAT: Effective leaders in the workplace are not born but made through hard work, as the saying goes. Therefore, Ooredoo launched the 'Qadaa Leadership Excellence Programme 2.0', the latest edition of its bespoke two-year leadership training programme, provides Ooredoo select team members with the skills to become effective leaders. Qadaa 2.0 is developed for both senior and aspiring leaders to teach them how to bring out the best in their team to get things done.

"Qadaa is a transformational leadership development programme that forms part of Ooredoo's continuing drive to train and upskill team members. We initiated Qadaa to build and maintain a culture of sustained Ooredoo leadership across the organisation.

We want our managers to use a specific leadership style to support their team in thriving, while solid management is based on consistency," said Sulaiman al Mughairi, Acting Chief People Officer at Ooredoo.

Qadaa 2.0 was launched during a signing ceremony with BBusiness, and the innovative course includes learning, practice and coaching throughout. The programme was initiated in 2016 to ensure all managers across all levels, are given the opportunity to perform and achieve optimally across the company.

To learn more about Ooredoo's company culture and also its award-winning products and services, head to www.ooredoo.om.

NBO unlocks opportunities for the next generation through its new youth account

MUSCAT: Reiterating its dedication to serving the diverse financial needs of the community, National Bank of Oman (NBO) has recently launched its latest banking solution, the Youth Account, custom-designed for individuals aged 13 to 17.

This innovative account affirms NBO's commitment to equipping Oman's youth with essential financial skills through their first banking experience. "Empowering the youth is not just about securing their financial future; it's about shaping a generation of responsible, confident and financially savvy individuals.

As a bank that believes in nurturing financial literacy from an early age and promoting financial inclusion, we are excited to offer teenagers a dedicated bank account and Debit Card, allowing them to embark on their financial journey responsibly.

With our Youth Account, NBO is taking a significant step towards realising this vision, providing young minds with the tools they need to



thrive in the world of finance and contribute positively to the growth of the society," said Ali Mustafa, Assistant General Manager and Head of Private Banking and Segments at NBO.

NBO's Youth Account is thoughtfully designed to cater to a diverse range of young individuals within the community. It is open to both Omani citizens and expatriates, underscoring its dedication to inclusivity. This account boasts a comprehensive set of features aimed at providing young people with an enriching and empowering banking experience.

Lynk & Co drives to victory as 'Car Brand of the Year - 2023' in Oman

MUSCAT: In a resounding celebration of automotive excellence, Lynk & Co, the esteemed premium global automotive brand under the 'Mobility Auto' banner, has clinched the prestigious 'Car Brand of the Year-2023' title in Oman at the TAS Business Awards.

The accolade was presented by Sayyid Saud bin Hilal al Busaidy, Governor of Muscat, during The Arabian Stories Conclave held in December at the W Hotels Muscat.

The TAS Business Awards, a hallmark of excellence and innovation, recognised Lynk & Co for its unwavering commitment to innovation, quality, and the creation of driving experiences that deeply resonate with the modern consumer.

Jointly owned by Volvo and Geely, Lynk & Co has emerged as a dynamic force in the



automotive industry, boasting a portfolio infused with cutting-edge technology, sustainability, and contemporary design.

Riyadh Ali Sultan, Director of Mobility Auto LLC, accepted the esteemed trophy on behalf of Lynk & Co, expressing gratitude for the recognition.

He stated, "Receiving the 'Car Brand of the Year' award is a testament to Lynk & Co's relentless pursuit of excellence in car manufacturing & driving experiences.

We are honoured to be acknowledged for our innovative approach, emphasis on connectivity, and our strides in shared mobility."

Lynk & Co's success extends beyond accolades, as the brand has been actively expanding its footprint in Oman, introducing its models 01, 03, 03+, 05 and 09 through a seamless blend of online and offline channels.

The recent inauguration

of the Lynk & Co centre at Ghala Heights underscores the brand's dedication to delivering exceptional customer experiences, covering sales, after-sales service, and spare parts.

Known for its innovative approach to car manufacturing and a steadfast focus on connectivity and shared mobility, Lynk & Co stands as a true industry game-changer.

The 'Car Brand of the Year' recognition mirrors the brand's triumph in resonating with a diverse audience and setting new benchmarks in the automotive landscape.

As Lynk & Co continues to drive the future of mobility, the award reinforces its commitment to redefining the automotive industry through groundbreaking technology, sustainability practices, and an unwavering dedication to customer satisfaction.



In brief

LONDON

**OIL DROPS MORE THAN 1 PER CENT DESPITE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT**

Oil prices lost more than 1% on Monday as the Middle East conflict's limited impact on crude output prompted profit taking after oil benchmarks gained 2% last week.

Brent crude futures were down \$1.14, or about 1.5%, at \$77.68 a barrel and US West Texas Intermediate crude lost \$1.15, or 1.6%, to \$72.05

Several tanker owners steered clear of the Red Sea and multiple tankers changed course on Friday after US and Britain launched strikes against Ansar Allah targets in Yemen after the group's attacks on shipping in response to Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza. — **Reuters**

NEW YORK

**BANK VALUATIONS COULD RISE BY \$7 TRILLION IN FIVE YEARS**

Global banks could boost their valuations by a combined \$7 trillion in the next five years if they take major steps to promote growth and boost productivity, the Boston Consulting Group said in a report on Monday.

Lenders could roughly double their current valuations if they pursue growth and improved price-to-book ratios despite obstacles, the consultant said.

"The largest driver of pessimism about the banking sector has been the significant drop in profitability," BGC said. About 75% of bank stocks had price-to-book ratios below 1 in 2022, while price-to-earnings multiples were almost half of 2008 levels. — **Reuters**

DAVOS

**UNITED STATES TOPS PUBLIC DISTRUST IN INNOVATION**

Business and governments are doing a poor job of managing and regulating new technologies, a survey of people ahead of this week's World Economic Forum's annual meeting has found.

The Edelman survey, released as the WEF meeting is set to begin under the theme "Rebuilding Trust", found 39% of respondents asked if they trusted business and NGOs with introducing innovations and governments to regulate them, said it was poorly managed. Just 22% said it was well managed.

Still, business was the most trusted category to integrate innovation into society, ahead of NGOs and media. — **Reuters**

Membership of Islamic Corp to unlock new funding source for Oman's private sector

CONRAD PRABHU

MUSCAT, JAN 15

Oman's recent endorsement of the establishment of the Islamic Corporation for the Development of the Private Sector (ICD) potentially open the way for a new source of Islamic finance for private sector projects and entrepreneurial startups in the Sultanate of Oman.

Royal Decree 88/2023, issued on December 27, 2023, effectiveness ratifies the agreement setting up the Jeddah-based Islamic Corporation as an organ of the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) Group.

Founded in November 1999, the ICD has been conceived as a multilateral development financial institution that supports the economic development of its member countries.

With the ratification of the



underlying agreement establishing the ICD, Oman becomes the 56th member country of the Islamic Corporation. Other shareholders of the Corporation, which was set up with an authorised capital of \$4 billion, include the Islamic Development Bank and five public financial institutions.

The timing of its membership of the multilateral development financial institution is significant

particularly as Oman rolls out a new Sustainable Finance Framework — the first of its kind in the Gulf region.

Unveiled by the Ministry of Finance last week, the framework seeks to unlock funding assistance for projects and initiatives designed to help Oman deliver on its commitments towards, among other targets, Net-Zero, Climate Mitigation and UN SDGs.



Power station in Musandam.

HM Royal Directives to drive industrial growth in Musandam: Madayn

BUSINESS REPORTER

MUSCAT, JAN 15

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik's visionary directives to establish an industrial city in Seih Al Wasat in Mad'ha and ready-built factories in Mahas Industrial City are set to boost Musandam's industrial landscape, said Engineer Dawood bin Salim al Haddabi (pictured), CEO of the Public Establishment for Industrial Estates (Madayn).

In a statement, Al Haddabi highlighted that these Royal Directives will spur growth, diversify income sources, and generate employment



opportunities in Musandam Governorate, contributing to the overall development of various economic sectors.

He added: "His Majesty's continuous focus on the development of industrial cities aligns with Madayn's overarching vision of creating world-class business cities, fostering sustainable economic and social development."

Workshop held to discuss preliminary outputs of National Aviation Strategy 2040

MUSCAT: The Civil Aviation Authority held a workshop today at its headquarters for government officials to discuss the preliminary outputs of the National Aviation Strategy 2040.

The workshop included a presentation that discussed three main axes: the objectives of the National Aviation Strategy 2040, its principles and preliminary outputs, in addition to feedback and guidance.

Eng Naif bin Ali al Abri, CEO of the Civil Aviation Authority, emphasised during the workshop that this strategy will enhance the position of the Sultanate of Oman in the aviation sector, considering that the Sultanate of Oman's location is a gateway between the East and the West.

He added that the strategy will also focus on the potential of air cargo at Muscat and Salalah airports.

On his part, Hamed bin Ahmed al Barshidi, the project supervisor, pointed out that the Civil Aviation Authority is seeking to develop the aviation sector through strategic planning and encouraging investment in infrastructure and directly related services to the civil aviation sector in order to provide air transport with the highest quality standards for all relevant parties.

He also aims to promote



Guests are seen attending the workshop.



Eng Naif bin Ali al Abri, CEO of Civil Aviation Authority.

the growth of the sector and improve air connectivity between the Sultanate of Oman and the world, while ensuring the highest levels of safety, security, and environmental protection.

The Civil Aviation Authority seeks to ensure that the formulation of this strategy is participatory with all components of the aviation sector, as well as other relevant sectors, in addition to institutions, individuals, and

sector projects in member countries, promote competition and entrepreneurship, and encourage cross border investments".

"ICD also brings additional resources to projects, encouraging the development of Islamic finance, attracting co-financiers and enhancing the role of the market economy. ICD focuses on financing projects that contribute to economic development, including job creation, the development of Islamic finance, and export growth.

Additionally, ICD works to foster sustainable economic growth by mobilising capital in the international financial markets.

ICD operates to complement the activities of the IsDB in member countries and also that of national financial institutions," it added.

stakeholders (and members of the community) through participation in workshops and meetings within multiple axes.

The Civil Aviation Authority has included the project of preparing the National Aviation Strategy in its annual plan for 2023, as a commitment to achieving the desired impact and building indicators for the aviation sector that are consistent with national programmes and international commitments, so that it is committed to as a unified roadmap for the sector.

It is worth mentioning that this workshop is part of a series of previous workshops that included youth, academics, and those interested in the aviation sector, in addition to CEOs of aviation sector companies and other relevant sectors, as well as officials, governors, and heads of authorities. — **ONA**

Total imports in Oman reach RO 12.3 billion

MUSCAT: Total imports in the Sultanate of Oman until the end of October 2023 reached RO 12.3 billion, as stated by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI).

Engine fuel imports (excluding aircraft engines) amounted to RO 1.2 billion, diesel for other purposes amounted to RO 581.1 million, crude oil and crude mineral oils amounted to RO 450.8 million, iron ores and their concentrates not agglomerated amounted to RO 342.3 million, raw gold alloys, other than non-monetary gold,



China ranked as the highest exporting country with a total of RO 7.5 billion, representing 43.12 per cent.

amounted to RO 238.9 million, and other commodities amounted to RO 9.4 billion rials.

The statistics show that the United Arab Emirates ranked as the highest importing country with a total of RO 3.3 billion, representing 26.80 per cent, followed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with a total of RO 1.6 billion, representing 12.99 per cent.

The statistics also indicated that the total exports amounted to RO 17.4 billion, engine fuel (excluding aircraft engines) accounted for RO 7.9 million, diesel for other

purposes accounted for RO 2.1 billion, crude oil and crude mineral oils accounted for RO 856.6 million, iron ores and their concentrates not agglomerated accounted for RO 539.9 million, raw gold alloys, other than non-monetary gold, accounted for RO 350.3 million, and other commodity exports accounted for RO 5.6 billion.

China ranked as the highest exporting country with a total of RO 7.5 billion, representing 43.12 per cent, followed by South Korea with a total of RO 1.0 billion, representing 6.15 per cent. — **ONA**

Triple A (AAA) for reducing goal setbacks



TARIQ AL BARWANI

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

THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT THE MAJORITY HAVE PASSED THROUGH THESE CHALLENGES, NORMALLY VIA PERSISTENCE AND COMMITMENT TO DELIVERY, IRRESPECTIVE OF THE ULTIMATE RESULT THAT ONE MAY ACHIEVE AT THE END.

Last week my article revolved around creating effective goals that work. Briefly, effective goals need to be defined clearly, well-timed, followed-up consistently and always celebrated in one form or another.

Great, you now have an effective well-planned goal to achieve! Nevertheless, every now and then, something comes up in the middle, that hinders your progress.

Don't worry, you are not alone. These setbacks are a normal part of any goal setting, and my focus in this article today is to share a system that I personally use, that encompasses of 3 simple steps, to reduce setbacks that one may encounter during the delivery of an effective goal.

I call this simple system "Triple A" i.e : Accept, Analyse and Amend.

While I have not come through a formal study or research that shares the percentage of people that experience setback on their goals, I can confidently confirm that setbacks are a common part of life that affects many people, in their personal and professional lives, and in various domains that includes but is not limited to financial, health, career, academic, relationships and the likes.

I have personally gone through these challenges, you may be going through them now, and many others did in one way or another, throughout their life journey. The good news is that the majority have passed through these challenges, normally via persistence and commitment to delivery, irrespective of the ultimate result that one may achieve at the end.

Having gone through many personal and professional initiatives over the past 3 decades

that were coupled with many ups and downs, fails that were eventually turned into wins, all having well planned goals yet everlasting setbacks that kept and keeps creeping into the delivery journey,

I am happy to share the 3 As system that I continue to follow till date, to reduce goal setting setbacks that I encounter.

First, accept the setback! Take one step back, recognise and accept the setback as part of the journey, and realise it's just temporary hindrance towards your goal.

Take an acceptable break, go for a walk, or even indulge yourself in a different activity with a friend or family to revive yourself. The energy and feelings that you will attain after this step is profound, especially that you are aware it's just part of the effective goal setting process.

Next, analyse the setback!

What went wrong? Why did it happen? You need to get and gain a clear understanding of the reasons of the setback. Unless you clearly understand the challenge or the problem, you may not be able to progress smoothly.

Furthermore, you may encounter the problem back again during this journey or the next one in the future. Learning about the setback is a necessary part of the process.

Finally, amend the setback! What change or additional activities that needs to be done? Do I have what it takes to fix it? Is there anyone else I can involve or anything else I can get to fix the problem? Make sure you refine and enhance the activity or approach of the goal to overcome the setback in place.

I normally speak to my father as a friend and coach, so as attain the support from subject expert matters as an opinion on

ways to resolve the setback in question. It's important in this step to be open to trying different approaches with the ultimate goal of progression at the end.

To conclude, setbacks that you encounter on your personal and professional goals, throughout the delivery and implementation journey may not be avoidable.

You just need to know that they are a temporary hindrance or obstacle that disrupts you from achieving your goals.

By simply accepting and acknowledging the setback, finding the relevant reasons and solutions for the same, and then accordingly adapting or refining the approach, keeping the ultimate destination in check, I am confident success will be awaiting for you at the end of tunnel.

Until we catch up again next week, stay focused and keep winning your goals!

Reparation bonds could unlock \$300 billion for Ukraine



HUGO DUNCAN DIXON

The writer is a British business journalist and the former editor-in-chief and chairman of the financial commentary website Breakingviews which he co-founded.

Ukraine needs cash to keep defending itself against Russian aggression. The United States and European Union are struggling to keep writing cheques to the country. They're also reluctant to hand over \$300 billion of Russian central bank reserves, which Western governments froze at the start of the war.

Here is a proposal for a fallback plan. Kyiv could raise money by selling bonds backed by future claims for war damages against Moscow.

It would be better if Ukraine's backers just gave it more cash, as the United Kingdom did last week. But elsewhere fatigue is setting in. US President Joe Biden has so far failed to persuade Congress to approve a new \$61 billion package for Kyiv.

Meanwhile, Hungary blocked the EU's planned 50 billion euros in aid last month, although other member states are determined to find a way round the problem.

Efforts to seize Russia's frozen assets are also making slow progress. Not only are lawyers arguing whether confiscation would be legal. Politicians wonder whether it would be wise, though they are actively exploring doing so, according to the *Financial Times*.

Issuing "reparation bonds" would circumvent these problems. Ukraine would sell securities which pay out if — and only if — it receives reparations from Russia for the damage done by the war. Interest payments could also roll up and only become payable if Kyiv gets compensation.

The bondholders would not have a contractual claim on the Kremlin's frozen reserves. But given that Russia is unlikely to pay up willingly, these assets would be the most likely source of cash to pay for damages.

Since the reserves are accruing interest, they could be used to pay both the bonds' principal and coupons.

This would be different from confiscation, because the assets would only be transferred if a legitimate compensation mechanism first ruled that damages were due to Ukraine.

ISSUING "REPARATION BONDS" WOULD CIRCUMVENT THESE PROBLEMS. UKRAINE WOULD SELL SECURITIES WHICH PAY OUT IF — AND ONLY IF — IT RECEIVES REPARATIONS FROM RUSSIA FOR THE DAMAGE DONE BY THE WAR. INTEREST PAYMENTS COULD ALSO ROLL UP AND ONLY BECOME PAYABLE IF KYIV GETS COMPENSATION.



The 'Motherland' monument is seen through a tattered tarpaulin, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Kyiv, Ukraine. — Reuters

Ukraine would have a plausible way to collect on any damages awarded up to the value of the reserves. It could therefore issue reparation bonds up to \$300 billion. But it would only get anything like this sum if the United States, EU governments and other allies were willing to buy the securities.

A LONG AND WINDY ROAD

Kyiv has a compelling case for damages of well over \$300 billion against Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin's attack on Ukraine is illegal and has caused havoc. The cost of rebuilding the country had reached \$411 billion by last February, according to a World Bank tally. It will keep rising.

The legal principle that a country should "make full reparation for the injury caused by an internationally wrongful act" is well-established. There is also a recent precedent of a state doing so.

After Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, the United Nations Security Council set up a compensation commission which forced Baghdad to pay \$52 billion in damages.

The money came from siphoning off a portion of Iraq's

oil revenues.

The international community will find it harder to impose its will on Russia.

After all, the UN Security Council won't vote to set up a compensation commission as Russia is one of five countries that can veto its resolutions.

That said, the UN's General Assembly — which has less power than the Security Council but where no state has a veto — has already said that an international reparation mechanism is needed. It has also called on members to set up a register of claims against Russia.

In response, the Council of Europe, an intergovernmental group committed to promoting the rule of law, is setting up a register.

There has so far been no decision on which body should adjudicate on claims. But the UN General Assembly's support gives legitimacy to actions to hold Russia accountable for its war damages.

The process of extracting reparations from Russia will nonetheless be tortuous. Iraq only made its final compensation payment in 2022, over 30 years after it invaded Kuwait. Ukraine needs money now. Reparation

bonds could solve this timing problem.

CUTTING THE DISCOUNT

One objection to the idea is that the bonds would be so risky that investors would demand a deep discount. So Kyiv wouldn't get anything like the full \$300 billion.

After all, even if a judicial process awards Ukraine damages, Western governments may be reluctant to transfer the title of Russia's reserves to Kyiv. Ukraine itself might also agree to abandon reparation claims against Moscow as part of some future peace deal.

This is why the ideal anchor investors would be Western governments. They have a lot to lose if Ukraine fails to hold off Russia's assault. They are also well-placed to mitigate the bonds' risks. The United States and its allies have the power to determine whether Russia's frozen assets are used for compensation. They will also have a big say on the shape of any peace deal.

If Western governments conclude that the Kremlin should get its reserves back, that will be because they conclude the wider gains of peace dwarf the costs of giving up \$300 billion.

Meanwhile, the legal basis for using Russia's reserves to pay off the reparation bonds would be strong if Ukraine assigned claims for damages against Moscow to the Western governments which bought the bonds, says Lee Buchheit, a veteran legal expert in sovereign debt.

The governments could rely on the common law principle of "set-off", under which an entity's assets can be used to pay its debts.

If Western governments weren't willing to buy all the reparation bonds, Ukraine could divide the bonds into several tranches, suggests Daleep Singh, chief global economist at PGIM Fixed Income.

Governments could buy the riskiest tranches, leaving regular investors to buy the least risky ones. That would reduce the discount Ukraine would have to take on selling the bonds.

Reparation bonds aren't the only innovative idea about how to get Kyiv cash now. But they don't rely on confiscating Moscow's assets, which is the basis of many other proposals. If Ukraine's allies can't write more mega cheques, the bonds could be a good fallback plan.

— Reuters



China 2023 growth tipped to be weakest in decades

BEIJING: China's economy likely grew at its weakest annual rate for more than three decades in 2023, data is expected to show on Wednesday, as it was battered by a crippling property crisis, sluggish consumption and global uncertainties.

A group of ten experts interviewed forecast China's gross domestic product (GDP) to have expanded 5.2 per cent, which would represent the lowest rate since 1990, outside of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The reading would be an improvement on the three per cent seen in 2022, though that year saw business activity hammered by tight health curbs designed to contain the virus.

After lifting the measures, Beijing set itself a growth target of "around five per cent" for 2023.

The return of normal life initially sparked a recovery at the start of last year but the long-awaited rebound soon ran out of steam as a lack of confidence among households and businesses battered consumption.

An intractable real estate crisis, record youth unemployment and a global slowdown are also gumming the gears of the Chinese

growth engine.

"The main challenge for China's economic recovery still stems from the property sector," said Jing Liu, chief economist for Greater China at HSBC.

The property sector has long accounted for around a quarter of China's economy.

It experienced dazzling growth for two decades, but financial woes at major firms such as Evergrande and Country Garden are now fuelling buyer mistrust, against a backdrop of unfinished housing developments and falling prices.

Purchasing property has long been seen by many Chinese as a safe haven for parking savings, but the price drop has hit their wallets hard.

"Real estate investment, dwelling prices and new dwelling sales are set to fall throughout 2024 before returning as a modest driver of growth in 2025," said Harry Murphy Cruise, an economist at Moody's ratings agency.

That crisis, alongside "sluggish labour market conditions", are dampening consumer confidence, said Helen Qiao, head of Asia Economic Research at Bank of



An aerial view shows containers and cargo vessels at the Qingdao port in Shandong province, China. Image for illustration purposes only. — Reuters

America.

A record of more than one in five people aged 16 to 24 in China were unemployed in May, according to officials, the monthly publication of which has since been suspended.

The uneven recovery has largely

benefitted services, as customers have returned to restaurants, transport and tourist sites.

But the level of spending is often lower than 2019, before the pandemic took hold.

A rare bright spark is the state-subsidised auto sector,

where a wave of electrification has buttressed domestic manufacturers such as BYD, which dethroned Elon Musk's Tesla as the world's best-selling EV maker in the fourth quarter.

However, other areas are struggling, notably industry,

which has been weakened by ailing demand at home and abroad.

Chinese exports — historically a key growth lever — fell last year for the first time since 2016, according to figures published by the country's customs agency on Friday.

The decline is partly explained by geopolitical tensions with the United States and efforts by some Western nations to reduce dependence on Beijing or diversify their supply chains.

"More (Western) companies (are) reducing or maintaining current levels of investments" in China but diversifying elsewhere, said Teeuwe Mevisen, an analyst at Rabobank.

"China saw significant capital outflows" as a result, but also due to increasing its own investments abroad, he said.

All of these challenges "will continue to play an important role in 2024", Mevisen warned.

This year, China's growth is expected to slow to 4.5 per cent, according to World Bank forecasts.

The average prediction by pool of experts was 4.7 per cent. Beijing is expected to announce its new growth target in March. — AFP

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TRAVEL
People gather on the rooftop area of Osanbashi Pier in Yokohama . — AFP



MUSIC
British musician Mark Ronson arrives for the 29th Annual Critics Choice Awards at the Barker Hangar in Santa Monica, California. — AFP



FASHION
A model walks the runway at the Armani collection show during the Milan Fashion Week Menswear Autumn/ Winter.— AFP

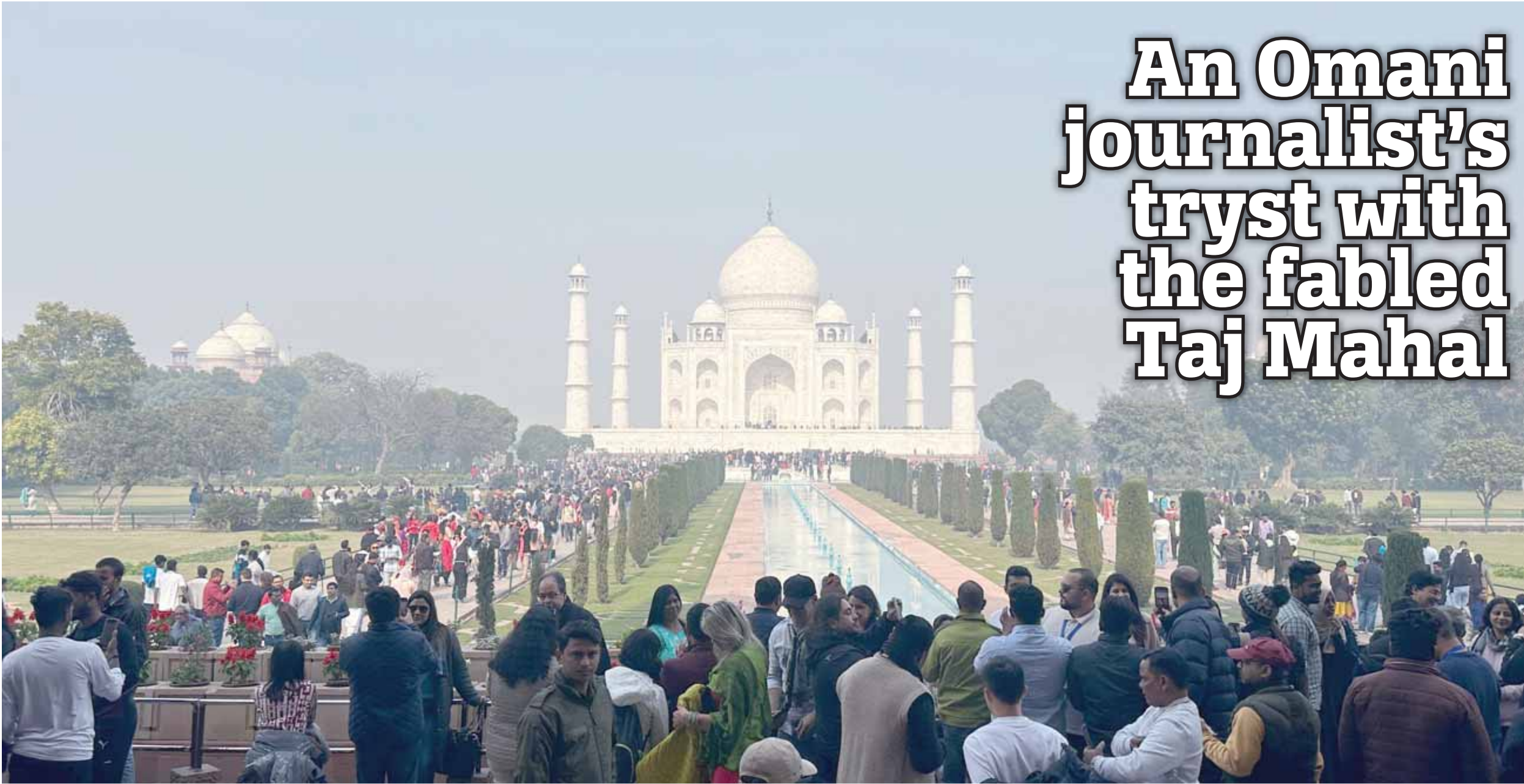


BOLLYWOOD
Bollywood actors Anil Kapoor and Hrithik Roshan (R) attend the trailer launch of their upcoming Indian film 'Fighter' in Mumbai . — AFP



LIFESTYLE
A man walks past the Metro Express in Port Louis, Mauritius. — AFP

art & life



An Omani journalist's tryst with the fabled Taj Mahal

QASIM AL MAASHANI

The dawn casts a soft, roseate glow over the Yamuna River, its gentle embrace cradling a vision of ethereal beauty. The Taj Mahal, a monument crafted from moonlight and memories, emerges from the mist, its ivory-white marble shimmering like a pearl against the blushing sky.

I stand among a throng of awestruck visitors, my senses overwhelmed by the sheer majesty of this architectural marvel. But amidst the click of cameras and murmur of hushed reverence, it's the words of our guide, a wizened Agra native named Shamsuddin, that truly unlock the magic of the Taj.

"Welcome, friends, to a testament to love that transcends time and mortality," Shamsuddin begins, his voice laced with the melodious lilt of Urdu. "This is the Taj Mahal, a love letter in marble, penned by Shah Jahan, the Mughal emperor, for his beloved Mumtaz Mahal."

As Shamsuddin weaves his



narrative, the Taj comes alive. He paints a picture of Shah Jahan, grief-stricken by the loss of his queen, channelling his immense love into the creation of this architectural masterpiece. He describes the 20,000 artisans who toiled for over two decades, their hands guided by an unwavering devotion to Shah Jahan's vision.

We walk through the Moonlight Garden, its geometric perfection mirroring the celestial order above. Shamsuddin points out the intricate pietra dura inlay work,

where precious stones like lapis lazuli and carnelian dance in a kaleidoscope of colours. He speaks of the octagonal mausoleum, its perfect symmetry echoing the harmony of the universe.

Inside, the air is cool and hushed, bathed in the dim glow filtering through the jali screens. Shamsuddin leads us to the cenotaphs of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal, their delicate marble forms veiled in white flowers. It's a moment of profound silence, broken only by the soft echo of our footsteps.

Emerging from the mausoleum, the midday sun bathes the Taj in a golden radiance. Shamsuddin smiles, his eyes twinkling. "The Taj Mahal," he says, "is not just a monument; it's a poem in stone, a testament to the transformative power of love."

His words resonate within me. The Taj Mahal is more than just an architectural wonder; it's a story etched in marble, a love story that transcends cultures and centuries. As I leave this magical place, I carry with me not just photographs and memories, but a newfound understanding of the human spirit's capacity for love and the enduring power of beauty.

The Taj Mahal, a dream in marble, continues to inspire awe and wonder. It stands as a beacon of love, a testament to the enduring power of human emotion, and a reminder that even in the face of loss, beauty can bloom. And for an Omani visitor like me, it's a glimpse into the rich tapestry of Indian history and culture, a testament to the shared human experience that binds us all.



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INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



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A frugal opera superfan's surprise gift: \$1.7 million for the arts

WHEN LOIS Kirschenbaum, a cultural aficionado who was a fixture in the standing room section of the Metropolitan Opera for more than half a century, died in 2021 at 88, star singers gave tributes, and fellow fans offered remembrances.

But that was not the end of Kirschenbaum's relationship with the arts.

Though even her closest friends didn't know, Kirschenbaum, a former switchboard operator who lived in a rent-controlled apartment in the East Village, had made plans to give away a large share of her life savings — some \$1.7 million — to cultural groups upon her death. After years of legal proceedings, donations of \$215,000 apiece have started to arrive, surprising groups like New York City Opera, American Ballet Theatre, Carnegie Hall and the Public Theater.

"I was just astonished," said John Hauser, president of the George and Nora London Foundation for Singers, one of the recipients. "I had no idea that she had that kind of money."

Kirschenbaum had no spouse, siblings or children, and lived a no-frills lifestyle, working as a switchboard operator for the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian aid organisation, until her retirement in 2004. On most nights, she travelled by bus and subway to Lincoln Center, where she secured free or cheap tickets just before performances began.

Elena Villafane, a lawyer for the executor of the estate, said that Kirschenbaum had "an incredibly frugal, Depression-era lifestyle." Her father was an optometrist who died in 1990, Villafane said; his first and second wives died before him.

"She didn't take a cab; her furniture was old; she didn't spend money on clothes; she wasn't going to Bloomingdale's," Villafane said of Kirschenbaum.

"Whatever little money she spent," she added, "she spent on the

arts."

For decades, Kirschenbaum was the doyenne of hard-core opera buffs who populated the standing-room sections at the Met. Legally blind from birth, she often watched performances from the uppermost balcony through large binoculars. After the curtain call, she rushed to the stage door for autographs, bringing a bag full of memorabilia — photos, recordings and scores — to be signed.

Susan Jaffe, artistic director of American Ballet Theatre, who was a principal dancer with the company from 1983 to 2002, recalled seeing Kirschenbaum frequently after performances.

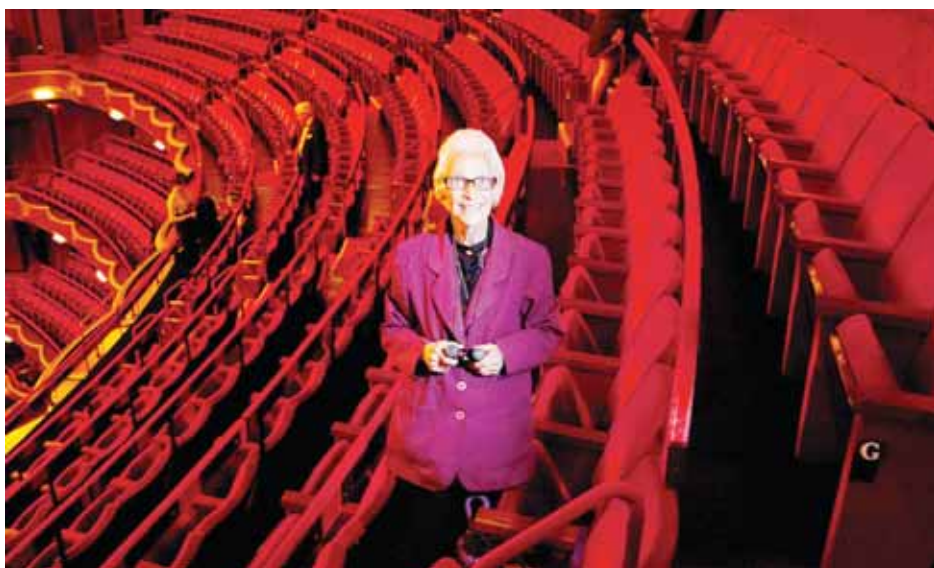
"In the world of ballet, Lois Kirschenbaum was not just a devoted fan — she was a silent force, an unwavering presence outside the stage door," she said in a statement. "Little did we know, behind her humble demeanor, she held the power to surprise us with a wonderful legacy gift."

Kirschenbaum's devotion helped her befriended opera stars including Beverly Sills, Renée Fleming, Luciano Pavarotti and Plácido Domingo. Dutifully signing her belongings became a rite of passage for some singers. While they chatted, Kirschenbaum gathered information about their upcoming appearances and compiled it in lists that she distributed to fellow opera buffs.

She left behind a trove of memorabilia — thousands of programmes, many of them autographed, and even ballet slippers — that she directed to be given to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.

The library has not yet received her items, but Bob Kosovsky, a rare books and manuscripts librarian who knew Kirschenbaum and helped pack up her belongings, called the material the "documentation of the superfan."

He pointed to her frequent notes



in the margins of her programmes. In 1978, the New York Philharmonic gave three performances of a program that featured the final scene from Richard Strauss' opera "Salome." She wrote in the program from one concert: "Even better than 1st perf."

"You really get a sense of her personality," Kosovsky said.

The total distribution from Kirschenbaum's estate, about \$4 million, is being divided equally among 18 nonprofit organisations and one individual: a woman who helped care for her and her father. In addition to her donations to cultural institutions, she left money for Jewish groups including the Simon Wiesenthal Center, as well as for nonprofits that assist the blind, such as the American Foundation for the Blind. And she gave to her former employer, the International Rescue Committee.

Despite her enthusiasm for Met performances, Kirschenbaum did not leave a gift for the opera house. Friends have speculated that she might have been angered by the



company's decision in the early 1990s — around the time she created her will — to ban her backstage, relegating her to the stage door.

Instead, she gave money to other opera groups, including several that help young singers: the London foundation, the Richard Tucker Music Foundation and Opera Index.

The London foundation, named for storied bass-baritone George London and his wife, Nora, announced this week that it planned to give an award in Kirschenbaum's honour at its competition for young singers next month. Kirschenbaum,



who knew the Londons from backstage at the Met, was a frequent guest at the foundation's events.

"She was the absolute perfect spectator," said Hauser, from the foundation. "I can't think of anyone who loves opera quite as voraciously as she did. She was just an opera superfan. It really was the most important thing in her life." — NYT

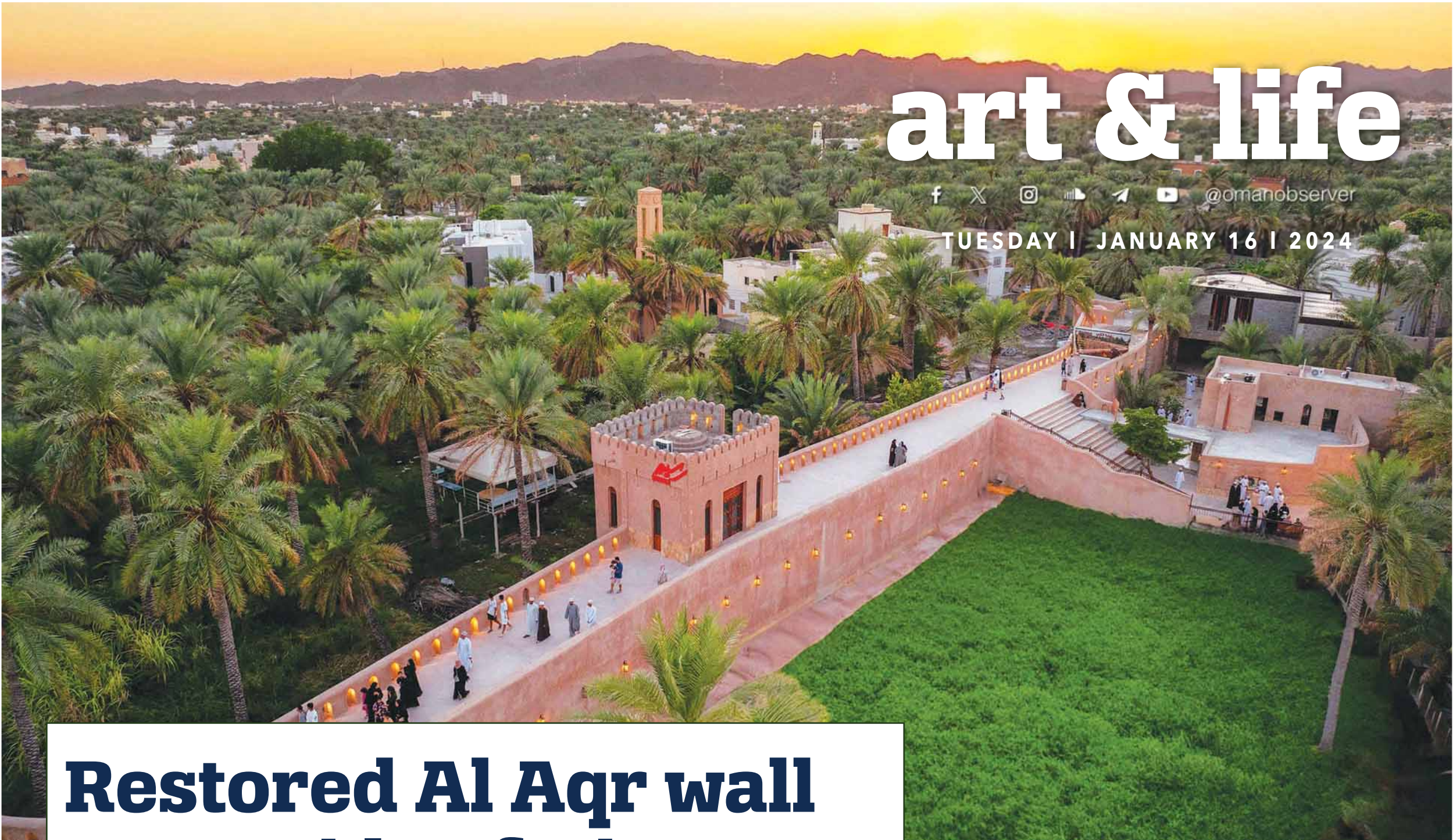
COFFEE

Kenya's coffee market sees rebound in volumes, prices

COFFEE TRADE at Nairobi Coffee Exchange (NCE) bounces back with increased volumes and prices after market uncertainty. Data reveals a surge from 3,773 to 20,199 bags offered for sale between August 15 and December 13, 2023. Coffee bean sales also

rose from 40% to 84% of bags offered. AA grade saw a price drop to \$240.10 from \$249.95. NCE attributes the rebound to restored confidence among market participants and improved global coffee prices, with the average buyers per auction rising to 18. — ONA





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Restored Al Aqr wall now pride of Nizwa



TEXT BY AMAL AL RIYAMI
PHOTOS BY SAMI AL HINAI

When people of Nizwa pooled their efforts to restore the old wall around Al Shahba Fort, it not only became the symbol of pride of the Wilayat of Nizwa but also a role model that will inspire future generations to preserve the rich heritage of Al Dakhiliyah Governorate.

The restored wall was opened on January 8 in the village of Al Aqr. Al Aqr Wall and Al Aqr Square is about 1,950 metres-long, of which about 700 metres has been restored at a cost of RO 4,000. The opening ceremony was attended by Eng Ibrahim bin Said al Kharousi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism for Heritage.

The wall runs across date palm orchards, old mud houses, and offers a view of Al Shahba. The wall is decorated with beautiful lighting and a geometric design that matches the neighbourhood and the design of the castle. The wall includes six towers, the highest of which is 13 metres.

It now has cafes, restaurants that sell traditional food, a photo booth to click souvenir photos in traditional Omani costumes as well as a large square for walking around and holding events.

Ishaq bin Hilal al Shariani, Chairman of Bawareq Nizwa International Investment Company, which is carrying out the restoration work, said: "The revival of ancient houses that were abandoned decades ago has become a tourist destination on the international map today. The Al Aqr heritage village contained 18 rooms 7 years ago, while today it includes 200 rooms. The number is increasing with many quality facilities. There are more than 15 cafes, two museums, a public library, and two majlis, a centre for introducing Islam, a Quran school, and a clinic, considering that the first hospital in Nizwa was in the Al Aqr neighbourhood."

These projects contributed to providing hundreds of jobs for young people and inspired them to take up



self-employment.

Suleiman bin Mohammed al Sulaimani, agent of Al Aqr Wall said; "Restoration and rebuilding of Al Aqr Wall began in early 2020, and it is expected to be fully restored before 2028. We started with the part overlooking the Al Bustan Inn. We expected that we would complete the restoration of the entire wall within 15 years. People also learned about the wall, and the success of the experience of restoring part of it made it easier for us to obtain support to restore the rest of the wall."

Regarding the materials used in rebuilding the wall, he said: "In the past, we used mortar, clay, and stones, and at present, we restore and build with several types of materials. Some parts are part of the old premises while some others are completely demolished. We use modern materials such as iron, bricks, stones, and cement in the base so that they are more solid. But it is completely covered with modern materials as well.



This is to avoid any problems due to humidity, and since the wall is located in many places on the farms, it is a humid area. There are places where we started building from scratch because it had completely collapsed. In these places, we build them about two metres underground and cover them with insulation from rainwater and the falaj. We also use modern base materials to give the wall a longer lifespan."

The wall was most likely built during the reign of Imam Al Salt bin Malik al Kharousi. However, there is no explicit evidence or documentation that it took place during the era of Imam Al Salt, but studies point to this period.

The wall was further strengthened during the reign of Imam Sultan bin Saif bin Malik al Yaarubi as the dynasty's military and financial capacity was bigger.

In ancient days, the wall protected the people from invaders and thieves. In the past, the old neighbourhoods were mostly walled. But its walls differ according to their importance. Part of its walls are the walls of houses and this neighbourhood was the command centre in Oman. The Imam or the Sultan was present within this neighbourhood. Governors, officials, judges, advisers, and scholars were also there. Therefore, its fortification was very important.

"The wall has been neglected for about 60-70 years. This negligence led to its near collapse in many areas. Another reason is many houses were built close to the wall as many landlords did not know about the wall as it had either collapsed or only parts remained. The change of ownership of properties adjoining the wall also made the restoration more challenging. All landmarks should be restored and taken care of. The wall is an integral part of the Al Aqr neighbourhood," Al Sulaimani said.

Al Sulaimani added restoration was expensive due to costly materials and lack of specialists. The dilapidated state of the wall made many construction equipment inaccessible.

To fund the restoration of remaining parts of the wall, the management has set an entry fee of 500 baisas for Omanis RO 1 for non-Omanis.